USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR LUCY MCCONNELL



DIAMOND COVE ROMANTIC COMEDY SERIES

Royal Agenda

DIAMOND COVE ROMANTIC COMEDY SERIES

LUCY MCCONNELL

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SECRET SEVEN MEETING

N ancy bustled into The Palm's conference room, where most of the Secret Seven waited to start their next meeting. Her short blonde hair puffed out in the back where she kept scrubbing at it and her button-up shirt was untucked. She briefly considered tucking it in but decided it was too much work. Her brain was scrambled like a 1000 piece puzzle right out of the box and there was no way she could put it together in the next thirty seconds.

There was no point. Life was upside down, inside out, backward, and all the other things that meant it was wrong. Very. Very. Wrong.

The group of retirees who had formed together as a secret group of matchmakers was special. Would she have chosen any of them as friends? A few. Probably. Who had time for friends when there was so much work to do?

Once she was forced out of her company, Nancy's Niceties, and into retirement by her loving and wonderful, though meddling, children and grandchildren who were more worried about a hole in her heart than they were about the company she built from the ground up, she had plenty of time for friends.

And these were the best!

The group's objective: to help their grandchildren find love—was the most ambitious and most important launch campaign she'd been a part of in her entire life.

It was also the most difficult.

Grandchildren—and their hearts—could be unpredictable, willful, and downright stubborn.

Feeling defeated, she landed in her seat before everyone arrived, and the

meeting began. Her carefully organized and labeled life in a pink bungalow by the ocean came unglued this morning.

She looked down to see that she was wearing one white sock and one gray sock.

Rosa glanced her way; the happy greeting on her lips died as she took in Nancy's appearance. "*Aiya*! Were you mugged on the way over here?" She hurried to Nancy's side, put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her so tight Nancy's face pressed against the cross hanging from her neck. "Harry, bring her some water." She motioned with her hand for him to get moving.

Harry, their resident find-anything-man of Scottish descent, dashed from the room as fast as his tartan crocks would let him.

Nancy pulled out of the hug and drew in a deep breath. She stood up wanting to pace. Rosa pushed down on her shoulders. "No, *amiga*. Rest. We will find the ones who did this to you and bring them to justice."

Nancy slumped—slumped!—back in her chair, her arms and legs splayed. "It won't do us any good."

"Why not?" asked Winnie. She spoke kindly, as per usual, this time with that note in her tone that said she was here for Nancy no matter what. She might be quiet, but she was resourceful. And, she took on Sweetie, the blind alligator who was as much of The Palms as the fountain in the lobby or the surly Chef Bruno, whenever a wardrobe/costume change was necessary. If that didn't shout bravery, then nothing did. The woman was a force for good in this world and her button-up shirt was tucked in!

"Because my granddaughter did this!" Nancy wailed, throwing her arms on the table and dropping her head between them. Such behavior was beneath her, yet she couldn't seem to contain herself.

"Elizabeth?" asked Walt, his forehead wrinkled under his NASA hat. He cleared his throat. "She's not in town this weekend. Am I right?"

"You are correct," answered Winnie.

"It's not Elizabeth." Nancy wobbled her head from side to side, too upset to answer. Elizabeth was fine—happily in love with Chad and planning a wedding. Not to mention, the germ bomb she'd worked so hard to bring to market passed the second round of lab tests last week.

"Another granddaughter then." Winnie turned to the murder board to search for pictures and names.

It wasn't really a murder board. It was a marriage board. However, it reminded Nancy of the suspect diagrams on police dramas on television and she often referred to it as such. Not that anyone else, except Don, picked up the phrase—which was understandable considering it was their beloved grandchildren plastered across the whiteboard, and none of them wanted to use the word *murder*.

"Maisey?" Polly asked, leaning toward her with a frown. Her turquoise earrings swung against her long neck. She was tall and thin with light gray hair and was always on the lookout for someone who needed help. She'd found jobs for several people in Diamond Cove and rounded up back to school supplies for teachers at the local elementary school every year among three dozen other service projects.

"Thank goodness, no," Nancy mumbled into the table top, her voice echoing strangely in her ears.

"So, Grace," Winnie tapped her nail on the board next to Grace's picture. It was a couple of years old and might not look like her now. Grace traveled extensively, living in this country or that for months at a time. She was a gypsy with a heart full of wind that carried her away to the next project.

"What's wrong with Grace? I thought she was in Mexico." Polly asked.

Harry's crocks appeared in Nancy's vision as he shoved a water bottle into her hand. She sat up, twisted off the top, threw back her head, and guzzled half. Gasping for breath, she nodded a thank you to him. He tipped his page-boy hat at her and then readjusted it on his head. He didn't sit down just in case he was sent on another mission but leaned against the wall, one leg crossed over the other.

Don, their resident bodybuilder, retired general, and baker extraordinaire, came in carrying a plate of homemade oatmeal cookies. The chocolate, sugar, and butter scents hit the air, and Nancy's sugar coping mechanism kicked on with a vengeance. She reached for a cookie.

Don slid the plate out of her reach. "They're for *after* the meeting." He checked the clock, his silver hair glinting in the light from overhead. It reminded Nancy of the old Archie comics and how the artist always had a flash of light on the characters' heads to indicate their shininess. "Besides, it's early for cookies." He gave her a funny look because she was the one who had instituted the no snacking during meetings rule.

Nancy squinted up at his broad shoulders, contemplating her chances of overpowering him and taking the cookies by force. They were oatmeal, for heaven's sake. Oatmeal was a breakfast staple. The odds of winning a wrestling match were slim, but she was desperate enough to take the chance. She squared her shoulders and clenched her jaw, leaning forward just an inch.

Don looked into her eyes and pushed the plate farther down the table. "What's going on?"

Nancy gave up her cookie coup and drew upon her reserve strength to maintain a semblance of composure—which was probably in vain because she'd already sprawled in her seat and thrown her hands in the air. "Grace rolled into town last night—in a Volkswagen camper van with a Mayan stone god painted on the side, dreadlocks, and a boyfriend."

Polly sat up taller, her silver bracelet clacking against the armrest. "That's good news. Who is this gentleman?"

"He's no gentleman," Nancy ground out as she leaned over the table, sniffing the cookie's soft cinnamon scent. Don always added cinnamon even though he also added chocolate chips. The combination worked, and if she didn't get some sugar soon, she would go crazy. A thought hit, and she yanked herself back, her shoulder blades hitting the chair. The idea was . . . brilliant. And scary. And bold. And just about the best idea she'd had since disposable dust cloths pre-loaded with shine spray. Looking from person to person, who stared back at her in shock, she hiccupped. Gulped. And then tossed the idea into the middle of the table. "*We* could break them up."

The room went silent. Not even Harry's chair squeaked.

Don narrowed his eyes, taking her measure. She sat up a little taller and also felt like saluting him just to prove she wasn't crazy.

"The Secret Seven doesn't do breakups," said Samantha, the activities director for The Palms and their inside man–er woman–when it came to well, a lot of things. Samantha was invaluable–if only she knew it as strongly as the rest of them did. Today, she breezed in looking lovely in a floral print, puffed sleeve, layered hem dress draped in thick lace. Polly clasped her hands in delight. She made all Samantha's clothing, creating beautiful outfits for their young and all too single friend. Samantha set down her laptop and hugged the seamstress. "It fits like a dream."

Polly fingered the material and beamed. "You look beautiful in anything."

Samantha blushed lightly and took her seat with a *Thank you*, as Harry skirted the table to get to his chair too. Without any further requests, he was off duty–for the moment. Now that Samantha was here, they could start the meeting properly.

"I know we said we don't do breakups—but this is essential," Nancy

brought them back around to the problem at hand. It was an enormous problem—one of the biggest they'd had since starting this group. As soon as they knew what she was up against, they'd jump behind her unconventional idea and run full steam ahead. Rosa might even run right over the man who was a thorn in Nancy's side. She walked to the murder board and grabbed an empty sticky note where she scribbled down the name she never wanted to hear, see, or deal with again. Behind her, the Secret Seven tried to talk her out of it.

Walt shook his head. "It's unethical. We have to let them make their own mistakes."

Nancy smacked the note onto the board next to Grace's picture and stepped away.

The arguments withered like a snail in saltwater.

Polly's hands flew to her turquoise stone necklace, which she began sliding back and forth.

Henry mumbled something that could have been a curse word.

"What does it say?" asked Don from the other side of the table, his eyes narrowed.

Rosa crossed herself and then pretend-spat at the ground. "Stephán." She crossed herself again for good measure. Harry scooted away from her in case she decided to actually spit.

Don fisted his hands, and Walt twitched his mustache.

"The Stephán?" asked Winnie, a single eyebrow lifting in question. Man, she could make that thing arch beautifully. *"Paddleboard yoga called-me-too-old-to-wear-spandex Stephán?"*

Nancy looked from angry face to angry face. Stephán had offended each of them in turn when he worked at The Palms—Don had even taken the man to task for how he treated the ladies.

Nancy barely held back the tears threatening to over take her. She hadn't cried since the first night she'd slept in her bungalow–feeling alone and not knowing what to do with herself. "He's sleeping on my couch as we speak."

"For the love of all that's good! Give her the cookies!" Harry reached out and shoved the plate toward her.

"They're all yours." Don motioned for her to go ahead.

Everyone agreed quickly. "You need them more than we do," said Rosa as she helped Nancy, whose feet were all the sudden too heavy, back to her chair. Petting Nancy's head, she hummed comforting words in Spanish. Nancy snatched a cookie, needing the carbs, the sugar, and the comfort that comes from baked goods and took a huge bite. The moment the chocolate registered on her taste buds, her tears abated, though her stress level was still through the roof.

"How's your pulse?" Samantha asked, concerned over Nancy's heart issue pouring through her gaze.

Nancy shook her head. "It's middle ground. Cookies help." She gave Don a grateful look as she picked up another one. "Grace said they met on a beach on her way up the coast. Their whole relationship was established on a road trip." She looked up—searching heaven for help. How was a grandmother supposed to react to an inane comment like that?

"I can't take this. He cannot be my grandson-in-law. He's after her trust fund, I know it!" She slammed her hand down, and the cookie broke into several pieces. She grabbed another one and kept snacking. "He left his surfboard on my front porch and his rucksack—whatever that is—in the guest bathroom. There's sand all over my wood floors, and did I mention Grace has dreadlocks?" She hiccupped and chewed. "He's an evil influence on her." Dreadlocks. Like she was some blonde pirate who washed ashore in that hideous bus.

Don stood up, his shoulders thrown back. "Ladies and gentlemen, we came to talk about Walt's grandson, but I move to hold off on setting up his grandchild and attack Nancy's problem head-on."

They all swiveled to Walt to get his reaction. "I'm game."

"You want us to break them up?" Rosa clarified. Nancy dropped her chin once—her resolve to see this through strengthening with every morsel even as she felt like she was having an out of body experience.

"Happily!" Rosa slapped the table. "He doesn't deserve your Grace!"

Nancy nodded numbly. "How did she go so far off the rails?" She stared at nothing, finishing off the magical chocolate delight. It had walnuts—they were crunchy and yet soft and she liked them so much. "I mean, I didn't love her gypsy job, but I never thought she'd be so irresponsible with her heart." She looked to Winnie for help. "Why Stephán?"

Winnie rubbed her arm, but Nancy barely felt a thing. "I think you're going into shock, dear."

Nancy nodded. "Probably." This is what shock felt like. Numbness. Light headed. A disconnect from reality. Check. Check. And . . . check.

"All those in favor, say *aye*," Don called for a vote which was normally

Nancy's job. "The ayes have it. Nancy?" He shook her shoulder. "Hang in there. We're going to help you."

Nancy nodded. "Yes. Help her. Help Grace find love." She absently grasped for another cookie only to find the plate empty. She stared at the white surface covered in crumbs for a moment. She moved it under the table's edge and brushed crumbs onto the pearly white surface. A clean desk was a happy desk.

"Let's consider our options." Don marched to the murder board. Nancy let him lead the meeting—she was in no state of mind to make rational decisions and Don was an expert strategist. Seeing Stephán's form sprawled across her couch had shaken her—and she wasn't a woman who was rattled easily.

She'd have to get it together before she went back to the bungalow. Grace couldn't know she'd become the Secret Seven's target. If she so much as suspected Nancy was trying to break her and Stephan up, she'd pack up her flower child camper-van-thing and high tail it out of Diamond Cove. A free spirit, she rebelled at the first sign of rules, control, or well-meaning advice.

For now, Nancy could lean on her friends and trust that they would do what needed to be done. They were good people and she was grateful they were on her side because she couldn't be the one to throw Stephán out of her house—not if she wanted to keep her relationship with Grace.

And she loved her granddaughter.

Struggled to understand her, but loved her nonetheless. That love was enough to move mountains—or ex-paddleboard yoga instructors—whatever needed to be shoved aside so that Grace could find real happiness while here in Diamond Cove.

One

G race Matthews stretched her arms above her head in the morning light that spilled through the open window and let out a groan as weeks of muscle aches bid her farewell. One night on Grandma Nancy's guest bed and she was halfway unwound from the ball she'd slept in for the last two months.

Outside, the waves crashed against the beach in a soothing rhythm that allowed her to sleep later than her internal clock usually let her. The scent of fresh saltwater and gardenias blooming hung heavy in the air, making the bright room seem even brighter.

Grandma's sheets were smooth and soft against her skin—such a contrast to the rough-haired cot she'd occupied while in Mexico tracking down a family line for a client, and the bunk in the Volkswagen wasn't much better. The two months it took to earn the young priest's trust and then be allowed to search through the records, some more than two hundred years old, was worth the effort and patience.

She'd left the village with a plethora of new friends—including the priest —and permission for her photographer to come in and preserve the info for future genealogists. The archivist she'd contracted would take months to get the info online for others to view and use in their quest for their ancestors.

Moseying back to the states, taking detours that filled her evenings with delicious meals and local music at festivals, she'd picked up Stephán in a small coastal town. He was a surfer, in Mexico to catch some big waves and enter the local competitions. He'd done well too, bringing home several purses. They clicked on several levels and she'd offered him a ride back to the states as checking surf boards at the airport was a pain.

She liked his easy-going attitude and the fact that he didn't pressure her for a commitment, gave her the freedom to enjoy the time they had together. He wasn't in love with her—he was in love with surfing. And that was fine because she wasn't looking for love right now. Maybe someday. If she could find the right man—a man who would love her like her grandpa loved her grandma.

Gramps was a rare find in the world, and she was afraid they just didn't make them like they used to.

Her phone rang, and she snagged it off the side table. "Morning, Celeste." "You sound chipper."

Grace threw off the blankets and sat up. "I will be if you tell me you're in Todos Santos." Celeste was an old college roommate who loved photographing records. She had all the equipment, had nothing tying her down, and a passport full of stamps, which made her the perfect freelance photographer to take on any project Grace came across.

"Just getting in now. I see the church. It's incredible."

"Right?" Grace tested the shirt she'd washed in the sink last night and hung near the open window to dry instead of turning on the washer and dryer. In this house, schedule mattered, order mattered, and she'd thrown both out the window when she showed up unannounced. Sure, Grandma was happy to see her but she didn't miss the eye-tick. The silent but traitorous tick that gave away Grandma's true thoughts about opening her door to find two overnight guests.

No warning.

No phone call.

Just a wild hair on Grace's part to reconnect with her family matriarch after being on the road for six months. What could she say? Sometimes a woman just needed the steadying influence of a grandmother's hug.

The shirt was dry enough, so she slipped into it and pulled on a pair of cotton shorts. Her dreads hung free and she flipped over, gathering them into a high bun on top of her head.

The sound of a parking brake setting screeched through the phone. Nancy could only imagine what kind of vehicle Celeste had procured. She'd had to buy the ugly Volkswagen van now parked in Grandma's driveway because there weren't any rental cars available when she'd landed in Mexico. The car was fine; pulling into these smaller villages in a shiny rental sent the wrong message. As soon as she found something better to drive, she'd donate the van to a local charity.

"I'm heading in for a preliminary look at things, and I'll email you my master plan tonight."

"Sounds good." Celeste would absolutely die over the parchments.

"Have fun." Nancy grinned, thinking of the treasure trove she was about to walk into. The small, stained-glass window the locals had saved and sacrificed to provide their church was stunning. The adobe architecture was classic Mayan with a Catholic vibe thrown in, and the young priest was enthusiastic about his work. "Make sure your lens cover is off when you walk in—you won't want to waste a second."

"I will and you stay far away from the Bermuda Triangle–I don't need you disappearing."

Grace laughed. Her phone beeped, and her sister's name popped up. "I have to take this." They signed off, and she clicked over.

"Elizabeth!" There was something about being in the same country as her sisters that brought her an added amount of joy. They understood that she had to travel, and they loved the stories she came home with, but she hated saying goodbye to her two best friends in the whole world. They'd always been like that—linked together and loyal—and she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Grace? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me," Grace replied. "Who else would it be?"

"I half-expected a kidnapper who wants a ransom for you to answer the phone," she teased.

"Ha ha! I'm at Grandma's as we speak." She hurriedly made her bed, tucking in the sheets and fluffing the pillows.

"It's so dreamy, right?"

Grace pulled the phone away and verified the number. "Who are you?" Elizabeth was the overachieving sister who lived for spreadsheets and office supplies. She'd only ever used the word *dreamy* to describe a new back-to-school notebook. It wasn't that she was uptight–oh no. She could have a good time. It was just that she loved business, marketing, development, brainstorming, and all things corporate to the point that an office supply store was her zen.

Elizabeth giggled. "Stop. I love Diamond Cove."

A lightbulb clicked on. "Love, huh? I think it's a hunky surfer you keep sending me pictures of—without his shirt on I might add—that you're in love with."

"Guilty. Chad is . . . incredible." She let out a happy sigh that would make flowers bloom and birds chirp. Not that she didn't have a reason to be all goo-goo-eyed over the man. Not only did he have broad shoulders and defined pecs—she should not know that about her future brother-in-law!--but he was intelligent, funny, and the yang to Elizabeth's Yin. A man who balanced work and play with incredible dexterity was precisely what Elizabeth needed in her life. And, if her sister's stories about being swept off her feet—pun intended!--were accurate, then Chad had a romantic heart inside that amazing chest, too.

Grace allowed silence to fill the space between them for the count of four. "Sorry about that, I had to gag for a second."

"You laugh now," she warned. "But Diamond Cove has *options* in the singles department. You could be next."

She thought about the man sleeping on Grandma's couch. Stephán was not her long-term, life-long guy. He was a convenient stop-over. Cute and adventurous—not to mention it was nice to have a man with her when she ran into the ruffians at the border. Not that Stephán had to defend her honor or anything. His grip on her hand was enough to warn them off.

She'd seen the same symptoms of love that Elizabeth displayed in several of her friends over the years. Like someone who'd fallen too deep into a vat of chocolate to want to get out—they want you to be as happy as they are. *Come on in*, they called. *The chocolate is warm and delicious*, they'd taunt, not realizing that they were getting sucked in and their lives and their plans were floating away. "Not me. I've looked the world over and didn't find a man."

"You didn't look in the Cove," she sing-songed. "Besides, you're always looking for dead guys. If you searched among the living, you might find something worth hanging on to."

"I'd argue with you . . .but . . ."

"But you know I'm right."

Grace bit her tongue. Elizabeth wasn't right—she was too blinded by her hot surfer to see other options. Which was awesome! Elizabeth deserved all the happiness in the world. She worked too hard and any man who could get her to leave the office was a gift to the whole family.

Someone on the other end reminded Elizabeth of a meeting starting in three minutes. "I only have a second. I actually called to warn you to take it easy on Grandma." "Why?" Grace tightened her grip on the phone. "Did she have another heart attack? Why doesn't anyone tell me these things?" What were weekly video calls for if not to tell her important things?

"Relax! The doctors at The Palms say she's doing well. She has a good group of friends there that are super important to her, and they're good for her. They get together all the time, and they invite her to concerts and activities all over the Cove. You're going to love them."

Grace absorbed the news. "Since when does Grandma have friends?" She had business associates she went out to lunch with, and she had their family, but other than that, she had the company. It must have been lonely in a lot of ways–especially after Gramps died.

"Since she retired. Don't make waves—pun intended. And don't upset her. She's in a good mental and physical space."

Seeing her grandma through a grown-up's eyes was strange—like trying on a pair of lederhosen for the first time. Thick leather that rubbed in places she'd never thought about before. "Okay, but . . . it's weird."

"All I'm saying," Elizabeth continued, "is not to get her riled up and don't pick fights."

Grace snorted. "You've met us, right? We're like oil and water together." Grandma was all schedules and agendas while Grace moved by intuition. That's not to say she didn't succeed in her chosen field—but she decided not to let her work run her life.

"Just . . . try?" Elizabeth pleaded.

"I'll do my best." She grimaced. "The problem with oil is that it can't be anything else. It's always going to be oil, and because of its very nature, it can't mix with water. I love her and I'll bite my tongue the whole time I'm here if I have to." If she didn't love Grandma and Grandma didn't love her they'd have drifted apart long ago. But their love was just too strong to let their personalities get in the way.

"And how long will that be?"

"That is yet-to-be-determined." She had several clients waiting for her to jump on a plane. She would too, but she wanted to spend some time with her grandma and recharge her own family-centered batteries. Besides, Stephan was here and they could spend a little more time together before she said goodbye.

"Good. I'm coming down soon. I want to introduce you to Chad in person when he gets back from the conference. No more of these video chats." Sounded good to her.

They said their goodbyes and Grace brushed her teeth and got ready for the day. She'd barely gotten out of bed and already fielded two phone calls her first day in Diamond Cove and she was already turning into Grandma Nancy.

She shuddered.

Stephán was not in the living room. A glance out the front window told her his board was off the porch, which meant he'd headed to the ocean. That was probably a good thing. Grandma was mortified at having a man camp on her couch last night. She'd done that thing where she clamped her teeth together and pressed her lips so hard they disappeared.

Grace headed to the kitchen, where she came up short at the sight of Grandma sitting at the table, her chair facing the sliding glass door to the ocean beyond. Grandma wasn't a still person. She was a bundle of energy and a bottle of soda—shaken. She sipped peppermint tea, the scent wafting to Grace on the light breeze coming through the open window over the sink.

Her blonde hair was tidy. Grace rolled her eyes at the crease down the pants of her navy blue tracksuit. She was a beautiful woman and could pull off anything from a leather jacket to a sweatshirt and yet she continually dressed as if she had a meeting that day.

She wasn't being critical. Okay, perhaps just a little bit. But it stemmed from the fact that Grace always felt like she didn't quite measure up to Grandma. She'd tried on several occasions to put as much care into her appearance and hated it. She'd rather have the dreads so she didn't have to worry about her hair while she focused on saving hundred-year-old records. And her clothing needed to be durable so she could trek through the jungle or climb into a crypt.

Although the crypt thing had only happened once, but she wanted to be prepared because she'd totally do that again if given the opportunity.

Grace had been in Scotland when Grandma was diagnosed with a heart issue. Standing in an abandoned castle where her client believed family records were hidden in the wall, all thoughts of the treasure hunt they were on evaporated with the text: Grandma had a heart attack. She'd flown straight home and rushed to Grandma's hospital room the moment the plane landed only to receive a scolding from her grandmother for making a big deal out of nothing and leaving a job unfinished. ${f S}$ he thought back to that day and the angry woman in the hospital bed. . .

"I can't believe you'd leave a client behind! That's not how the Matthews do business." Grandma tugged on the ugly hospital gown that hung on her thin frame. Where had the padding gone, the soft layers that snuggled Grace close when she heard something go bump in the night during one of their sleepovers?

"I was worried about you," Grace protested as she grabbed Grandma's hand and held tight-reassuring herself that Grandma was still here, blood still pumped through her veins, and her spirit filled her body with life. "You have a hole in your heart—that's not something to brush under the rug or ignore and hope it goes away."

"You, of all my family, should be the calmest." Grandma looked at her like she'd offended her—personally.

"Me? Why me?!" She was the flighty one who couldn't sit through a meeting without tapping her pen—much to Grandma's frustration. The eye-twitch had started in just such a meeting.

"You're the one who says we don't really die. You've had more conversations with my mother than I have—and she's been dead since before you were born." Grandma threw a dismissive hand in her direction.

Grace sucked air in through her teeth. She ignored the jibs and jabs at her spiritual gifts and stayed focused on the moment. "Did they say you're dying?"

"We're all dying." Grandma stared at the sheet. "Isn't that what you say?"

Grace moved so she could put her arm around Grandma and leaned her head on her bony shoulder. "I would miss you terribly."

Grandma stiffened her spine. "I'm not going anywhere—yet. There's still too much to do."

T *oo much to do* was the theme of Grandma's life. As a young mother, she'd started Nancy's Niceties, ran for office, run the PTA for three years, and did countless acts of service for the women and families who attended

the same church.

When Mom called to explain the plan to vote Grandma out as President of Nancy's Niceties for her own good, Grace's gut clenched and her heart twisted.

"Without the company, what will she live for?"

She truly believed that if Grandma stopped working she would give up on life.

"We've found her a wonderful place not too far away. The doctors agree that if she keeps working, she won't live much longer. Someone needs to think about her health, even if she won't," Mom replied.

The timing was horrible—what with Mom getting married and going on an extended honeymoon. Somehow they'd made it through and from what Elizabeth said, Grandma had adjusted to The Palms quite well.

Grandma turned in her seat. "Ah, good, you're finally up. We need to have a talk about your guest."

Grace ignored the fact that Grandma didn't use Stephán's name, even though she knew it. She also ignored the way she said *finally*, *as if* sleeping until mid morning was some kind of crime.

As they'd pulled into The Cove late last night, Stephán told her that he used to teach yoga here. He'd said he enjoyed the lifestyle and that the classes were a piece of cake. He'd mentioned that Nancy was not a regular in his yoga class, but he wished she had been.

"Stephán speaks highly of you, Grandma." She went to the kettle and poured herself a cup of boiling water. Opening the cupboard next to the stove she found the tea bags—just like at Grandma's house in the city. Predictable. Organized.

"That's nice." Grandma set her mug down. "He's . . ." her gaze darted from Stephán's beach shoes by the back door—not the ones he wore on the beach but the ones he wore everywhere else—to his shirt draped over one of the chairs to dry and then his dishes in the sink. ". . . messy." She wrinkled her nose.

Grace ignored the clutter. Stephán could and would clean up after himself. He was excited to return to the waves he loved so much.

"Are those cookie crumbs?" Grace nodded toward Grandma's front.

Grandma looked down, frowned, and brushed them away. "I've made you an appointment at the hair salon this morning at eleven."

"What for?" Grace blew over the top of her mug.

"You said you were ready to take your—" She motioned to Grace's dreads, "out. And I agree wholeheartedly."

Grace's free hand flew to the synthetic hair. The dreads were braided in not made from her own hair. They allowed her to be in places where she couldn't wash her hair often and kept her from feeling grungy. They also protected her natural hair from damage and helped it grow out. She'd had this set in for six months, having them rebraided every six weeks. They were brown, caramel, blonde, and white, with teal thrown in for fun.

Grace chaffed. "I planned to see *my* stylist." *On my schedule and when I'm darn good and ready*, she added silently. "Why don't you cancel it, and we'll have a long, leisurely lunch on the pier?"

Grandma's eyes widened with . . . was that fear? No. Grandma wasn't afraid of anything. This woman built a business from nothing while raising children. Mom said that Grandma had changed—that retirement helped her relax and see the world through fresh eyes. Grace didn't buy it for one moment.

Grandma traced the mug handle. "The appointment is under my name."

Grace caught the panic, mixed it with what Elizabeth had told her about Grandma fitting in, and understood that she would embarrass Grandma if she didn't show up. Her hair may also be an issue with Grandma's friends. She'd not met any of them, but if they were like Grandma, they'd think she was a hippie.

Her gaze fell to Grandma's hands, where blue veins were visible. Before she could work herself up into an argument, Grace relented. "Maybe we can do both."

Grandma brushed at the front of her shirt again. "That's very diplomatic of you. There's a new boutique in town that specializes in bohemian clothing for women. It sounds like it's right up your alley. We could get in some shopping, too."

Grace hid her smile behind her mug before taking a sip to test the temperature of the tea. It was just shy of too hot, and she enjoyed the freshness.

"Bohemian?" She lifted an eyebrow. "Grandma, I'm impressed."

Grandma lifted her chin. "When Elizabeth came to visit, I took her shopping too. Different store, but it was fun to spoil her. Do you remember when we used to go back-to-school shopping?"

Grace smiled. "I loved that." Grandma would book a whole Saturday for

just the two of them. She let Grace pick the stores, the styles, and the shoes. Anything went. Anything. She could have bought booty shorts and crop tops, and Grandma wouldn't have said a word. Well, she might have told her that she had the legs to pull off the shorts and then winked. There was a wild side to Grandma that rarely appeared, but when it did, Grace thrilled to see it.

"Me too. You were always so daring with new trends." She tucked her short hair behind her ear. "In truth, I was jealous of the freedom you felt to express yourself."

Grace's mouth fell open. "Shut the front door! You were not."

Grandma smiled and blushed slightly. "Hurry up now." She got quickly to her feet and pushed her chair in, cutting off any more grand revelations.

Grace checked the clock. "It's not quite ten." And they had just scratched the surface of things. She wanted to explore Grandma's wild side—see if there was a hidden hippie in there just dying to come out.

"I have a class at ten." Grandma tapped her watch. "It's important to me, and you're coming."

Grace blinked. Classes? Elizabeth's warning about not ruining Grandma's social life rang through her head. "I'm ready when you are."

Grandma glanced over her cotton shorts and wrinkled tee shirt. "You have great legs." She patted Grace's knee. Grace took a moment to wash out her mug and set it on the drying rack.

"Do I need to lock up my jewelry, or will your guest be out for the rest of the day?" Grandma asked.

"I think you'll be fine." Grace dried her hands. She didn't actually know when Stephán would be back, but he'd never stolen from her—and he'd had plenty of opportunities.

The walk to The Palm's main building didn't take long. Behind the front desk, a receptionist with streaks of purple and pink in her bob spoke on the phone. Above them, a skylight let sunlight fall on a stunning fountain where a muzzled real-life alligator lounged in the water. The fountain was lined with aqua-blue, white, and light blue tiles. On the far side was a ramp where the alligator could slide in with ease.

"Who is this?" Leaning over the edge, she ran her hand down the alligator's side.

"That's Sweetie. She lives here most of the time." Grandma shifted her weight from foot to foot and checked her watch.

"You can go ahead. I'll be up in just a second," she promised, enamored

with the reptile and how calm she seemed with traffic in the lobby.

"You'll be late."

"How many times in my life will I get to pet an alligator? Totally worth it." The skin was smooth and yet rigid. Not soft like the large snakes the men brought out of the jungle and cooked up for the village of Todos Santos.

Grandma smiled softly. "Seize the day." She told her which room to meet her in and to hurry before bustling off to the elevators by herself.

The alligator was a darling with scars over her eyes that spoke to the cruelty in the world. She allowed Grace to run her hands up and down her bumpy tail and along her smooth sides—even making appreciative noises now and again.

A white lab pushed under Grace's elbow, demanding his share of attention. One end of a leash was attached to his harness, and the other end hung free. She laughed, "Where did you come from?"

"They are friends, sí?" said a deep, sexy voice. "Thick as thieves who enjoy the administration of a beautiful woman. But what man could resist one such as you?"

Grace turned around while leaning over, only to stare at a man's knees. She tipped her head up to a trim middle section, a chest rivaling any pictures Elizabeth sent of her surfer and shoulders that looked like they could hold up the world. Her gaze traveled to a square jaw covered in expertly trimmed stubble that called out to her to run her fingers over it and sigh gustily. *Oh my!* He had olive-toned skin, the perfect shade of brown hair, and green eyes. Not just any green eyes, but the most coveted green eyes on the planet. The combination of genes could only mean one thing, and her heart jumped and spun in a circle. "You're from Isola de la Famiglia." Excitedly, she surged to her feet, and the overly handsome man stepped back.

The bloodlines from the small island off the coast of Italy rarely made it out of Europe, although a few families migrated to America in the early 1900s. Over time, they married Americans, and their distinct genes spread and mingled until they were no longer recognizable as Isoladorians\$.

There was no mud in this man's bloodlines. He was a thoroughbred through and through. His genetics ran back thousands of years, and he was the perfect specimen. Her eyes ran over him again, and she practically purred with pleasure at the sight. So. Darn. Perfect.

She wiggled her fingers, eager to get her hands on a DNA test. Her eyes fell to his mouth; just one swipe and she'd have so much information. His

lower lip was slightly bigger than the top lip, and they were—as the legends said—kissable.

Was it hot in here?

"No. No. I am Italian," he insisted. He bent down and clipped the dog's leash to the alligator's harness. The system was ingenious. The lab wore a special vest that designated him as a service animal for the blind alligator. Although how that worked, she had no idea.

She shook her head and touched his arm–a buzz lighting her up on contact. "There's no way you're Italian." She drew her eyebrows together. "You enunciate like an Isaladorian."

"How did you know that?" he asked, his eyes guarded.

She yanked her gaze away from his mouth and her hand from his arm in an effort to clear her brain. "I'm a genealogist. Your genetic markers, coupled with your wonderful accent," did she mention she had a thing for accents? Like, a double-decker-sweet-as-gelato thing that could potentially incapacitate her? "and incredibly proper English—were a dead giveaway."

He moved further away from her. "A genealogist? What is this?"

"Si, studio le famiglie." I study families, she told him, dropping into Italian. *"I connect generations."*

He half turned away from her. "*É buono per te. Buona giornata*." It is *good for you. Good day.* He strode purposely away, leaving behind a wonderful scent made from many manly things she couldn't name but wished she could get her hands on.

"I'd like to get my hands on him," she mumbled.

He looked good going, too. He had muscles, broad shoulders, and a trim waist. With his short-cropped, slightly wavy hair, he was most definitely Islandorian\$. The man was a specimen Michelangelo would beg to carve. So strange that he wouldn't claim his unique heritage.

The lab bumped her. "What? I meant so I could study him, dog. Geeze, get your mind out of the swamp." She bumped him back.

He barked once.

"What?" she lifted both her palms. "He's interesting." Like getting a taste of Swiss chocolate for the first time—her appetite was wet, and she wanted more. She wanted to know why he thought he was Italian. Who were his parents? Grandparents? How did he end up in a small town in Florida? Yes, they lived in a global world where people traveled just about anywhere and settled far from their birthplace, but he truly seemed confused about his past. And she loved to sort through history.

"Wouldn't mind sorting through his for a while," she mumbled.

The dog shoved his head under her hand and whimpered. She scratched behind his ears as she worked over the short encounter. "He called me beautiful," she said. "Does he do that to all the ladies?" Checking his name tag, she laughed. "Bear?" Scratching more intently, she asked again. "Does he charm all the women?" A true Isl\$ would do precisely that. They were the most charming men on the planet, and, generally, women were suckers for their incredibly romantic natures.

Bear's back foot thumped the floor in sync with her, scratching his ear. "Well, if you're not going to spill his secrets, then I'm going to class with Grandma." She gave him one more good scratch, said goodbye to Sweetie, and then took the stairs. All the while, she fought the urge to picture the stranger on a surfboard. Now that was picture-worthy!

Two

R yker Rockefeller (not his real name) was shaken by his encounter with the beautiful woman and an alligator.

And a dog . . . but Bear was not at all dangerous.

Sweetie, if given the chance, would eat his left foot. Her muzzle was not just to make the residents of The Palms feel safe with her in the building but to prevent her from gobbling up unsuspecting victims. She may be fascinating and majestic as one of God's creations, but she could be deadly if not controlled.

Yet his pulse had never raced in her presence before. Not even when Aaron, her owner, took off the muzzle and fed her half a rotisserie chicken. He pressed his hand to his heart, feeling it throb inside his chest as well as pound against his ribs. It beat out a message he knew better than to ignore.

The woman was the dangerous one.

Captivating blue eyes, round, expressive lips, and her slightly upturned nose spoke of innocence and intelligence, and he was drawn to her in a completely unexpected way. "Like a shark," he mumbled to himself. His deep male instincts rose to the surface, turning him into a huntsman, a protector, and a lover, and consumed him in such a way that all he could hear was a buzzing noise, and all he could feel was the force of his heart pumping blood through his veins as the desire to learn if her skin was as soft as it seemed.

The feeling was too much. *She* was too much.

Her mention of his homeland was the ice bath he desperately needed to regain his senses.

Glancing at his phone, he quickly discarded the idea of using it to contact

his security. Phones were tapped and traced. He doubted anyone in the underbelly could have gotten past the firewalls set up by the US Navy SEAL team assigned to this special mission.

There were protocols to follow. The farther he moved from the lobby–and *her*–the clearer his thoughts became, and he moved with a purpose into the busy kitchen at The Palms, feeling as though he were in enemy territory and wondering if the dishwashers or cooks had been spying on him this whole time.

"You!" Chef Bruno barked at him. "Get out of my kitchen."

Ryker pulled himself up to his full height, his back military straight and his shoulders square. Chef Bruno may be holding a cleaver, but he would not intimidate a member of the royal de Luca household. "I am looking for Cocoa."

Cocoa, the talented pastry chef, was married to Aaron, a recently retired Navy man, alligator rescue specialist, Sweetie's owner, and trustworthy friend. He would be on the property today, and his wife, who was utterly smitten with him, would know where to find him. Thankfully, Sweetie was in the lobby distracting the possible spy.

"She's out there," Bruno jerked the glinting knife toward the back patio. "It's Tarts and Toddlers Tuesday at the pool."

Ryker stayed in place for three more seconds to prove that he would leave when he wanted. The longer he was away from home, the more he wondered if he was programmed to behave that way or if he had a stubborn streak. His sisters would claim it was stubbornness. At the thought of them, his heart tugged, and he moved quickly, hoping to leave behind the sense of homesickness that always gripped the shirttails of thoughts of his family.

He passed through the dining room, where residents—clients in the barbershop located upstairs—called out greetings or waved hello. Once a world traveler and representative of his country, his world quickly shrunk to Diamond Cove and The Palms when tragedy struck Isola de la Famiglia.

As far as exiles went, Diamond Cove wasn't a horrible place to be shipwrecked. The residents were fun, quirky, and opinionated, and the beach was stunning. The work was so far removed from his life as a prince that some days, as he swept hair or advised a man on how to trim nose hair, even he would not believe he was a prince.

Nevertheless, if he had arrived under better circumstances, he would recommend the secluded Florida town to other royals as a secluded getaway where the world would not find them and the people would treat them as friends.

Pushing through the double glass doors, he left the air conditioning behind and stepped into the muggy heat that clung to his skin like beard oil and smelled of chlorine and sunscreen. He shaded his eyes as they acclimated to the sunshine.

The Palms sported an impressive backyard—as Americans called them. There was a six-inch deep pool with a playground in the center, tall, multicolored poles that sprayed water on the children and their caregivers, and a bucket that dumped water every seven minutes on the dot. To the left of that was a mini golf course for people of all ages. A lazy river circled the entire course, shaded by palm trees and decorated with flowers blooming in many colors and scents.

To the left of the golf course was a large swimming pool. On weekends, Samantha, the activities director, set up a movie screen, and residents and their guests floated in the pool as they watched everything from classics to semi-new releases. If moviegoers did not want to get wet, they could sit around the pool at one of the tables. On hot days, the umbrellas provided shade for retirees and their families.

Between the pool deck and the lazy river was a walkway that led to a snack shack where they sold cold drinks, popsicles, soft-serve ice cream cones, and frozen ice drinks.

Adjacent to the snack shack was the storage building. Inside was where the paddle boards and other lake equipment were stored until it was needed for a yoga class on the water or by a resident to cruise around the lake. It also housed a bug-out bag full of weapons and minimal diving equipment in the rafters. Of course, only seven people knew about that. The SEAL team had stashes all over The Palms since it was where Ryker spent his days. They also carried weapons, but no one wanted to be outgunned should the situation arise.

In the middle of the lake was the library. Accessible by one bridge, you had to use the main building's front entrance to access the world-class atheneum. The library was a stunning observatory turned book vault by the owners of The Palms, Adam and Bella Moreau.

Ryker had explored every inch of The Palms within his first week here a sense of unfulfilled wanderlust racing through his veins. His life before Diamond Cove was the life he had always wanted and the one he had worked hard to make possible. The decision to give it up was not difficult—he would always put his family and country first. But actually, living here had been a royal adjustment.

Cocoa and Aaron stood next to a food cart, holding an umbrella over the tarts to keep the direct sun off of them as Cocoa considered her options for table placement. She wore her white chef coat and had her long blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail. She had, what his SEAL friends called, the All-American girl look about her. Ryker's sisters would have dubbed her a natural beauty who was confident in her skin. Ryker called her a kind person with a big heart and mad skills with a whisk and he could not have asked for a better woman for his friend.

Aaron, as per usual, wore cargo shorts and a polo shirt—his company's logo, Mitchell's Alligator Rescue, embroidered over his left chest area, and flip-flops. The man had no taste in footwear, though Cocoa didn't seem to mind.

In the role of dutiful husband, Aaron struggled with a portable table and awning. No doubt Cocoa intended to display the beautiful tarts on the table and offer them to the many grandparents and their small grandchildren playing nearby. Toddlers, as he understood, were children aged three and under. A half dozen of them were on the playground, and twice as many adults were watching them.

Ryker moved to take one side of the table and leveled it for Aaron.

"Thanks." Aaron locked the legs. He slid the umbrella into the hole in the middle of the table and bent down to clamp it in so it wouldn't lean to either side. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, but you are *looking shaggy*." Ryker gave him the code that said a possible threat was nearby and they should proceed cautiously.

Aaron was not a member of the SEAL team anymore, having retired a little more than a year ago, but was aware of their protocol. Since his marriage, he'd been less and less available for the team's casual get-togethers, which was to be expected, and Ryker only disliked him a little because he had found a woman who was much better company than the rest of them.

Aaron stood up and ran his hand through his hair, letting it flop in his eyes. "You have time for a trim?" he asked. Which was code for: Are we leaving or fighting? If he said there was no time, they were fighting. Fighting meant finding a defensible position away from civilians if possible. If he had time, they would proceed to one of their predetermined safe spaces loaded with a stash of weapons and contact the team.

"I do," he replied. Aaron relaxed only slightly, his eyes scanning for danger.

Cocoa moved the cart under the umbrella and ran her fingers through Aaron's hair. "I like it longer." She pecked his cheek. "But if you're playing one of your military games, I hope you win." While she was not aware of the secret mission nor Ryker's true identity, when they married, Aaron filled her in on some of what happened with the SEAL team. He'd often played assassin to help the team train for different scenarios. Cocoa thought they were just reliving their glory days and boys would be boys. They all lived as though they'd retired from the military—even taking on civilian jobs—when, in fact, they were on active duty and very much on guard.

Aaron grinned at her as if she had invented cake and he'd like a slice. "You like my hair, huh?"

With her no-make-up, fresh-faced look, Cocoa was the epitome of innocence, and all that was right in the world. Ryker compared her to the woman in the lobby. They were not opposites—both beautiful women with trim yet strong figures.

He had watched the stranger from the moment Sweetie caught her attention. She was brave, leaning over immediately and running her hands over the alligator as if it was not the scariest creature she had come into contact with in her life. The beaded cord necklace at her throat looked like something she would pick up at a market in Mexico for a few pesos. Yet the dreadlock extensions, cotton shorts, and tee shirt were made from quality material. The extensions especially. She also did not wear makeup, though her eyes had a depth to them that said she had seen parts of the world she would have rather not, or perhaps she had seen the darker side of people and wished she had not.

The image of her hair returned to him, and he contemplated why she wore it up in a bun and how long it would be if she let it down. He had never found the look all that attractive, preferring his women elegant and refined—*foxy*, as his elderly clients would say. But on her? You could bet your *sweet bippy* she wore it like a *babe*.

He really needed to spend more time with people his own age and get out of The Palms once in a while.

"I'm on an early lunch," Ryker prompted Aaron, who couldn't stop

staring into Cocoa's ocean-blue eyes. The man was impossibly in love with his woman. For a time, no one on the team believed a lady out there could compete with alligators for Aaron's attention. Apparently, Cocoa won hands down.

"Let's go." Aaron kissed Cocoa goodbye quickly, thank goodness. She set about to make Toddlers and Tarts a huge success, humming as she worked.

Ryker checked as they walked through the lobby to the stairs, but the mystery woman was no longer in sight. It would have been too convenient for her to loiter long enough for Aaron to get a good look at her.

The two men made their way up to the barbershop on the second floor of the main building.

Next door, the salon was in full swing, giving perms, trims, coloring, and blow-outs. The place was a hive of activity every hour of the day. Though, this morning, it seemed especially busy. Elvis Presley crooned over the speakers about *what a night* he had had, and the ladies chatted loudly past the sound of blow dryers.

Ryker unlocked the door to the barbershop and stepped inside his domain.

Jazz music played low, just loud enough to bring the soulful sounds of a bluesy guitar or saxophone into the air. Sift lighting filled the space–enough and then some to work by, but not the offensive fluorescent lighting that rivaled the sun. Two red, white, and blue barber's poles trimmed in chrome rotated on either side of the mirror. His black leather chair, with extra padding for his customers with bad hips, waited for Aaron. The scent of sandalwood beard oil hung on the air from his last appointment.

In a place where fifty-three percent of the male population was bald, there was one barber to three hairdressers. In a bold move, he had added a clean shave and beard care to his repertoire and increased appointments by an hour and a half a day. Turns out, men enjoyed being groomed as much as women, even if they did not want to talk about it.

"Are you shaving more than beards?" Aaron asked as Ryker shut the door. He held up a pink bottle of ladies' shaving cream with a picture of two bare legs on the front.

Ryker swiped it away from him. "Some gentlemen need a little shave up top." He motioned to his widow's peak, where men tended to grow islands of hair. He evened things out and kept them from looking like a golf course. "They have sensitive skin." Ryker shrugged it. "What's the situation?" He sat in the chair.

Ryker draped a cape over him. If he did not at least trim Aaron, Cocoa would notice. If there was one thing he had learned over the last year and a half, it was that pretending things were normal helped people believe they were normal.

"There was a woman in the lobby today. She spoke Italian and she pegged me as Isoladian like that." He snipped his scissors together because he could not snap his fingers while holding them.

Aaron pulled out his phone, which was much more secure than Ryker's would be if the threat played out. "Did you get a picture?"

Ryker shook his head. "Description: Long, dirty blonde hair in multicolored dreads. Thin, muscular frame. Blue eyes like," he paused to think, "You know on the news when they warn us about an incoming hurricane?"

"Yeah?"

"The water in that picture. That color."

Aaron's eyebrows climbed his forehead. "That's . . . oddly specific."

"The Portuguese crown jewels feature a stone the same shade of blue and just as sparkling, but I thought you would be more familiar with the local news stories." He finished evening out Aaron's sideburns and then moved on to shape the hair at the back of his neck.

Aaron clicked his tongue as if he could not quite believe the situation. "I'm sending a text to Mack." His phone beeped a second later. "He'll be here soon. Sean is at the dive site."

Ryker hummed. He knew where Sean was and that the rest of their team was out of town for the foreseeable future. None of them did anything without letting the others know. On the outside, they appeared to be a close group of guy friends who ate copious amounts of pizza and enjoyed diving excursions. Sean even had a grandfather in The Palms—Don. Now there was a man who could grow a solid head of hair. Their weekly family dinners added to the "pretend everything is normal" aspect of the operation.

L iam and Malcolm, or "Mack," as the team called him stood out with their red hair and big muscles. Mack was the serious older brother from Scotland, and Liam was the American charmer who had a way with animals. "Perhaps I can get Liam into my chair, *sí*? The man needs a haircut more than I need a decent cannoli."

The door flew open with a bang, and Aaron was out of the chair and standing half-in front of Ryker before Rosa, Polly, and Nancy entered the room. Still wearing the cape, Aaron did not appear menacing, though Ryker heard him unsheathe the large knife at his belt. Ryker approached the counter where a Smith and Wesson 340 PD was velcro to the underbelly.

"How many men do you know with enough hair to warrant a trip to the barber shop?" asked Polly. She had a calming way about her and moved with grace. "I'm sure Ryker can fit you into his schedule," she worked to convince someone who stood just far enough outside the door that Ryker could not see her face.

"This place is practically a graveyard," said Nancy as she paused to look around.

"Nancy! Don't talk about graveyards," replied Rosa. Rosa was hard to miss with her lively personality. Her husband had thinning, salt-and-pepper hair, and a thick mustache. "It's bad luck." She kissed the rosary necklace she wore and then tucked it back into her shirt as her focus landed on Aaron. *"Hola,* Aaron. Are you done? Your hair looks very nice. Cocoa will approve." She pumped her eyebrows and guided him away from the dark leather chair.

He covertly resheathed his knife.

"Excuse me—we're going to need this." Rosa whipped the cape off of him like a matador taunting a bull.

"Come on." Nancy, businesswoman extraordinaire, pulled on a long, nicely shaped, tan arm. "It's not my fault the salon can't find your appointment. This is the next best thing."

"I can take them out on my own. They're braided in," came the reply. The voice echoed against the wall and came to him, sounding like someone speaking through a tin can.

Nancy tugged again—more insistently and with a stomp of her foot. "Don't be rude. Ryker needs the clientele."

Ryker blustered. He certainly was not *disperato*.

"Get *tae*," called Mack in the hallway behind the dam of people. That was Mack's way of saying get out of the way. He'd moved to the States to be with his dad when he was a kid but had not lost his Scottish brogue. The reluctant patron yipped. Nancy dropped the arm and her jaw and quick-stepped backward into the salon.

"Whoa!" The reluctant patron breathed. "I'd ask you to put me down, but

I'm not hating this moment."

Aaron snickered and exchanged a look with Ryker. Mack was not the most patient man on the planet. If someone was in his way and did not move– he moved them. Apparently, the female roadblock had been picked up by their massive friend.

Two very serious Scots crowded into the shop. Mack walked backward, holding someone in his arms in order to maneuver through the doorway. Long, beautiful legs curled around his forearm. Behind him was Liam, and behind Liam came Sweetie and then Bear.

Liam shut and locked the door. He folded his arms and took up the sentry. Sweetie and Bear circled Liam like Tweety birds with hearts over their heads; Bear practically skipping around him, while Sweetie swished side to side, her tail whacking the wall, then Mack's leg, then Rosa's as she went.

"Well, aren't you two helpful." Polly smiled at Mack as if he'd done a great deed, not at all ruffled by the men's appearance and gruffness nor the fact that he bodily carried one of them into the shop. In fact, she looked thrilled with the development.

Rosa fanned herself. *"Tan guapo."* she said as she fanned her face. Her eyes darted to Mack's bicep and stayed there.

"Tienes razón," I agree, said the woman in Mack's arms. He dropped her to her feet as if she were a cactus. Holding his arms in the air like a man trying to prove his innocence, he moved to stand next to Ryker.

Ryker dropped his scissors at the sight of his possible assassin in his sanctuary. "That is her," he whispered out of the side of his mouth, forgetting protocol and training. His heart, once again, pounded as if it wanted to bounce from his chest, land at her feet and beg her to take it home.

Mack turned on the woman he'd carried in here as easily as he carried a watermelon, his face going dark.

"Goodness!" Rosa crossed herself. "It's not a sin for a woman to be in a barbershop, is it?"

"According to Walt, it is," mumbled Nancy, looking less intimidated by Mack than she should be. Of course, she was friends with Don which could explain her boldness.

"He looks like he wants to grind my bones and put them in a stew," Rosa whispered loudly to Polly as she pointed at Mack, then grinned a saucy grin. "I might let him."

Polly snapped a picture of Mack and then turned around and did the same

with Liam. "Smile."

Liam grinned while giving her an overly enthusiastic thumbs up.

Ryker turned his head to hide his smile. In the mirror, he caught the mystery woman studying him. When their eyes met, she grinned back as if they shared a secret laugh. His pulse thrummed, and he forced himself to look away. He felt the same buzzing sensation threaten to overcome him, and he leaned into Mack.

Mack shoulder bumped him away and glared at him like he'd lost his mind. "What's going on here?"

Polly took the cape from Rosa and wrapped it around the stranger as she explained. "Grace had an appointment to have her dreads washed out, but the salon has no record of it, and they're overbooked today."

"Aye!" Rosa threw her hands up. "My wash and style starts in one minute." She rushed to the door where Liam, Sweetie, and Bear formed a solid wall. When Liam did not move, she smacked him with her purse. "You don't stand between a woman and her hair appointment." She raised her purse again.

Liam had the decency to flinch.

Mack waved to him to let her out. Rosa was not a threat unless she had a brick in that purse. Which she might, considering the way Liam rubbed his arm after she left.

"You've met Nancy, right?" Mack asked Ryker, pointing at Nancy.

Ryker nodded. "She is the resident I told you about who suggested I add beard care to my services." Nancy had not only suggested beard care—she had also suggested ear waxing but the idea made Ryker shudder. Not because he thought men should have ear hair but because he imagined the experience to be quite painful. He promised to maintain their ear hair in other ways and she had backed down.

"And you know this woman?" Mack asked Nancy while pointing to the stranger.

Nancy lifted her chin slightly. "This is my granddaughter, Grace. She's been in Mexico and needs a makeover."

"Grazie, nonna," Thanks grandma, she mumbled sarcastically in Italian and then winked at Ryker, probably thinking he was the only one in the room who spoke Italian. He glanced around. Okay, so he *was* the only other person in the room who spoke Italian.

Why was she interested in him?

"How do you know Italian?" Ryker asked point blank.

She lifted a shoulder. "I have a propensity for languages. I lived in Italy for a year, researching a family line for an illegitimate, first-born son to inherit his title."

Ryker sucked air through his teeth. "Octavio," he whispered.

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! How did you know that? Do you read *Modern Genealogists*?" She turned to her Grandma. "They dedicated an entire issue to the story, and Octavio did interviews on news channels worldwide."

"I'm afraid I missed that one," Nancy lifted a shoulder.

Grace's face fell. "I'll get you a copy."

Her disappointment was a knife to his heart.

Ryker quickly put the pieces together. Octavio was his roommate when he had studied abroad. He was a good man with a sweet mother who had been seduced by a man of title and money. When she told the *duca* she was pregnant, he denounced her and the child and married a contessa with a considerable fortune. Octavio wanted justice for his mother, who never got over her broken heart and went after the title, the land, and the money that should have been hers.

He was happy to hear his friend had succeeded in his quest.

"Have you read the magazine?" Grace asked him with hope in her every word.

He could not tell Grace personal details. As far as she was concerned, he graduated from the closest barber school and nothing more. "I must have read about it online. I have a *molto bene* memory."

She nodded, but the look on her face said that she did not quite believe him.

Mack ran his fingers through his deep red hair. "What do you think about taking on a new client today, Ryker? She can have my appointment—unless you think I'm *too shaggy*."

Ryker considered Grace. The granddaughter of a resident explained why she was in the building, and apparently, she traveled. Though her connection to Octavio was suspicious. What were the odds that this woman would know his university roommate?

He would feel better about having her here if he did not feel so nervous around her.

"Perhaps you wait, Mack. Ladies first." He motioned to the chair for her to sit down. He could question her while he worked. It was unlikely that Nancy's granddaughter happened to be a spy. However, it was equally as unlikely that Don's grandson, Sean, was on a secret mission for the US Government—yet he was. Ryker would leave nothing to chance.

His hands shook, and he placed them on the back of the chair. He was not scared, and yet he trembled at the idea of touching Grace. Once he crossed that line, he would not be able to go back. That is why there were so many rules for royals. Rules like they cannot travel together or walk behind one another but off to the side without touching. Rules were not meant to fence him in but to protect him. However, he had never considered the idea that they would protect him from himself as the shark swimming inside his chest very much wanted to be closer to Grace.

"For the record, this was not my idea." Grace flounced the cape out as she sat down.

Aaron stepped toward the door. "I'm headed out—unless you want some company?" he asked Mack.

Mack shook his head. He jerked his chin, and Liam opened the door for Aaron, stepping into the hallway himself. "I'll be out here, making phone calls." His two shadows followed after him, Bear staring up like he'd met his hero and Sweetie purring low each time Liam allowed her to brush his leg.

Aaron scowled at the alligator. "You do remember that I'm the one who rescued you, don't you?"

Sweetie ignored his jealousy.

With the guard out of the way, the rest of the room could clear out.

"We'll just leave you to it." Polly grinned over her shoulder.

"Yes. Don't hurry home, Grace." Nancy shook her finger at Ryker. "Take all the time you need. This must be done right."

Ryker saluted her.

"Love you, Grandma." Grace waved, and then her hand disappeared under the cape again.

Nancy stepped over Sweetie. "I've never seen her so attentive to a person —even Aaron. And she *loves* Aaron."

"Hey!" Aaron protested. "I'm her favorite."

Liam took two steps down the hall, and Sweetie followed. Aaron frowned, making Liam laugh. "Can I help it if the women love me?" he asked, his hands up in an I'm-so-innocent movement.

Mack grunted, but it was an amused grunt, and shut the door, cutting off the women giggling over Liam in the hallway and the rock n' roll music from next door.

Ryker turned the chair around so Grace faced the mirror and considered the task before him. If he thought of her as another haircut, another client, and nothing more, he might be able to tame the pull she had on him.

He lifted a dread and rolled it between his fingers. It was soft and smelled of sunshine and spices. "Are you certain you want to take these out? They are quite fetching on you."

She laughed lightly, breaking through all his walls and calling to his heart like a siren. "I'm sure. I only wear them when I travel, and I would have taken them out soon anyway. Might as well do it now and keep her happy."

Ryker tipped his head to the side. "You love your *nonna*, *sí*?" She was not pretending the emotion; it was as clear as the radiance in her deep blue eyes, full of life and light.

Mack coughed, jolting Ryker out of the spell Grace cast over him without trying. It had been a long time since Ryker dropped so easily into his full accent. Normally, he only allowed it to come forth when he had to charm one of the women at The Palms into behaving herself, which was not too often.

He gave Mack a shrug. Something about Grace made it all too easy to be himself—his authentic self.

He ran his hands down her dreads and a feeling of lightness came over him, a soft buzz of happiness that he had not felt in his lifetime.

Grace may or may not be a spy, but she was most definitely a threat to his heart.

Three

G race closed her eyes and allowed Ryker's strong fingers to work through her hair. His hands were large, calloused, and tender. As he finished with a dread, he brushed and positioned her hair over her shoulder, brushing his fingers down her neck in the process and setting her skin aflame.

The man had serious seduction skills, and he wasn't even trying.

She told herself over and over again that he was Isladorian. Sensuality was part of their DNA–they were born to be gentlemen who said delicious things and mastered the art of flirty touch. The whole country should come with a warning that reads: Exposure to Isladorian men may cause your ovaries to explode. Every time their skin made contact, a burst of wantonness–was that even a word?–went through her like fireworks.

Not only did he take out the braids, but after each one, he massaged her scalp, the pressure just right. He ruined her for any hairdresser or barber the world over. She never wanted to be touched by anyone but him.

Wait–that sounded oddly like a lifetime commitment, and Grace didn't make those.

Committing six months to fake hair was the longest vow she'd uttered. And even then, she'd balked when told they had to be removed and rebraided every six weeks. She could do it on her own in a pinch, but there was usually a woman in whatever village, town, or city she was in who was happy for the work. Once she explained the process, they took to it with glee, singing or humming as they braided, sometimes telling stories. Those moments were her favorite because she collected the stories, recording them on her phone, and then transcribed them when she was on an airplane.

Though Grandma was heavy-handed with the appointment, Grace

wouldn't complain. She bit her lip and stifled a moan as Ryker tipped her head to the side and ran a thumb down her scalp and neck.

"Sei molto bravo in questo," she murmured appreciatively as his fingers gently worked the tender spots. *You are very good at that.* At some point in their conversation, she'd dropped into Italian. Probably early on because Ryker fell into it quickly. The language was softer, smoother, and—dare she say it—more intimate?

Not that she was trying to create a sense of intimacy with the Isoladian who had his hands in her hair and her knees in a bottle of jelly. Yes, he was all sorts of yummy.

Why hadn't she visited Isola de la Famiglia yet?

This, this was the reason. Her reserves when it came to Italian-speaking men made to seduce women with their words, their lion-like-loyal hearts, and their muscular frames—did she mention Ryker had muscles? So many of them rippled as he worked. His biceps were like boulders—the kind she could fall asleep on, snuggle up next to, and kiss hello in the morning. So. Many. Muscles. Her resolve against the tidal wave of pure man would hold up as well as a Post-it note in a hurricane. To add whipped cream to the top—great, now she was thinking about Ryker and whipped cream, and her cheeks were a thousand degrees—he smelled like sage and sandalwood, a come-hither combination. If he added vanilla, she'd have to crawl out of here because there's no way her legs would support her.

She was so lost in the fog Ryker created simply by caring for her that she contemplated living in this chair for the rest of her life. Who needed food?

"Your hair is like silk, sí?" he asked.

She didn't have to answer. The "sí?" on the end of the sentence was rhetorical. Instead, she allowed him to tip her head from side to side as the muscles in her neck relaxed. More like they sighed into his ministrations like a wanton woman begging for more.

When she'd sat down, she'd promised to casually and naturally work all her questions about him into the conversation. However, she'd told Ryker more about growing up with two sisters and spending summers interning at Nancy's Niceties than she'd learned about his past.

The scalp massage continued, and she bit her lip so she didn't moan with pleasure. Okay, *moan* too loudly. She may have let one slip.

"Dinna remember getting that treatment," teased the large Scot, who sat resting his foot on his knee as he leaned back in his chair, reading a magazine. He had this alertness about him that was hard to ignore. His accent was half-buried, though around here it would still sound thick. She suspected he'd come to America at a young age and wanted to ask him about it. She'd loved rambling through the emerald-green countryside and spending evenings in pubs, clinking glasses with locals. No one laughed as freely or as loudly, and the zeal for life was contagious.

"Is your mother or father Scottish?" she asked. "Or both?"

He jerked his chin back and pressed his lips together, indicating he wasn't going to answer.

She pressed on. "My guess is both. I'd venture your mother is from Edinburgh, perhaps even the coast. Did she spend time in England before coming to America? That tends to soften up the accent as well." A child's first and longest caregiver usually shapes their diction.

"I dinnae know," he ground out, his amused countenance falling away like a bug that'd just been swatted. If Mack's generally happy state was attractive, his brooding one was even more so. His fair skin, red hair, square jaw, and straight, thin nose would send him right to the top of the hottest man in America list. Okay, second to the top because Ryker definitely had first place wrapped up and stamped with authority.

"Well, which parent do you share with the guy in the hall?" She pointed to the closed door where Bear whined for attention every three minutes or so. Sweetie refused to go with Aaron, even when he'd tried to bribe her with a roast. Her tail was the only thing visible from where Grace sat and it swirled back and forth with pleasure.

Ryker choked. "How do you know they are half-brothers and not brothers?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Easy. Liam is not quite a carbon copy of Mack. The genetic markers in everything from their hair color to the shape of their shoulders indicates a half-sibling relationship instead of a complete DNA match. Genetics don't lie. Plus, Mack has a little bit of Scottish accent, and Liam doesn't. Which suggests Mack grew up in Scotland and Liam grew up here."

"A *wee* accent?" Mack shook his head in disbelief.

She smiled. "No offense. But I've heard much thicker."

He scoffed.

Ryker scowled, though she wasn't sure why her perceptions put distance between them. Perhaps it was the whole Italian-not-Isoladian misunderstanding they'd had earlier that put him on guard. She'd seen this reaction before. Clients were told one story all their lives–like this man is your father–only to find out that he was not. It was upsetting and tore at a person's very foundation of existence. *If that was a lie, what else was a lie?* they would ask themselves.

The thing was, after a few days, they'd come back to her and say, "I always suspected," or, "I think a part of me knew all along." Intuition was strong, though people had the ability to ignore it or rationalize it away. What was right in front of them was easier to believe was truth; but truth was often found within not from without.

Ryker could be one of those people. Her innocent excitement about his country of origin could have him examining information his parents told him in a new light—one that could, and most likely would, change his identity.

A worm of guilt squirmed inside of her–which was a gross thought but she didn't have another way to explain it. Ryker was not her client and had not asked, nor paid, her for information about who he really was and where he came from. Her assessment of Mack and Liam must have been pretty close to the truth or it wouldn't have upset Ryker so much. As a professional, she should step back and let him come to her with questions.

Mack got to his feet, towering in the space. Seriously—her mother's closet was bigger than the whole barbershop. Then again, her mother's closet was bigger than most houses she'd visited while in Mexico, so that wasn't saying much.

She cocked an eyebrow at him, waiting to see if he would confirm her suspicions or become defensive.

The Scot glared. "What's your game?

Defensive it was.

She tucked her smile away because his reaction was textbook. Even as big as he was, and with his lethal aurora coming right at her, she wasn't threatened. He'd already picked her up and carried her around, and his big heart was all over the tenderness he'd used to hold her.

Not that he was attracted to her in any way–there was zero chemistry between them. No. He'd carried her like an overprotective older brother. Which was nice because she'd never had a brother.

It also made her want to tease him relentlessly–what were younger sisters for anyway?

"No game. Just really good at my job." She smiled innocently.

He considered her as if knowing she was trying to egg him on with her guiltless look. "Why are you here, *wee hen*?"

"Mack!" Ryker was properly aghast at Mack, referring to her as a barnyard animal as any good Isoladian would be. Women were precious in Isola de la Famiglia—a tradition more of the world would do well to adopt.

She wiggled a finger toward her head, holding back the giggles that threatened to surface. Man! She wished she had a brother. This was too fun. "I'm here because my grandmother was horrified that her doublemasterdegree-graduate-of-the-lady's-etiquette-school granddaughter walked around Diamond Cove looking like a homeless woman. Her words—not mine." She bit her lip as she thought about Grandma Nancy's urging her through the door as if her standing in the retirement community depended on this one appointment. She was ten seconds away from grabbing a broom and prodding Grace through the door.

Grandma's friends were just as insistent that she came to the barber shop when her appointment went missing. They were not shy about telling her what to do. In the kindest and sweetest way possible and had taken up Grandma's cause—a complete makeover for her vagabond granddaughter. Seeing them have Grandma's back was good and made Grace count how many people in the world would do the same for her. The list was small. She had many acquaintances who were happy to see her when she landed in their city or called in favors and questions, leaning on the expertise Grace was willing to share.

But how many of them would be willing to jump into the messy parts of Grace's life?

The list was discouragingly short. Her sisters, of course. They had her back, her front, and her top and bottom. Grandma Nancy and her mom. Though Grandma was moving into the phase of life where her granddaughters took more care of her than she did of them.

She shoved the thoughts away so she could enjoy this moment. It wasn't every day she had two handsome men focus intently on her.

"Homeless?" Mack quirked a grin. "Nanna doesn't hold back, does she?" She shrugged. "Does your family?"

"Nah!" He barked a laugh. "Dinnae see the point."

She grinned and offered him a fist of solidarity. He bumped it before settling back in his chair to read.

Ryker trimmed her hair with surprising speed and then blew it out. When

he finished, he ran his hands through it, expertly tousling it into place. It was the most breathtaking experience of her life—and she'd kissed a man on the top of the Eiffel Tower at dusk during a light rain storm. Laurent and his skinny arms and skinnier mustache had *nothing* on Ryker. Ah, to be eighteen again.

Brightening, she complimented Ryker, "If I pay you double, will you do it again?"

He chuckled. "No." His hands dropped to her shoulders and squeezed. Bending over, he spoke close to her ear, using a deep chocolate-covered tone, "I would ignore all my clients for you, *bella signora*, but then I would not have a job."

His words were like being covered in warm caramel and feeling just as tempering. How could some men call you beautiful, and you wanted to punch them in the throat while Ryker saying it made her want to purr? "Well, we can't have that," she managed to breathe out. The man was a walking hot flash waiting to happen. How did the women around here survive?

Liam leaned through the open door. "Hey, they just sent over the info. We're in the clear." He didn't look at her, and she had the distinct impression he was making himself not look at her. Which made her think that they were talking about her in some kind of bro code. Being able to pinpoint accent origins, she was hyper-sensitive to tone and wordplay.

Not that she'd tell them that. These guys were intense, and she'd already pushed buttons she didn't know they had. Better play nice for a while.

Ryker sprayed something into her hair and ran a brush through it. "You will go now, *sí*?" he dismissed Mack.

"Yeah—I'll, uh, text you for whatever." He stopped in the doorway. "I'll expect the full treatment when I come in, though–no skimping on the scalp massage." He pointed at Ryker.

Ryker scowled. "I would rather clean your SCUBA gear."

Mack snapped. "Deal." He sauntered out.

Ryker glared at the doorway. "There is no deal!"

Laughter was the only answer.

The silence that filled the space was not uncomfortable.

Ryker ran the brush down the full length of her hair. If she stood up, it would brush her belt loops. If she were wearing pants with belt loops. Why hadn't she put on something a little more flattering than cotton shorts? Not even her Grandma-labeled good legs could be seen under the cape she had to wear.

"What would you like me to do with this?" he asked, staring at her locks, moving them this way and that to catch the light.

She met his warm, green eyes in the mirror, and her breath caught. "You can do whatever you want with me." She gulped as soon as she registered what she'd said—and the embarrassingly breathy way she said it. "I mean, my hair. I'm not picky. I, uh, I don't really have a look. Like Grandma has a look." She threw her hands out from under the cape and ran them around her chin. "I've never seen her hair longer than this. Although the A-line cut they have on her now is really cute."

She clammed up. Blathering was not her norm; neither was it her defense mechanism nor her default. She *never* blathered. Which said a lot more about the way he affected her than she wanted to admit.

He frowned. "I cannot cut this off." He lifted her hair, fingering it as one would a piece of velvet cloth. The tender and thoughtful gesture had her wondering what it would feel like to have him cup her face in his hands. "*Sarebbe un crimine.*" *It would be a crime*.

"I trust you," she replied, closing her eyes. If she looked at him anymore, she'd violate one of the basic rules of etiquette school—you don't stare at people. In her head, she could study him all she wanted to, and no one would ever know. Then, she'd avoid him at all costs when this appointment was over. He was too smooth, too handsome, and too attentive to ignore. As if that wasn't enough, he was a rare find in Florida, USA. Stumbling upon an Isoladian was like catnip for her.

She was a sucker for rare bloodlines, and Ryker had some of the rarest on the planet. Not to mention, his voice melted every joint in her body. She'd once bought an entire display case of pastries because the man behind the counter had a voice like that. When he'd asked, "You only want one?" She'd handed over her credit card and told him to give her all he had.

Ryker could undo her at the seams, taking apart her gypsy heart.

And she couldn't have that. Oh no. She most certainly couldn't have that.

Four

R yker drove out to the fishing docks where Sean's "business," Bob's Underwater Salvage, operated. He purchased the company from Bob five years ago when Bob retired and hadn't bothered changing the name. Why? Because he thought it was funny.

Sean was a mix of several things, and had taken a while for Ryker to understand. He was the class clown who aced the class. His grandfather, Don, scared most men with just a look–something he'd perfected while serving in the US military. Though he was always pleasant when he came into the barbershop. Ryker had the sneaking suspicion that Don would not have returned if he had not done well the first time. The man had standards that Ryker respected.

While the docks were about getting boats in and out of the water and fishing, the main boardwalk was a great place to hang out. They had an ice cream shop, bands on occasion, restaurants with outdoor tables, stores, and hot dogs, which he could never quite wrap his European taste buds around.

He had walked there after work every night for three nights, hoping to bump into Grace. He could not get the stunning woman out of his head. Probably because he had slipped into her personal space and caressed her head and hair like a love-sick prince.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel," he mumbled, even as his fingers tingled at the memory of her silken hair flowing through them.

He had not had to ask her to let down her hair so that he could access her tower, yet she had shared a part of herself in the stories she told of her sisters. Growing up, they were close, and her love for them came through every word. As she regaled him with her stories, he'd removed braids to reveal the most gorgeous natural hair he had ever touched.

She had highlights from the sun that were almost white, with every shade down to her natural vanilla woven throughout. Artificially creating that look would take eight hours and thousands of dollars, and she wore it like a queen.

Her hair wasn't the only thing that had him in knots, though it was possible that he'd fallen in love with it at first brush stroke.

She'd managed to set Mack on edge with her ability to pick up on accents and read his and Liam's half-sibling relationship without effort. The men had been undercover for over a year. They were certain no one suspected them. Until Grace. It was as though she could see right through their carefully constructed secret identities. Though she had not mentioned military service, he was sure she had noticed that they stood too straight and moved with the speed of someone trained in combat.

Mack did not reveal to her that his mother had died and he had been forced out of Scotland to the U.S. to live with his father—even after her astute guess at his past.

She either had a superpower or she was a spy. Since Liam's background check cleared her of all espionage activity, he was inclined to believe she was super and powerful.

He should not wander the boardwalk searching for a glimpse of her long, tan legs and easy smile. And he should not cruise downtown hoping to catch her sapphire blue eyes watching him drive by. And he should not walk through the lobby four times a day on the off chance she would be there, and he could kiss her hand in greeting.

These were not the reasons he was in Diamond Cove, yet he had done all of them under his heart's command.

According to news reports, his plane had gone down in the Bermuda Triangle, never to be found. He was, by all accounts, a dead man. He was immortalized as the prince who was killed by the mysterious Devil's Triangle in the Atlantic Ocean. A tragedy. A mystery that would never be solved.

A dead man's heart should not beat with ferocity when a woman drew near, and his most certainly thrummed for Grace.

He needed a distraction from the way she consumed him.

This brought him to Sean's salvage company headquarters, which doubled as team headquarters for the SEALs. Not that the unsuspecting population of Diamond Cove knew anything about the secrets residing somewhere off their shoreline, assuming his calculations were correct. If they did, every treasure hunter in the world would invade.

He lifted three pizza boxes off the passenger seat and climbed out of the vehicle. The scent of dead fish hit him square in the face, as it did every time he stepped onto the dock where the local fishermen cleaned their catch. He wrinkled his nose, wishing for the black sand beaches of his homeland and the clean, crisp air.

Wolfe, one of the Seal team who resembled his name in frightening detail, said he was a beach snob.

It was possible he was right—though Ryker would never tell him that. He would and did tell him to keep his beard trimmed and his hair from growing over his ears.

White sand didn't feel like home, nor like childhood where balancing relations with the United States and his home country was not his concern.

They were very much his concern now.

He walked into the warehouse-type building. Two shiny wave runners on the trailer waited for adventure. Boat, sailing, and ship paraphernalia were neatly organized on custom-made shelves and in bins. Everything had a label. Sean was military through and through and therefore very tidy, but it was Gray—co-Seal-team leader with Mack—who made sure everything from Sean's underwater salvage company to Gray's and Knox's construction company to their undercover mission ran like clockwork—inspections happened regularly. The two months Gray and Ryker were flatmates almost ruined the special operation.

Not that Ryker was a slob; he was used to having a maid. There was a big difference between the two mindsets, whatever Gray believed.

Ryker continued to the office, where Sean leaned back in his seat, his bare feet on the desk as he talked on the phone. He set the pizza on the coffee table—a converted shipping pallet stained light gray. Sean saluted him in acknowledgment, then went back to his conversation.

Ryker flipped open the lid and took out a slice. Of all the American food he'd been forced to eat during his time here, pizza was by far the best. It didn't come close to authentic Italian pizza and was a ghost compared to Isoladian pizza, but he could appreciate it for what Americans wanted it to be.

They really knew how to pile on the meat.

"We'll keep an eye out. Let us know if you need backup." Sean followed

his nose to the pizza. He said goodbye to the person on the phone.

Ryker knew better than to directly ask who it was. Secrecy was safety for all of them. "Anything I need to know about?"

He found his seat on an old plaid couch with springs poking out all over. He had endured a painful planning session the first time he sat down, and his backside refused to go through such treatment ever again. Therefore, he had painstakingly scouted the perfect spot—the only spot that didn't poke him in his royal bottom. He had a sneaking suspicion this had been Bob's couch.

Sean took two pieces of pizza, folded them together to make a sandwich, and took a large bite. He chewed thoughtfully before responding. "There's a movement taking place, and someone pointed to Diamond Cove. Murmurings really. Nothing solid yet."

"You are concerned." Ryker threw one arm over the back of the scratchy couch and continued to eat. Three pizzas would be a lot for two men, but others would come. They were drawn to the smell like sharks to blood. "Is this because of Grace?"

He loved her name. Grace, *adonare* in Italian, had several meanings, including *to adorn*. His life would be adorned beautifully with such a woman. But, for once in his life, he preferred the English definition of a word and thought of her as an *unmerited favor of God*. He did not deserve a woman like her. But, if he were not a *principe*, he would court her with all of his soul–releasing the great white shark of passion swimming just under the surface. The wild beast was no threat to Grace but could destroy him if left unchecked.

Sean grinned, his eyes creasing in the corners with amusement. "Nah. Your girlfriend's in the clear."

Ryker bit back the need to correct him about the status of his relationship with Grace. Which was to say, there was no relationship. To his dismay, he could not even claim she was a client, and saying goodbye to her at the end of her appointment was only possible because Freddie had shown up, speaking loudly about his back hair and how the missus wanted to know if Ryker could trim that up for him.

Grace had squeaked as she tried to hold back her giggles. "*Arrivederci, buona fortuna,*" *goodbye and good luck with* that. Her eyes glinted with laughter as she waved to him from the doorway.

He did not shave Freddie's back. However, he ordered a bottle of hair removal cream and told him to be very careful that he did not get it on his partially bald head. In The Palms, handing out such a cream was like handing out explosives, and the men treated it with the same care.

"Give me some gloves, man!" Freddie insisted. He took four so he could layer up.

"What did you learn about your *girlfriend*?" Sean pressed. He was almost through his pizza sandwich, though he would not stop eating at just one. Despite being of Italian descent—and bearing a familial resemblance to Ryker in skin tone, hair color, and build—Sean was American through and through and the biggest *teaser* in the group. Ryker had acclimated to the way he kidded around—mostly.

"She is Nancy Matthew's granddaughter. She is a genealogist and fiercely loyal to her family." In the short time he had had Grace to himself, he had discussed benign topics such as proper conditioning techniques and the type of brush she should use based on the thickness of her hair strands. Basically, he had been a bumbling idiot. Hiding in America had taken him off his game. He used to woo political women, doctors, lawyers, and the occasional supermodel with ease. They fell into his charm with weak knees and batting eyelashes.

He brushed at his pants as if there were crumbs. There were not. A prince did not make crumbs when he ate despite the lack of plates and utensils. "What did *you* learn about her?" He tried to sound disinterested.

Grace was not immune to his charms, but she had not asked for a second appointment at the end of his ministrations. There was a moment when he thought she felt the same heady blur of attraction he had been drowning in since running his fingers through her hair. When he had whispered in her ear, and she had replied with a breathy, though articulate, answer, the very air around them charged, and it was almost as if they were in an embrace because he could feel the heat coming from her. One signal, and he would have taken it all a step farther and kissed her neck.

But she had dropped her gaze, and he had pulled away, and the moment was lost to eternity.

The fact that he could not sweep her away made him all the more interested.

Typical male ego—he hated himself for it.

Sean grabbed a roll of paper towels, tore one off, and wiped his lips. "She's twenty-seven. Has multiple degrees. A trust-fund kid—thanks to her grandma, Nancy, who's a total sweetheart and often offers to review my business plans or help me take things to the next level."

Ryker arched a questioning brow. So, he was not the only one Nancy used her business savvy to help.

"Nancy has ideas. A lot of them. *So* many business ideas." Sean rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling.

Ryker cleared his throat to get Sean back on topic.

"Anyway," Sean said, taking the cue, "Grace is actually pretty well known in her field. She made a name for herself with the Octavis scandal turned pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Taking his case was a gamble for her–could have ruined her reputation if it'd gone the other way."

"When she said she studied families, alarms went off." Ryker flashed his hand like an alarm blaring. He felt foolish calling in the whole team because of his reaction to an innocent woman.

"Understandable. Considering your family situation." Sean paused for a moment, looking over something on his phone. "She'd be a great femme fatale. Smart. Knows several languages. Can read body language and unconscious cues—it says here she's also a certified graphologist—remind me not to write her a note. Plus, Liam said she was hot." Sean watched him out of the corner of his eye.

Ryker's neck burned with jealous fury. Only by training and sheer royal will did the blush not spread to his ears. If Liam thought he was getting within ten—no fifty—feet of Grace, he would find himself at the bottom of a swamp hole. "I will thank Liam for his compliments on my talents as a hair connoisseur," he quipped, pointing the attention at his ability to cut hair more than Grace's natural beauty, which surpassed every other woman's. "Speaking of my family situation, how are my sisters?"

Sean stopped chewing. "Wait for Liam," he managed around a mouthful of cheese and bread. "He had the latest info."

Ryker ground his teeth. He needed a moment to take the hot burn of possessiveness from atomic levels to a low simmer. He barely had enough time before the warehouse door opened and closed. He watched the office entrance, and soon the American Scot's large frame filled the doorway.

Sean pointed to Ryker. "He needs an update."

"Food first." Liam spied the pizza and made a beeline for it. Flicking the top box aside, he dug into the ham and pineapple concoction. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sweet and spicy combination.

Ryker waited. Diplomacy was in his blood. Allowing for awkward pauses

was part of his upbringing. Not just as a prince who would not inherit the throne, but between his parents and at private family gatherings. *Madre* and *Padre* were not Romeo and Juliet, and he often wondered how they managed to get along long enough to create three offspring.

"Okay." Liam licked the sauce off his thumb.

Ryker sighed and reached for the paper towels. He tore one off and handed it to Liam. One day, this batch of ruffians would be tamed by table manners. He was not sure how it would happen, especially if he continually supplied the pizza.

"Your uncle is a real piece of work," Liam started.

"We have established that," Ryker replied, his royal way of saying *get to the point*.

"Repeatedly," added Sean.

Liam lifted a shoulder and reached for another slice. "Last winter, Prince Zeno exposed his father's plot to remove the king." He sliced his finger along his throat. "But, apparently, your uncle didn't put all his eggs in that basket."

Ryker adjusted his posture, a move to protect himself against the news. Not only did his parents not get along, his father and brothers behaved like children fighting over a toy. To be fair, his father did not join in the fight so much as turn a blind eye to his older brother's arguments. Angelo, his cousin, had been crowned several years ago. It was a political move that was supposed to end the feud over the kingship. It did not. Ryker's *zio* only became more obsessed, and his actions became those of a desperate man. Desperate, connected, and ruthless, *Tio* was a formidable foe. His children, Zeno and two daughters had nothing to do with him in private and barely tolerated being in the same room with him at public events.

But they were not here to rehash the family drama that would rival any American soap opera. He motioned to Liam. "Go on."

Liam scowled. "Don't get all princely on me. Trust me, you won't like it if you do."

Ryker lowered his chin and growled, wondering why Liam always seemed to have an issue with princes. "How many times do I have to tell you? I cannot stop being a *principe* any more than you can stop being obstinate."

"I think last time you said he couldn't stop being annoying," Sean clarified.

"And the time before that, it was taxing," added Liam. He pulled off a

piece of ham, tipped his head back, and dropped it into his mouth.

Ryker did not want to get into the round-and-round argument at the moment. "Are you going to tell me about my *zio*, or do I need to google it?"

Liam scoffed. "Like you could find this info on Google."

Ryker pinned him with a look as he pulled out his phone, ready to ignore the insufferable man until he spilled the information.

Liam huffed. "You can't. So I'll tell you. Your sisters are both safe. They're sticking close to the Winter Palace, working to stimulate the local economy and restore the palace with your cousin-in-law, the architect. The whole thing looks like a royal project and a half, but we think there's more going on."

"Why?"

Liam swallowed and reached for the paper towels. "Zeno and his group of mercenary guards are there." He swiped his mouth and cleaned his fingers before reaching for another slice.

Ryker pondered the information. "Zeno is married now and has therefore reduced his military involvement." That was not to say Zeno was not lethal on many levels.

Avery, the American architect who tamed the wild Pincipe Zeno, was sweet and good for him. He needed someone with a softer side to buffer his flair for danger and dramatics. He was a ghost soldier. The kind who took missions no one else wanted to take because the survival rate was too low. The soldiers in his squad were fearless and respected even by the two men in this room—which said a lot. "I suspect he will retire from service soon." Zeno never planned to marry. His sister was the same way. She'd joined the military and committed her heart to serving her country.

"The family isn't sharing why they're slowly gathering at the Palace or staying for so long. It feels like a safety-in-numbers kind of thing. Like the ghost soldiers are keeping an eye on the princesses." Liam went for the third type of pizza: chicken, bacon, and barbecue.

"It could also be, with my supposed death, they are pulling together to grieve," Ryker added. He'd been close to his sisters, never going a day without talking to them. Christmas in Isola de la Famiglia was like a dream, and he missed his family terribly.

"Possible," Sean consented, moving on to his second pizza sandwich–one slice of the BBQ chicken and one of pineapple. Americans! "But we'd like to know what's happening inside, and no one is talking." "On another note . . ." Liam paused to chew and swallow. "You've taken on a sort of Anestasia-ness. There's rumors that you're still out there—biding your time to return and take over the country." Liam tossed his uneaten crust into the box.

"Ridiculous," Ryker scoffed.

"What? You don't want to be king?" Liam teased. "Could have fooled me."

Ryker smirked. "Angelo is the right man for the throne." There was never a question that Angelo would make an excellent king. Perhaps it was because of their *zio*'s poor example, but the contrast between *zio* and Angelo was enough to cement the oldest de Luca as Isola de la Famiglia's rightful heir.

Unlike England, which does not store their jewels but puts them on display, Isola de la Famiglia kept their crown jewels in a bank vault. During WWII, the royals were forced to flee for their lives. In the chaos, Ryker's great-great-grandfather stored the crown jewels in the vault, sealed it, and left the country. No one could break in, and upon their return, they decided that the vault was the safest place for the jewels. They only removed them for coronations and maintained a specially chosen guard who lived in the bank itself. One or more of the guards turned traitor, and the jewels went missing. Ryker heard whispers that the jewels were in jeopardy and took action, which almost cost him his life.

"The best thing I can do for the crown is find our royal treasure." Millions of dollars worth of jewels went missing, and Ryker suspected his *zio* was part of the thievery. The monarchy was already suffering, and the loss did nothing to bolster the crown's strength in the people's eyes. He'd hoped to show his people, and by extension the world, that they were strong–a small country but one that would not be bullied. He failed once. He would not fail again.

And now his family, his country, and the world believed he'd died—and to make things worse, his "death" had thrown his country into turmoil and had only strengthened his tio's cause to become king. His *zio* was a madman with strong communist sympathies. Protecting King Angelo wasn't just a matter of security for his country—it was about protecting the world. But the man was standing on a podium of self-righteousness, claiming Angelo hadn't done his duty to protect the monarchy.

Ryker turned to Sean, who oversaw the systematic search through the ocean along the coastline of Florida. Time was of the essence. If someone else found the treasure first, they could secret it away before Ryker could send it to Angelo so he could show that he was a strong leader who would protect their people and secure himself against a coup.

The SEAL team assigned to help him were not only his protection, but they were experts in diving and salvage. Living normal-ish lives, they worked regular jobs, hung out as friends, and pretended to be civilians, all while working a covert international operation to protect him and help recover pieces of Isola's heritage in their spare time.

It had been months before he'd trusted them enough to tell them what he had found that implicated his *zio*, that he had managed to put a tracking device on the ship carrying his family's jewels before being taken captive and nearly killed. That was how he knew the ship had sunk near the Florida coast after being hit by a hurricane. If only he had gotten a more precise location before the boat went down. But then again, if he knew more, he might not have confided in these men—his friends—who had caught him trying to find the sunken treasure on his own and immediately insisted they would help. He had never given up on his country, and his friends would never give up on him.

Because of his assumed identity—and theirs—Ryker did not need a bodyguard 24/7, a freedom he did not take for granted.

"We're working on it," Sean reassured him. He glanced at his desk where the map he had painstakingly made of the area they searched was rolled out, the corners held down by metal discs.

"So far, it's only rumors that the lost prince is still out there. No one knows for sure," Liam assured him. "I've put enough false information about your demise online to keep them chasing ghosts for years. Which is what I suspect is actually happening. The Bermuda Triangle is known for strange disappearances. Which works to our advantage, too because anyone who comes close to figuring out what's going on is going to be labeled a conspiracy theorist right off the bat."

Sean nodded. "We've got this, Ryker."

Ryker drew in a deep breath. "I need to blow off some steam." Discussing his family, and his *zio* in particular, put him on edge. "Night surfing?" It was not quite a full moon but it would be bright enough.

Sean shook his head. "I'm charting tonight." He motioned to the screen in front of him where a 3D image of the ocean floor loaded one small section at a time. The one-of-a-kind map spread across his desk was the most accurate map of the Florida coast. Each ship wreck, coral reef, and pile of junk had

been painstakingly located, verified, and recorded in an extensive grid system.

"Wolfe and Gray are coming by to plan our next dive."

"You?" he asked the half-Scot.

Liam tucked his chin-length hair behind his ear. "I have a date."

Ryker considered him. "With whom?" He prayed it was not with Grace. The prayer managed to keep his jealous rage in control while he waited for the answer.

"Melanie. We met outside my apartment." He seemed bored already. "She's bumming around Florida before heading back to college. Although . . ." His previously uninterested eyes sparked. "I might find Nancy's granddaughter and see if she's available tomorrow night."

Ryker slowly rose to his feet. The thought of Grace under Liam's spell made him nauseous. Why were women drawn to him and Mack like seagulls to picnics? Not that either of them paid much attention. They were too focused on the mission to look for love. "*She* would not go out with *you*."

"Oh? Is that because I'm *annoying*?" Liam nettled him.

Ryker lifted his chin. "Aggravating and irritating. Among other things." He pointed to the pizza sauce on Liam's shirt.

Liam looked down, cursed, and grabbed for the paper towels.

"Enjoy your date with Melanie." Ryker smiled as he walked out of the building.

It was none of his business whom Grace dated. He should not care.

But he did.

And he wanted the man she dated to be him. But that was not a possibility. He was technically a dead man. Which meant he had nothing to offer a woman except a pile of lies and empty promises.

Grace deserved so much more than that. She was no ordinary woman, and he had the good sense to know it.



SECRET 7 MEETING

N ancy paced the front of the conference room as the rest of the Secret Seven chatted. No one who worked for The Palms ever used the meeting space, and it became the Secret Seven's headquarters early on. She loved the large table with seating for everyone and the board they'd turned into a murder board. It flipped from one side to another so they could turn it around, and no one would be the wiser to what was on the other side. The functionality in this space was familiar to her corporate-loving heart and drew out her creative problem-solving side.

Samantha sat at the end of the table, her laptop open in front of her. The event organizer was overworked and underpaid.

Nancy wished Samantha would listen to her about asking for a raise. The woman not only organized events on and off-site—like their weekly visits to the local amusement parks, rotating parks, of course—she gave classes on everything from cell phone etiquette to organizing your closet. There was no helping it, though; Samantha was a giver, and she truly loved The Palms' residents. Which probably would make her feel guilty for asking for more money. Why was it so hard for people to see their own value?

Polly and Rosa talked about the latest romance movie they'd watched together. Rosa loved to fall into the romance and Polly liked to explain why the romance between the two characters with opposite personalities worked. She'd heard rumors that Don had read a romance novel with them but she wouldn't believe it until she heard it from the man himself.

Walt and Harry discussed the upcoming golf tournament. The big event wasn't sponsored by The Palms. Several of the residents had bragged about their low scores and a heated arguments ensued. The only way to settle it fairly was to have a competition to establish who was actually the best golfer.

There was, of course, a catch.

Since no one wanted to lose forever, they decided it would be a quarterly event with a trophy that stayed with the latest winner. If the last winner died while in possession of the trophy, it would be buried with him and a new award would be found. Harry was in process of locating said trophy, scouring local thrift stores and online markets.

Don had yet to arrive which was understandable considering the last meeting where she'd decimated his oatmeal cookies.

She'd offered to pick something up from the local bakery for today, and Don would have none of it. He'd promised them a new treat but wouldn't reveal it until they'd gone through their agenda.

Nancy bit her cheek. She could really use a treat right now.

Grace was the only one of her granddaughters who drove her to sugar.

Elizabeth was just like her—driven, organized, and settled with Chad, The Surf Shop owner.

Maisie was a whole other story. She was also just like Nancy but in a different way. She'd married right out of high school and wanted to settle down and make babies. Nancy had also married young . . . because she was going to have a baby.

God had other plans for Maisie, and she was lost-trying to find her way.

Nancy wanted to set the Secret Seven on her during the next round of matchmaking. The girl's heart was full of romance, and when her husband passed away, he seemed to take it with him. Her only hope was to find someone to love her back to life. Maisie needed the Secret Seven—she just didn't know it yet.

None of their targets knew they were matched by a group of retirees.

"Are you okay?" Polly asked quietly. "You're tapping your foot like a bunny rabbit."

Nancy shook out her shoulders and sat down, her back straight. "Grace stresses me out."

"What? But I thought the makeover was a success."

Nancy flicked her hand. "Indubitably. Her hair is stunning. I couldn't get that kind of color when I was younger—and she has my blonde locks." She fluffed her hair. "We need to go shopping, but every time we start out the door, her phone rings, an email arrives, or," she shuddered, "Stephán distracts her."

Polly's reassuring smile faltered. "Stephán." She spat the name out like a curse. "Did you know he once told Samantha that she dressed like an old lady?"

Rosa glared and mumbled what sounded like a jinx on Stephán's head.

Samantha often wore 50s-style dresses made with themed fabrics. If Nancy had half that much style as a twenty-something, she would have rocked it.

Samantha snorted derisively. "I took it as a compliment, by the way. The man is as fashionable as a doorknob."

Her comment drew a round of chuckles.

"He's horrible." Nancy pressed her fingers to her forehead. "He leaves his swimsuits everywhere. How many trunks does one man need?" she asked Walt.

Walt tugged on his mustache as he thought. His navy polo shirt was buttoned up and appeared pressed. "Two. One for wash day and the other for swimming."

"Exactly!" Nancy threw a hand out. "He has at least a dozen. And he wore one out to dinner with Grace last night. I wanted to die for her."

"Did she mind?" asked Polly diplomatically.

Nancy huffed. If it didn't bother Grace, it shouldn't bother her, but it did! "She didn't say anything about it in front of me. Why didn't Ryker ask her out? There was chemistry in that barber shop."

"She didn't even look at the two hunky Scotsmen who barged in." Rosa fanned her face. "She only had eyes for Ryker and his beautiful speeches."

Harry perked up. "Scotsmen, you say?" He shuffled his tartan-style crocks under the table. "Sounds like my kind of guy."

"One had a wonderful brogue," Polly added as she scrolled through her phone. "I got a picture of both of them. They're big men. Lots of muscle. And they were so polite–once Rosa hit one with her purse."

Harry frowned. "You hit him with your purse?"

"I had a hair appointment." Rosa fluffed her light brown hair.

Harry opened his mouth as if to ask for clarification on how having a hair appointment allows you to whack someone with what could be classified as a deadly weapon but thought better of it. "You say there was chemistry between her and Ryker?" he asked Nancy.

"Not that Grace noticed." Winnie chimed in. "She was dropping Italian phrases like she grew up in Tuscany." "You think she really liked him?" Nancy asked, needing the confirmation. "She came home after—with her hair all shiny and stunning and hardly said a word. I expected to see hearts in her eyes but nothing." She flattened her hands on the tabletop and blew a raspberry—something she hadn't done since childhood. The sound startled her—or, more accurately, the fact that the sound came from her startled her.

Winnie tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Given the opportunity, he should have expressed interest."

"I swear my girl has no desire to settle down." Nancy felt herself getting worked up. "She wants to flit around the world chasing after dead people."

Walt snorted, stopping Nancy before she got going.

When she was truly upset—and Grace was the cause—her heart fluttered. The doctor assured her that would happen occasionally, but she wasn't ready to turn in her Secret Seven membership card and take it easy quite yet. She needed to stay calm and matchmake on. "What?" she asked in a pleasant tone.

"It can't be hard to chase dead people," he teased. "They don't run that fast." He pantomimed, running slowly, and then slumped onto the table as if he were dead, letting out a pathetic moan.

Nancy fought the smile that tried to appear. She glanced around the table at everyone chuckling at his antics and stopped trying to fight it. "Oh, you!" she laughed. Gratitude for her friends filled her up and calmed troubled waters as they shared a laugh.

Don breezed in, carrying a tray. His hair was short—freshly cut as to his reconnaissance plan. He glanced at Nancy and then at the sweets, keeping them above his head and out of her view. She waved him over. "All baked goods are safe from me—for now," she joked, feeling lighter and ready to face the challenge ahead, for it would be a challenge. "Let's get this meeting started."

Samantha clicked away on her keyboard, presumably moving from the task she'd been working on while waiting for the meeting to start to take notes for them. She looked lovely in the diagonal red, white, and blue stripes that twisted around her hips like a moving barber pole. She curled her hair in subtle waves, accentuating her classically beautiful face. Had Nancy still been the CEO of Nancy's Niceties, she would have used Samantha as a spokesperson. Her gorgeous smile would sell window cleaner in a heartbeat.

They recapped what happened in the barbershop for Grace and Ryker's

first meeting for those who hadn't witnessed it themselves, and then Nancy opened it up for discussion.

"I'm curious about why she hasn't wanted to settle down." Winnie looked from person to person and then focused on Nancy. "Perhaps you should delve into that."

Nancy nodded. "If she's not forthcoming with the information, I'll bring you on board to lovingly interrogate her." She turned toward Don who had been uncharacteristically quiet up to this point. "What about Ryker? What did you learn from your information gathering haircut?"

He pulled his shoulders back as if reporting in military style. "Ryker can talk his way around a subject as easily as tying his shoes."

"He wears slip-on dress shoes. Shiny ones," Walt commented.

"Figure of speech," Winnie whispered to him.

"I know it's a figure of speech. We need intel and I had some," he replied.

Nancy pointed her pen at him. "Noted. Thank you." He nodded in reply. "Don?"

His thick neck muscles tightened. "Give me fifteen minutes with the guy in a locked closet where no one's watching and I'll get him to talk. But this round-about word dance is exhausting."

"In my experience," Polly leaned forward, "a man who is smitten doesn't take much prodding to start talking about his lady love."

"Does that mean Ryker isn't smitten?" Nancy asked the group. "If so, we'll have to find another target and start over immediately. Grace could leave town at any moment. She's a flight risk."

Don pushed the dessert tray farther down the table at the exact moment Nancy glanced at them.

Traitor.

"Did we get this wrong? The wrong matches?" asked Walt. They'd originally mis-matched his granddaughter, Avery, and had to do some lastminute matchmaking to get it all worked out. Avery and Tucker were happily together and stared into one another's eyes with the promise of forever.

Nancy sighed. She loved seeing the fruits of their hard work walking around the Cove, holding hands and sneaking kisses.

The hush in the room as they contemplated a possible mismatch reminded her of when she was working with the development team to develop a vinegar-based cleaner with a shelf life of over one year. They'd tried and failed several times, almost giving up entirely. Then one day—eureka!—they had it. "Love is a work in progress, right?" she tried to encourage them.

Hmms, and *rights*! echoed around the table, and then the room fell silent again.

Rosa gathered herself like a hen fluffing her feathers. "I saw them together! The strong chemistry made my eyes water—like chopping onions."

Nancy smiled at Rosa's flair. She remembered the moment when Grace and Ryker's eyes caught in the mirror and the slight blush that tipped Ryker's ears before he turned away. He was–at the very least–interested. Interested was one step away from smitten. "I think Rosa is right. We will try getting these two together one more time before giving up. Any suggestions?"

Walt drummed his fingers on the table.

Don glared at the wall, the wheels in his mind spinning.

Polly's foot tapped.

"Genealogy," Winnie blurted. "Grace likes to trace genealogy. We should get her to do Ryker's."

"Okay." Nancy nodded slowly as the idea sank in. She didn't know much about Grace's work–or more like passion. "How? Without being blatant and hiring her? That's a little heavy-handed for our group. And she hasn't given me an answer on how long she's in town. The woman has no respect for calendars."

They looked back and forth between one another.

"Too bad we can't find her a job in Diamond Cove," Polly narrowed her eyes, probably mentally running through the available positions listed in the local paper. "Then she'd stay longer."

"I think you're onto something there," Samantha said. She didn't speak up unless she had something of value to add and so everyone gave her their full attention as she continued, "I've been teaching a class on genealogy— The Palms has several accounts with Acenstry.com. We have a dozen residents in class now and a waiting list. Quite frankly, I'm over my head with a lot of this stuff. Having a professional genealogist with a degree—"

"Two." Nancy jumped in. "She has two degrees."

"Even better." Samantha grinned. "Having a professional genealogist with two degrees teach the class would lighten my load considerably. Maybe we could add extra classes for those on the waiting list." She brightened at the thought. "I hate making them wait when they have an interest in something." Nancy smacked the table. "Great idea. Samantha, as usual, your input is invaluable."

"Thank you," she said as she glanced down, so modest. If they hadn't promised not to set her up, Samantha would be the first one on their list. She deserved to be loved and loved on by the right man.

"Samantha and I will get Grace a job—hopefully that will help her commit to staying in Diamond Cove long enough for this match to click. The rest of you figure out how to get Ryker to come to class." Heads bobbed in agreement. "One last thing. How do we get Stephán out of my house?!"

Her blood pressure spiked and she reached for her water bottle, taking a long drink. Samantha raised an eyebrow at her. Nancy took another sip.

"Tell her what he is really like," offered Harry.

Polly gave him a dubious look. "Since when has a grandparent telling their grandchild that their boyfriend is no good ever worked in the history of this planet?"

Harry frowned. "Good point."

"But . . ." Polly sat up in her seat. "If we could *show* her what he's really like, then she could make up her own mind."

The idea caught fire.

"You said she was smart." Walt pointed at Nancy. "She'll put two-andtwo together right quick and dump his trunks—all of them."

They worked out a plan, and Nancy hoped she would get her bungalow back. With a smile, she announced, "Meeting adjourned. Don, what do you have for us today?"

One of his home-baked treats was just what the doctor ordered.

Don proudly pulled the foil off the serving dish to reveal his latest creation, lemon crinkle cookies. "I know lemons can calm your stress levels, Nancy. Thought you might need these." He passed her the tray first, and everyone encouraged her to take a bite instead of waiting for them to get a cookie, too.

As Nancy breathed in the fresh lemon scent, her soul expanded, and the knot between her shoulder blades gave way under the gentle soothing that came with citrus. It had always been like that with lemon. That's why her first line of cleaners had smelled like the fruit—lemon was clean, lemon was a new start, lemon was hope and accomplishment wrapped up in one.

Which was exactly what she needed because she had to convince her wanderlust granddaughter to settle down in Diamond Cove and do something

that she once said would make her soul shrivel up like a dead bug—get a job. Lemons. She needed lots of lemons.

Six

G race laid back on the surfboard, the rough surface rubbing her skin, and let the sun warm her up. She and Stephán had been on the water since six-thirty, and it was close to lunchtime. Her stomach rumbled, and she gave it a promising pat. "We'll eat soon."

The ocean lifted her and then dropped her with a steady, almost hypnotic motion.

Unlike her sister, Elizabeth, Grace loved all sorts of outdoor activities. It wasn't that Elizabeth wasn't adventurous or fun; she was a klutz. More often than not, she'd end up in the emergency care. It was kind of ironic that she fell in love with a surfer. From what she'd heard, Chad had worked a miracle and actually taught Elizabeth how to get up on the surfboard. She claimed that wiping out in water was much less painful than wiping out on land.

Grace had been in Diamond Cove for over a week and had yet to lay her eyes on her future brother-in-law. Apparently, he was at a trade show making a name for himself in the retail business. No doubt Elizabeth coached him on how to take his pier shop from one location to a dozen. From what she'd heard, Chad was all over it. He had just as much ambition and drive as Elizabeth, but he balanced it with time on the water.

Maybe that was what Grace missed in life—balance. She spent so much time in cemeteries and with musty smelling papers that she didn't make time to do things like surf or, read the latest fiction or shop with Grandma unless invited. Shoot. She couldn't keep putting their shopping trip off.

Balance would be good for her. Living life. Playing a little.

She sat up and looked around at the other surfers.

"What's going on, babe?" Stephán paddled closer and tugged the end of

her board.

She wobbled and dropped her feet in the water. He'd started calling her *babe* yesterday. Every time the word came out of his mouth in front of Grandma, she cringed.

"I was just looking for Chad's shop. Do you know which one it is?" she asked, shielding her eyes from the sun as she scanned the pier.

The shadow that crossed Stephán's face was there and gone so fast she wondered if she'd actually seen it.

"Nah. I've never been there."

Her eyes jerked to him. That was strange. As far as she knew, Chad owned the only surf shop in Diamond Cove, and Stephán had lived here for almost two years. There's no way he hadn't gone in.

"Are you ready to head in? I'm starving." Stephán ran his hand through his wet hair.

"Me too." She moved to lay on her stomach.

"Last one in buys lunch," he called over his shoulder, taking an unfair lead.

Grace wasn't one to miss out on a competition. She dug in and came in a board length behind him.

He grinned triumphantly, and she splashed saltwater at him. He splashed back, harder, maybe even meaner. She thought she'd caught a hard look in his eye right before her eyes were burned by the water on impact, and her nose tingled painfully. He hauled his board out, and she stumbled onto the sand behind him. They'd left a pile of towels, and his t-shirt and her coverup where the sand was warm and soft.

Winnie and Polly walked by wearing full spandex outfits that had Grace doing a double take. Polly's was canary yellow with lime green accents, and Winnie's was hot pink with teal. They had matching headbands, too. They waved excitedly. "Stephán! It's good to see you again," called Winnie.

Stephán didn't stop walking. Winnie frowned at his snub.

Polly waved vigorously. "Stephán! Yoo-hoo. It's a beautiful day for a yoga session, don't you think?"

He had to have heard them, yet he sauntered back to the towels without so much as a glance in their direction.

Grace paused, embarrassed that he'd ignored them. "Hi. It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"It really is." Winnie smiled happily. "I wish the sunshine would rub off

on some people." She gave Stephán a side-eyed look.

"He's . . ." Grace searched for a viable excuse for Stephán's rudeness. ". . . hungry?" Like that was any excuse. "Sorry." She was hungry, too, but it didn't mean she couldn't be kind. "Have a wonderful day."

"You too, dear." Winnie replied. The two put their heads together and whispered as they made their way along the beach.

Grace hurried to catch up to Stephán. He plopped onto his backside and flicked his wet hair, showering an older couple and their picnic lunch nearby. The woman gasped in shock as the cold water hit her right across the face, and the man glared.

Grace looked closer and realized they were some of Grandma's friends, Harry and Virginia. Virginia wiped the salt water droplets off her cheek, and Harry took off his glasses to clean them with his shirt.

"Sorry." Grace waved at them. "Do you need a towel?" She offered hers. Their lunch had been sprayed as well, but she wasn't sure how to help with that.

Virginia shook her head. "It's just a little water."

Harry stood and offered her a hand. "Come on. Let's take the picnic basket back to Cocoa and eat in the dining room." They began packing up.

"Stephán, you splashed them," Grace said low. Apologizing was the least he could do.

He lifted a shoulder. "It's the beach. Water happens." He rubbed his chest and legs off.

Technically, he was right. But Harry and Virginia weren't dressed for swimming. When he didn't make a move to help them, her shoulders came up to her ears. That was so not cool.

She used her towel to ring out her hair as she tried to come up with something else to talk about. Touching her hair always brought up thoughts of Ryker and his vibrant green eyes. She'd fallen asleep thinking about him the last couple of nights. She'd also spent way too much time trying to catch sight of him whenever Grandma hauled her over to The Palms' main building for a class. So far this week they'd done two knitting classes, a seated weights class that actually made her thighs burn, an art class, and a cooking class with Cocoa that was a whole lot of fun. The pastry chef had a sense of humor and she got along with the residents as if they were her close friends.

"I can't believe how long my hair grew over the last six months," she finally said just to have something to fill the uncomfortable silence. Stephán laid back and closed his eyes. "It's cool. Long hair makes you look young."

"I am young." She laid out the towel.

"You're practically middle-aged. Me too." He shrugged, his eyes still closed.

Grace scowled. She was in her twenties. How was that close to middle aged?

Harry and Virginia left, carrying the basket between them. Grace sighed. She liked the people here. They were warm and friendly . . . and funny. Twice now she'd been caught off guard by a hilarious comment and ended up holding her side as she laughed with Betty, an octogenarian, in art class.

She sat down, ready to let the sun dry her suit before going to lunch and Stephán jumped to his feet. "Let's grab something on the pier."

"O-kay." She stood back up and put on her coverup. She was mostly dry and it wasn't the first time she'd hung out in a wet swimsuit.

Stephán picked up his board, flinging sand all over her towel. She cried out in surprise.

Stephan turned to her. "It's just a little sand, right?"

"Why don't we stash the boards at Grandma's?" She glanced in the direction of the pier. It was a fifteen minute walk and Grandma's was only twenty yards away.

"Nah. If we leave them, we have to come back before getting in the water." Without waiting for their reply, or for Grace to join him, he started off.

She had half a mind to go back to the bungalow, drop the board, and shower. Let him eat alone. Something had gotten into him today. She drew in a breath. Everyone was allowed to have an off day.

"Grace! You coming?" Stephán called, his hand cupped around his mouth.

"Yes!" she called back. Grace gathered up the board she'd borrowed from him. When she was five feet away, he turned and continued walking, leaving her to trail behind or hurry to catch up. Annoyed, she slowed down even more. He could wait for her when he got to the snack shack.

Instead of stopping at the snack stand, he continued on to La Parisian Brasserie. Leaning his board against the wall, he reached for the door, motioning for her to go first.

She stopped in her tracks. "I'd rather have a slice of pizza—if you don't

mind." She liked French food—loved it in fact; but she didn't appreciate him assuming she would buy him lunch at the most expensive place on the pier. Especially since he'd cheated to win their race and hadn't bought a meal since they came to the Cove.

Wait, was that right?

She bought burgers. She paid for groceries. She's ordered take out. Yep, he'd freeloaded off her for days. Instead of waiting for his response, she turned and went back to the Italian place.

He came to stand beside her in line. "You sure? They make a mean lobster roll." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

"I'm sure." She smiled innocently.

"Okay. I mean, you're the one who always wants to eat healthy. I thought you'd freak out over the calories." He pinched her side as if calculating her percent body fat.

Grace opened her mouth to argue the point and then paused for a moment. She did try to eat healthy, but she never forced that on anyone else. Also, she didn't ever freak out over calories and pinching her—even slightly implying that she had put on weight—was just plain rude. "That must have been someone else," she told him right as they stepped up to the window to order.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, but she'd already started talking to the teenager behind the glass.

Once they ordered, they went to sit at one of the tables under an umbrella.

"Oh, man! Look at those waves." Stephán stood up and wandered to the handrail.

Grace stayed put. She needed a minute without him, which didn't bode well for a potential boyfriend. He stayed there, staring at the ocean instead of talking to her, right up until they called her number at the window. Instead of helping her with the food, he met her at the table and dug right in.

She raised her eyebrows. "You in a hurry?"

He shoved three pieces of pepperoni in his mouth at a time. "Yeah. I want to get back on the water."

She folded the paper plate in half, the large piece of pizza inside. "I'm going back to Grandma's to eat. I'll see you later." Standing, she put on her sunglasses and walked away.

"What about the board?" he yelled after her. "Hey! I can't carry two."

"Bull," she said under her breath as she kept walking. He could think

whatever he wanted about her ignoring him. The man had been a total jerk today.

It wasn't just today. He was careless and rude. Grandma was right, he left his things laying around and used her house like it was his personal beach shack. He should have been a gracious guest. Grandma had been the hostess with the mostest patience and deserved better,

The beach was the fastest way to Grandma's but she wasn't in a hurry. The annoyance she'd felt at Stephán didn't sit well with her. She wasn't the type of person to hold grievances. There were precious few things you could take with you when you died, and she didn't want to show up at the Pearly Gates with a backpack full of grudges. She'd always known Stephán's first love was the ocean. Maybe if she felt the same, she'd understand why he treated people the way he did.

She didn't.

What she'd come to understand through working with old records was that falling in love with *things* here was as foolish as buying a toy at the dollar store and expecting it to last forever. Not that this life wasn't beautiful. She frowned. Maybe she just found that beauty in a different place than Stephán— family.

By the time she got to Grandma's kitchen, she was hotter than the sand on the beach. She threw her meal on the table and slammed the drawer shut after getting out a knife and fork.

Grandma came in from her bedroom. She glanced around the room.

"He's not here." Grace sniffed. Her nose liked to run when her face got hot.

"Well, I'm not complaining." Grandma pulled out her chair and sat down. She reached for Grace's lunch and began arranging it.

Grace grabbed two plates and a knife. "Want half my pizza?"

Grandma shook her head. "I probably shouldn't."

Grace proceeded to cut off one-quarter of the slice. She put it on a plate and passed it to Grandma. "Just don't let it clog up your heart. I don't want to be the bad influence that leads you down the path of destruction."

Grandma laughed. "You're too late. I've already been down it and back again."

Grace laughed. She sat down and began to eat. Her stringy, salt-water hair fell over her shoulder and she tucked it behind her ear. The shampoo Ryker gave her would do wonders to wash out the salt and the conditioner softened it. She closed her eyes and put herself right back in his chair, his fingers in her hair, and suddenly all her stress from the afternoon melted away. Why didn't she mentally go to that place before? Because that's what anger does to a person, it blots out the goodness in life like paint splatters over a beautiful canvas.

Grandma nibbled on her slice. She put it down and pinned Grace with a stare. "I have to ask; what do you see in him?"

Grace choked on the question. Coughing, she pounded her chest while her eyes watered. "Who? Ryker?" she gasped out. Maybe the pepperoni was spicy?

"No, Stephán." Grandma went to the sink and brought back a glass of water. "Why did you think I was talking about Ryker? I haven't said a word about him."

Grace drank deeply. "No reason." She wiped her lips with a pathetic paper napkin..

Grandma patted her back before sitting down. "Have *you* been thinking about Ryker?"

Grace's cheeks burned. "Let's stick to the subject."

Grandma *hmmed*. She sat back in her chair and took another small bite of pizza. "Did I ever tell you that I almost didn't marry your Grandpa?"

"No! Why? What?" Grace couldn't get whole questions out. She thought she'd recorded all of Grandpa's history and stories before he passed away. Dangling this new one in front of her was like waving a piece of Cocoa's chocolate cake under her nose. She plopped her chin on her fist and rested her elbow on the table, giving Grandma her full attention. "Tell me everything."

Grandma laughed lightly, the sound like wind chimes on the breeze it was so free and light. "It was so long ago I'd nearly forgotten." She picked up a crumb and put it on her plate. "We were young and I had so many dreams. I wanted to see the world. It was an age when doors were opening for women and I felt like I could be anyone I wanted to be." Her voice trailed off and her eyes unfocused, like she was seeing into the past.

Goosebumps broke out on Grace's arms.

"I wondered if tying myself to a man would limit my life, my dreams."

Grace held her breath in the silence. She'd had those same thoughts. How could she do what she did with a husband and children? Her gifts required freedom and a flexibility that the school calendar wouldn't permit. Not to mention, any man with a job would be tied to his desk. Sure, she could support them on her trust fund, but she didn't want a free loader either. She wanted a man—someone who was strong and capable, independent and yet loyal and dedicated.

"I went to your Grandpa," Grandma continued, "and I—what's the phrase you use? *Unloaded* on him." She smiled with the memory. "He didn't give me a speech about how he'd support me in whatever I wanted to do. He simply said: Nancy, you can do anything you set your mind to do, and I don't think I could stand in your way if I wanted to, and I wouldn't have *you* any other way."

Grace could feel Grandpa in those words. That's exactly how he would have phrased it, and she could practically smell the Old Spice he always wore.

"I thought long and hard about what he said and realized I could have it all. I could do all the things I wanted to do and be loved by him. I just had to reach for it. I had to reach for him. I kissed him long and slow, and from that moment forward, I never once questioned marrying him."

Grace relaxed into the ending of the story, content to know how the rest of it panned out. Grandma started her business. Grandpa worked for an auto dealership selling cars until retirement. She had her thing, and he had his, and they raised a beautiful family who loved each other to this very day.

She covered Grandma's hand with her own. "You picked a good one, Grandma."

Grandma nodded. "Best man I ever met." She glanced down and grimaced. Leaning over, she pinched a pair of Stephan's swim trunks that sat on the floor between her fingers and held it up. She lifted her eyebrow, asking what Grace wanted to do about this.

Grace took in the other three swimsuits, the sheets in a pile on the couch, the charging cords hanging out of every socket, and the take-out container on the side table. Out the front window, the hideous van took up the whole view. She suddenly had an idea.

"I was going to donate the van to a charity." She tapped her bottom lip. "I think I found the one."

"Oh?" Grandma asked, lifting one eyebrow in question.

"Yeah, the homeless surfer fund."

A slow smile spread across Grandma's face. "I wouldn't mind donating to that cause myself."

Grace hopped up and snatched clothing from off every surface. Grandma

pulled out a vacuum and followed behind, cleaning up the salt and sand that fell out. In no time, they had all of Stephán's things loaded into the van. Grandma even put in three cans of stew and a box of crackers so he wouldn't starve.

The two of them locked the back door where Stephán would normally barge into the bungalow without asking and sat on the front porch chairs like two Southern ladies, sipping raspberry lemonades as they waited for the tide to go out, which would send Stephan inland. The view of The Palms was nice, and with each moment, the rightness of her decision filled Grace up and settled around her.

They didn't have to wait long before Stephán came around the side of the house carrying two surfboards and wearing a scowl. "The door's locked," he ground out as he dragged one board through the flower bed, leaving a disaster behind. "And my arms are tired because I had to carry your board back."

Grace stood up and stopped him before he made it to the porch.

"Stephán," she began in an even tone. "It's been fun having you around, but it's time for you to go."

"Go?" He set his boards against the house. "Go where?"

She held up the van keys, letting them dangle in front of his face. "Anywhere the surf takes you."

He stared at them and then turned to look at the van. "I don't get it."

Grandma huffed and mumbled, "Not that hard," into her cup.

Grace barely hid her smile. "I'm giving you the van. The title is in the glove box." She couldn't hold back her sarcasm anymore.

"Why, babe? We have a good thing going."

Grace turned to Grandma and widened her eyes. Grandma nodded and shooed her to continue.

It was time to pull out the smoking gun. "Stephán," she gulped. She'd intended to say *babe*, but the word stuck in her throat like a horse pill. "I've always known that your first love is surfing. I just can't stand to compete with her anymore when I know I'll always come in second." She dramatically threw her head to the side as if admitting as much was personally painful.

Grandma lifted her glass to salute Grace's performance, encouraging her to continue. Grace pinched her lips together to hold back her laughter. She gathered herself and turned back to continue.

"You were meant to be free, to ride where your heart calls, and I can't hold you back any longer. Your things are already packed." More like thrown inside with the same haphazard abandon he'd exhibited in the house, but who was keeping track?

Stephán nodded slowly. "You're right. I mean, no woman can tame me."

Grace pressed the keys into his hand, turned him around by the shoulders, and pushed him away. "Go! Before I change my mind and try to convince you to stay."

"Yeah! I'm going." He hurried to put his boards in the rack. His movements were so quick, and he looked like he was terrified Grace really would try to stop him.

"What a goob," Grandma said behind her glass.

As soon as Stephan pulled away from the curb, they clicked their glasses together and burst out laughing.

"I'm not sure who is the bad influence on whom, Grandma," Grace quipped. She leaned back in her chair. "That was more fun than it should have been."

Grandma fanned her face. "Agreed. But I've always enjoyed taking out the garbage."

"Grandma!" Grace shrieked as she laughed. "Since when were you so sassy?"

"All my life—you just seem to bring it out in me," she admitted.

"Right back at ya." Grace winked. "Want to go shopping?"

"Or I could schedule you at the barber shop for a trim . . ." she said suggestively.

Grace rolled her eyes and stood up, taking Grandma's hand and pulling her up, too. "I don't need a trim. But I do need some new bohemian outfits. And I think you might like one too."

"Oh no! Not me!" Grandma threw up her hands.

Grace's new mission was to find something in the boutique Grandma would wear that wasn't a track suit. "We'll see."

As they made their way past The Palm's main building in a golf cart Grandma borrowed from Don to get them around town, Grace's eyes lingered on the door. It swung open, and Ryker stepped into the sunshine. The air whooshed out of her. He was so handsome! Her memories of him didn't do the real version justice.

He put on a pair of sunglasses, hiding those incredible green eyes from the world. Such a shame. He caught her staring, and a sexy Isoladian smile lit his face, silently asking if she liked what she saw. She liked. She liked it so much!

Grace about swooned out of the golf cart. She lifted her hand. He waved back, still watching.

"Are you hot?" asked Grandma, oblivious to the exchange. Her hands gripped the wheel at ten and two, and she kept her eyes on the road.

Grace fanned herself to cover up the wave and to help with the flushing that consumed her from such a small exchange. She was attracted to Ryker. Not just attracted like, I'd like to put a picture of you on my desktop to cheer me up when the skies are blue but attraction like, I'd move to your country for a hot makeout session.

Maybe she should have taken Grandma up on her offer for an appointment with the resident barber.

No, she didn't want to throw herself at the man—that was not her style. Not that she had a style per se. She did know that she didn't want to be seen as desperate. He probably had women falling at his feet all the time.

Without an appointment or legitimate reason to walk into his man cave, she'd have to accidentally bump into him. It shouldn't be that hard. Diamond Cove wasn't that big of a city. And, with a new wardrobe, she'd be confident and ready to flirt.

That was exactly what she'd do. Flirt. And if he happened to express an interest, then she'd be open to a date. And if he whispered in her ear again, she grabbed onto him and kissed him until her lips were numb.

She chewed her cheek. A part of her had a burning desire to find out exactly who Ryker Rockefeller was and how he washed up on this shore. Okay, so maybe her attraction was three-parts physical and one-part mystery.

Or maybe it was more. Because there was a feeling that she couldn't ignore–one that said her and Ryker's paths were meant to cross–that he would have a significant impact on her future.

Sometimes, her intuition scared her. Not because she didn't trust it but because, in this case, she did. Ryker was about to flip her world.

And she wasn't sure she would come out on top.

Seven

N ancy hid in the changing room of Leather and Lace Bohemian Boutique with her phone.

Leather and Lace!

Leather and *Lace*!

Did she mention that there was leather and a whole lot of lace in this store? It sounded like a lingerie shop for biker chicks. She should have sent Winnie shopping with Grace instead of going herself. Winnie didn't mind discussing things like intimate apparel and hemlines.

Not that there was anything scandalous about hemlines. Unless they were, um, inadequate in length. Then, there was a bit of a scandal. Her initial apprehension eased quite a bit when they stepped inside to find a normal clothing boutique with only a hint of leather. Though the lace part was true. Apparently, bohemian women preferred lace. And ruffles. And tassels.

And soda.

An old-fashioned soda counter took up one wall. It was genius, actually. Combining the two unlikely shops into one. Having a daily consumable product would keep this store afloat even if the clothing line didn't. She could go for a pineapple sarsaparilla right about now.

Although it appeared the clothes were a hit and the owner wouldn't need to rely on the bubbly stuff to keep her financially afloat.

Several women browsed, dresses or tops slung over their arms in a possessive manner. The jewelry stand had holes where items had been purchased and not restocked. Which, if the manager was any good, meant that they'd been full when the store opened today.

Grace, of course, didn't blink before walking in. That girl charged ahead,

ready to face whatever the boutique threw at her. She'd already tried on several sun dresses, a pair of linen pants and a matching shirt, shorts with lace trim, and several other outfits. She could pull off anything. Unlike Nancy, who was startled at the dress Grace shoved into her arms.

It was creamy with light blue and green flowers, a scoop neck, and what seemed like no shape to it at all.

"Try it on," she begged. "For me. Just this once?" Her big blue pleading eyes didn't play fair, and Nancy had ducked into the changing room to appease her.

And to text the Secret Seven.

Nancy: The plan worked! Stephán's off the couch and out of my bungalow. Rosa: Party town tonight!

Don: Greta news

Walt: Worth the sand sandwich I had to eat for lunch.

Don: *Great news

Polly: I'm taking off this spandex now. He didn't even comment on our outfits.

Winnie: What's next?

"G randma?" Grace called through the door. "Let me see the dress."

Nancy stuffed her phone under her carefully folded tracksuit on the bench, threw the floral print thing over her head, tugged it in place, and swung open the door. "I don't know about it." She hadn't even looked in the mirror, but it was loose in the place she was used to having a waistband.

Grace grinned as she lifted the full skirt to one side to reveal the whole pattern. "I think it's lovely. And think how much cooler it will feel than wearing pants all the time." Nancy rubbed her hands up her arms. The cap sleeve barely covered her shoulder, and she felt exposed. Which was silly because she wore a swimsuit often enough. The idea of walking into a Secret Seven meeting wearing this would cause fainting spells in Winnie and Polly–and possibly Walt.

Then again, she'd changed so many things over the last year–like moving to Diamond Cove, learning to knit, and organizing the Secret Seven–and they'd worked out well. Except for the knitting, she was still working on that one.

Maybe trying a new fashion trend wouldn't be so bad. Air brushed her legs as the dress swirled, and she was covered in goosebumps. "You have a point about having a draft."

She stepped back and looked Grace over. She wore an expertly faded red dress that fell to her knees. Tiny cream-colored tassels trimmed the V-neck and bell sleeves. Her hair hung long and free, and a large matching bracelet graced her wrist. Even barefoot, she looked put together and completed.

Nancy sighed. "You can pull this off." She plucked at the fabric hanging limp against her chest. "But I'm not sure I can."

Grace grabbed her hand. "You need to make it yours. That's all. Come over here." They went to a display case, and Nancy's eyes fell on a jasper beaded bracelet. The blue and cream matched the flower petals in the dress. She slipped it on while Grace was busy looking. At work, she'd always worn a wrist watch and a set of diamond stud earrings her husband gave her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Now that she was retired, she leaned on her phone to keep track of things like the date and time.

Grace came up with a simple gold chain with a small jasper stone hanging from the center. She gapped when she saw the bracelet and then laughed. "Great minds think alike." She helped fasten the necklace around Nancy's neck and stepped back so she could see herself in the mirror.

Nancy stared and stared. The woman looking back at her was polished and yet free, safe and yet daring. The dress was loose and airy and had movement. "I think I like it," she admitted. "Although it will take some getting used to."

"Maybe you could wear it to church and try it out." Grace pecked her cheek. "I have three more things to try on, and then we can go to dinner." She flipped the hem of her dress. "I might wear this one out." With a wink ,she was off.

Nancy hurried back to her phone.

Nancy: We need to get Grace and Ryker in the same place while she's feeling pretty. Any ideas?

Polly: Let's put Samantha's plan in place. Time to get her a job and get Ryker to class.

Don: I'm on Ryber.

Don: *Ryker

Harry: I'll help.

Don: Make an appointment at the barber shop for five minutes before class starts. I'll meet you there.

Walt: 👍 🎆

Rosa: 🗟 🔐 😓 🏂

Nancy stared at the screen, trying to decipher Rosa's pictures. Cowboy, secrets, Sweetie, party? They were all positive, so she decided to move forward.

Nancy: Samantha and I will get Grace to class, and we'll go from there. Can anyone meet me for lunch and help encourage her?

Polly: I can!

Winnie: Me too.

Nancy: Perfect!

She tucked her phone in her purse and changed clothes. The dress was out of her comfort zone but she always envied Grace's style—maybe it was time

she stopped envying and bought the dress.

Zight

R yker opened the barber shop the same as every day, the movements robotic and scripted because his mind was on Grace and the brief interaction they had had the day before.

A wave could hardly be called an interaction and yet the moment consumed him.

She had seen him and waved.

He had waved back.

Which was nothing in the grand scheme of things. Nothing at all.

And yet . . . it was everything.

As the golf cart zoomed away, he felt as though he had missed his train and was left standing on the station—alone and bereft.

He did not enjoy that feeling.

He checked his schedule. It was packed with only a half-hour lunch break. Suddenly every man in The Palms wanted a trim. Was there a dance this weekend? A social? A gathering of some sort? He should have checked Samantha's calendar at the start of the week but he'd been too busy with the SEAL team to have a spare moment and every spare thought he had was already promised to Grace.

He prepped what he would need for the first three men even as he replayed her soft smile over and over again like his sisters used to do when they found a song from an American boy band that made them swoon.

Yes, men could swoon. Although Ryker preferred to cause the swooning rather than experience it himself–although it was a rather nice experience and for Grace he'd repeat it as often as possible.

What was he to do about his romantic nature? Nothing. It was one of his

best assets.

His first appointment, Carl, arrived. "*Ciao, come stai?*" *Hello, how are you?* he asked.

"Don't drop that Italian on me, my good sir." Carl sat in the chair. "Just give me a shave so the missus will let me smooch her again."

"Trouble in paradise?" Ryker chuckled. "You have been married for three months."

"Well, the honeymoon period isn't what it used to be. She told me to pick up my socks or go back to my own apartment."

"Oddio!" he exclaimed.

"I don't know what you said but yeah." He rubbed his hand across his stubble, filling the air with a scratching noise. "Do you have anything that smells good? She likes honey."

Ryker glanced over his supplies. He had a small sample of after-shave oil from a place in Virginia. He plucked it off the counter. "We will use this." He held up the cream-colored bottle with the image of a bee on the front.

"Sounds good."

Ryker set Carl with a hot towel and prepared his razor. He made short work of shaving his whiskers and then trimmed up his neck, ears, and eyebrows for good measure. He could not leave a gentleman less than his best for his lady love. When he finished, he whipped the cape off of Carl and spun him around to look in the mirror. "You will capture her heart all over again."

The man looked fifteen years younger—it was the eyebrow trim. Ryker was a firm believer that unruly eyebrows aged a man faster than sun exposure.

Carl turned his chin right and then left. "Looks good. I'll see you next week."

That was the biggest compliment Carl had ever given him. He took a moment to look at the sample bottle and then pulled up the website for Sticky & Sweet. They had several products that interested him, so he called the shop directly to place the order.

"Sticky and Sweet; this is Jo. How may I help you?" said a pleasant voice.

Ryker swept as he talked. "I am a barber, and I would like to know if you have a shaving product specifically for a man's head."

There was a pause. "We do. One of my husband's best friends shaves his

head almost daily, and we developed a cream specifically for him. The scalp is often sensitive."

"Esattamente!" Exactly, he exclaimed. *"Women's shaving cream works well enough but daily use can cause irritation."*

She giggled. "I can tell you're passionate about your work."

He paused. Cutting hair was not his passion, but he had been taught to give every responsibility his best effort. "*Per favore* send ten bottles of the shaving cream, and," he checked the website, "I would like a dozen of the aftershave cream and a dozen of the wrinkle cream. Men should care for their skin, too."

"Of course. Where would you like them sent?"

He rattled off the number for the credit card he used for barber shop expenses and The Palm's address.

"Florida!" she exclaimed. "We've been talking about expanding to Florida."

"That would do well for you. There are many dry-skinned people here." He glanced at the clock. Walt would be here for a trim any moment. "I must go, and you have an order to fulfill, *si*? I expect it to arrive in three days, *si*?"

"Okay, your highness," she chuckled, softening the tease. "Thank you, and have a wonderful day."

He hung up and then nodded. The woman was like his SEAL friends and joked as a way of creating camaraderie. Although he believed she was more refined than his American cohorts. They would just as soon grow Viking beards and long hair if he did not try to keep them presentable. Liam already had the Viking hair going, and Wolfe the beard—a nicely trimmed beard thanks to Ryker, but still. Of course, some of them fought him tooth and nail. One day, they would understand—one day, they would find a woman who would appreciate his efforts.

Walt came through the door, followed by Don and Harry. The three of them had stony faces and intense eyes. The whole energy in the room set Ryker on edge as if he were in a boat in the middle of the ocean and a storm approached.

Nine

"I 'm glad to hear that it's going so well, Celeste." Grace stood in Grandma's backyard, watching the waves through a hole in the magnolia bushes. She badly wanted to walk the beach where she could swipe her bare feet through the sand and ground herself. But the sound would drown out the call that was already difficult to hear.

The back door opened and she spun around to see Grandma step onto the patio. She began tidying up the cushions on the outdoor furniture, killing time while waiting for Grace to finish with the phone call. Once again, she was in a tracksuit. The stunning dress they'd bought at the Leather & Lace Bohemian Boutique was stuck in her closet, probably for the rest of time. Grace may have to be content with the fact that she actually got Grandma to try it on in the store.

"I'm over half-way done, and Diego is a huge help," Celeste gushed. "He's so kind and quiet. I can't believe he's a priest already—he's only twenty-six."

Celeste had a note of hero worship harmonizing with two notes of romance in her voice. *A non-Catholic priest, thank goodness*, Grace thought.

"As your boss, I have to warn you against fraternizing with a coworker. I'm paying Diego for his time on this project, so try to keep it professional." Diego was, in turn, donating the money to the church fund. He didn't feel right about keeping it when generations before him had kept the records she cataloged.

"Will do—but I may pay to stay an extra month on my own." She giggled.

"That's up to you." Grace paused, something akin to jealousy tugging at

her heart. Diego was a very nice man, the kind who honestly tried to do what God wanted him to do. When he spoke about Jesus to his small congregation, he was sincere in his love for the Lord. If Celeste truly fell in love with him, she'd have found a gem in a world of fakes. "If you need a maid of honor, I'm happy to fly back down there."

She giggled again. "I may take you up on that. Don't worry about the photos—they'll be my best work yet."

"I'm sure they will." They said goodbye and hung up.

Grandma fluffed the last pillow and laid it just so. She brushed off her palms as she regarded her work and then nodded with approval. "What is this about having employees? You never said you were starting a company." She waited expectantly for an answer.

Grace tucked her phone in her pocket. "It wasn't intentional. I mean, I don't have a company."

"But you just warned that person about having a romantic relationship with another employee."

Grace blinked. She may have a hole in her heart, but nothing was wrong with Grandma's hearing. "Some of the projects I take on need skills I don't have—specialists. I contract with them and make it happen. No payroll, employment taxes, or any of the hassle. So, no company."

"If it looks like a flamingo and eats shrimp like a flamingo . . ." Grandma muttered.

Grace's mind ran through the conversation, and she couldn't help but notice how similar it sounded to many of the conversations she'd overheard Grandma Nancy have with her employees when she interned at Nancy's Niceties in the summers. "Maybe this apple didn't fall that far from the tree after all." She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She chaffed in an office environment. She didn't have the patience for office politics or drama.

A lone wolf. That's what Grandma called her.

A butterfly who flitted from flower to flower, which didn't sound like a compliment.

"Are you ready for lunch?" Grandma asked. "Today is braised beef with ravioli, and you can't miss Cocoa's individual-sized carrot cakes." She kissed her fingers.

Grace took one more longing look at the beach. It had been too long since she'd had quiet time with nature.

As much as she wanted to get out there and feel her soul expand over the

ocean, she was dressed to turn heads in a cream-colored knee-length dress with wide sleeves and stitching in red, blue, and yellow. She'd taken time to curl her long hair into beach waves and applied eyeliner *and* mascara. Ryker could be around any corner, and she looked forward to seeing him again. More than looking forward to it. That man was a craving for chocolate after three days of fasting. If going to lunch brought her closer to sampling his green gaze, then Grandma would have to hold her back. "I'm ready when you are. Just let me grab my sandals."

They went through the house and out the front door. It was amazing how cute Grandma's pink bungalow looked without Stephán in it and with the van gone. She'd need to buy a car but in this small town, walking was preferable. If they were going farther, Grandma would check out or borrow a golf cart.

"At some point, we need to go to the Surf Shop," she said as they walked. "Elizabeth says they have the best line of swimsuits there." Ever since their shopping trip, Grace had the strangest urge to pull her fashion sense out and parade it around. Sure, she had professional attire she pulled out for conferences and dresses reserved for church, but she wanted to take it up a notch. And no, a certain barber with a sculpted beard and shoulders strong enough to carry babies, her, and a lifetime of happiness didn't have anything to do with it.

Okay, maybe he had a little to do with it. He was so put together, from the shine on his leather shoes to the rich, tantalizing scent on his skin. Ryker exuded this sense that he knew his place in the universe, his mission in life. She wanted some of that. The confidence and the man. Because finding a man like him was more difficult than finding a diamond in the rough or a yellow submarine.

Grandma lit up at the topic of The Surf Shop. "Chad's done well bringing in fashionable swimwear. Even the locals stop there now." The pride in her voice was evident, making Grace think she had more to do with the business operations that she let on.

They made their way up to the main building. In the lobby, Aaron was putting a harness on Sweetie the alligator.

"Hi." Grace stopped to run her hand along the animal's side. She curved into the touch as if Grace tickled her. Grace smiled.

Aaron nodded to her. "It's good to see you again."

"You too."

"Come on, Grace." Grandma waved her along. "Lunch is waiting."

Grace said a quick goodbye to Sweetie and followed Grandma into the dining room. The back wall was made of glass-covered doors that lead out to the pool area. There was a shallow pool with a playground for young children, a lazy river, and a large pool with a – "Is that a movie screen?" she asked.

Grandma made a beeline for two chairs near her friends. "They play movies on Friday nights. It's fun."

"You've been?" Grace asked, aghast. She could barely get Grandma into a dress, let alone a swimming pool.

Grandma came up short. "Why wouldn't I?"

Grace lowered her eyebrows. "Because you don't go to movies. You told me they were a waste of time, and if you wanted a good story, you'd read a book."

Grandma pressed her lips together thoughtfully. "It's not just the movie, it's time with people and . . ." she paused. "Maybe I should have made more time for things like that." She tapped over her heart. "Maybe this wouldn't have happened."

Grace wrapped her arm around her. "I'm glad you found something you enjoy doing with your friends." She squeezed and then let her go.

Grandma's statement filled in the questions Grace had about Grandma being so supportive of Elizabeth and Chad. Not that Grandma didn't support them, but Grace would have bet her Irish breakfast tea set–currently in storage–that Grandma would have encouraged Elizabeth to forgo romance for a few more years as she settled in as CEO.

Of course, now that she knew more about Grandma's and Grandpa's courtship, she had a peek into Grandma's heart. She stumbled a little as she realized that genealogy wasn't just about collecting information from or about people who were dead, but about creating memories to share later. The thought hit her like a revelation, and she barely righted herself, narrowly avoiding face-planting in the dining room in front of the residents.

Grandma took them to a table, and they were soon laughing and chatting with her friends. "Where's Don and the others?" Grace asked.

Winnie leaned forward. "Harry has a haircut this morning. They went for . . . emotional support."

Grace giggled. She'd need support while in Ryker's capable hands too, though of a whole different kind. Her knees would give out if she was ever under the influence of his fingertips again. She could only imagine what he would do to her if he brushed his thumb down her jawline or across her collarbone.

"I won't trust Harry's hair to anyone else." Virginia's tone brokered no arguments and snapped Grace from her fantasy of Ryker and her all alone after hours in the barbershop. The lights are low. Jazz music plays. There's only one chair, so of course she's sitting on his lap, her nails scraping up the back of his neck as he—

"Ryker sure knows his stuff," Virginia said.

Grace swallowed. "I'm sure he does," she said, quite out of breath.

The others chimed in. They were a hoot going on about Ryker's abilities with a pair of scissors as if he were the half-child of the Greek god of haircuts. They didn't have to sell her on him–she was paid for, the receipt printed, and out the door.

If only she could find the guy. Besides the day he ruined all other men and hair stylists for her and the quick wave, she hadn't been able to accidentally bump into him on purpose. They said absence makes the heart grow fonder, but all it had done was make her ansty. She needed her some Isoladian accent and a dose of those green eyes if she was going to make it through the rest of the day without combusting.

The servers brought out plates laden with delicious food and kept their water cups full. They chatted with the residents who were interested in them as much as if they were their own grandparents. Bless these kids for their openness.

The feeling around the table was one of family, and Grace soon found herself wrapped up in it all. Perhaps Elizabeth wasn't far off when she'd said this place was magical. Of course, no prince charming had shown up at her door—yet. And no barber had so much as walked through the dining room. Didn't he get a lunch break? Slave drivers.

Samantha tripped over a chair leg and dropped the armload of files she carried, interrupting Grace's musings. She scooted her chair back and dropped to her knees to help retrieve the papers that had fanned across the floor. Her hands slowed as she realized what she was looking at: pedigree charts. She shuffled through the ones in her hand, tracing the family line back to the 1700s. "Is this your family?" she asked Samantha.

Conversation at the table had stopped, and everyone stared at them. Grace made sure her skirt wasn't up around her backside. The last thing she needed was Ryker seeing her underpants. She always wore grandma panties when she had on a knee-length skirt–just in case of a freak wind storm. But she didn't want him to know that!

Samantha flicked a hand. "Heaven's no. I mean, I wish. I'm an orphan. This is one of our residents." She accepted the proffered folder and stacked it with the others. "And these are several more. I'm afraid I'm over my head with all this, and it's starting to show." She brushed off her skirt, a beautiful number made in deep green with silver accents. It had a royal look to it— much like the traditional uniforms for soldiers from Isola de la Famiglia— especially with the tassels hanging off the gathered sleeve. But perhaps that was more Grace's current obsession with a certain Isoladorian and not so much the dress itself. "Betty is stuck on her family line—it's a dead end."

"There's no such things as dead ends," Grace quipped. "The lines continue—we just have to find the right thread to pull."

Samantha huffed, blowing a piece of hair off her forehead. "I'm a disaster with thread."

"It's true," Winnie threw out. "She's hopeless."

A small line appeared between Samantha's eyebrows. "Thank you, Winnie. That was very helpful."

Winnie winked.

"Anyway," Samantha brought the attention back to her. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to suspend the ancestry searches here at The Palms."

Winnie gasped and clutched her pearls. "You can't do that, Samantha. People count on that class."

Samantha didn't seem ruffled by Winnie's pronouncement. "I don't know what else to do. My workload has increased, and the classes take up an hour a day."

"But people love them," argued Virginia.

Polly side hugged her.

"What was that for?" Virginia asked.

"Because you're helping." She grinned.

"Helping what?" Virginia asked.

"Uh," Polly glanced at Grandma.

"Helping keep the classes going," Grandma supplied. Her eyes darted to Grace. "What if we found you a substitute? At least until your schedule calms down a little."

The hair on the back of Grace's neck stood up. She had a sinking feeling she knew where this was going. However, she didn't know how to stop the flow of the conversation without being blunt and possibly rude.

"That would be wonderful, Nancy. Do you have someone in mind?" Samantha asked.

Grandma beamed. "My granddaughter is a professional genealogist. She's more than qualified to not only teach your class but the advanced and specialty classes as well."

Grace was so shocked by the pride in Grandma's eyes, especially when it was about her, that she momentarily forgot she didn't want to teach genealogy classes. She'd taught a class when she was a Ph.D. student, and motivating the middle-grade students drained her energy.

Study after study showed that knowing your family's names three generations back grounded children and helped them say no to drugs, smoking, vaping, and underage drinking. She'd wanted to take the power of genealogy right to the kids. Only, they made it so much more complicated than it needed to be, and they whined about reading cursive. She'd lasted one semester and gladly didn't sign up for another.

Samantha pressed the folders into her arms. "Sounds like you're the perfect woman for the job. These are their records. Class starts upstairs in fifteen minutes. Thank you so much." She hurried away before Grace could form a complete syllable. "Wow—Samantha can move," she mumbled. Especially given those Mary Jane heels she was wearing.

When Grace turned back to the table, everyone who had been staring at her suddenly became interested in their food, the floor, or the children playing in the pool with their grandparents.

"Uh," she glanced down at the arm-load of folders to see a class schedule. It would be a shame to let a class go to waste. Maybe she could fill in this one time and then talk to Samantha about finding someone else to teach the class– er, she noted the dates and times—class*es*.

"Can someone show me the computer lab?" she asked.

Grandma hopped up. "I'm finished here. I'll take you up." She dabbed the corners of her mouth and dropped the napkin on her plate.

A few minutes later they were in a room with tables lining the outside walls. There was a large, empty table in the middle of the room. Grace set the files down there and began turning on the computers. Looked like she was stuck inside today.

Ten

"W e came to keep him company." Don motioned to Harry.

"This is fine with me." Ryker motioned to the waiting chairs. "This should not take long."

Harry shifted in his seat as Ryker worked. He kept flipping his arm out from under the cape and checking the time.

"Do you have an appointment?" Ryker finally asked. No one had ever been so eager to leave his shop before, and he was slightly offended. "Perhaps you are meeting someone to pick up a treasure?" Harry was fond of buying things around town at a bargain and reselling them for what they were really worth. He had an eye for quality and antique items.

"I have a class. It's my first time, and I'm nervous." He checked his watch again, then glanced at Don and Walt.

"Perhaps your friends will go with you," Ryker offered in an effort to get him to hold still while he worked. The man was as jumpy as a bed bug.

"We're not going," Walt said determinedly, folding his arms and settling deeper into the chair. He reminded Ryker of his younger sister when she rebelled against their *bambinaia*.

"You go with him," Don commanded, pointing a sausage-sized finger at Ryker. Could fingers have muscles?

Ryker straightened his spine. "I cannot. I have appointments."

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Don stepped out and came back in a moment later. "Your next two appointments decided to reschedule."

Ryker's phone beeped, and the scheduling app told him that his next hour was clear. What in the world?

"Hey, we have three more minutes," Harry motioned to his head. "Don't

skimp on the aftershave either. Virginia likes it."

Ryker's lips twitched, but he managed to hold back his chuckle.

"Don't laugh. You'll have a woman to keep one day, and you'll see how good it is when she looks at you like you're ten years younger and her hero."

"I would like that very much," Ryker admitted. All three men perked up. "But I am in no place to provide for a family, sí?"

They frowned in unison.

Harry huffed and unfolded and refolded his arms. "You make it work, man. When we got married, we didn't have two dimes to rub together. I learned how to find deals and fix things up. It was a challenge, and you do it because you want to be her man."

If women only knew the efforts their men went to to ensure their happiness.

If he had a woman—not just any woman but the beautiful Grace—he would go to great lengths to keep her content and delighted as well. Bringing a smile to her face would give him much satisfaction. However, hearing her soft moans of pleasure during his scalp massage, moans he wasn't certain she knew she made, made him want to see what other sounds he could coax out of her.

He gave himself a shake. The odds of him having that chance were *niente*. Nothing. He would do well to forget his heart and hide away in the barbershop for the rest of the time she was in town.

He added a light balm to Walt's hair and then used a fine-tooth comb to style it. "All done." He whipped off the cape.

"Great." Don and Harry surged to their feet. Don's beefy hand landed on his shoulder in a silent warning not to struggle against what was about to happen.

Harry took the cape out of his hands, rolled it into a ball, and tossed it into the chair Walt vacated.

"This is not an art class, *si*?" he asked. He was not a good artist, and no amount of classes would change that.

"Don't you worry about a thing." Don slapped him on the back a little too hard for a regular person but much too hard for a prince. "You're going to enjoy this, I promise."

Why did the smile on Don's face remind him of a fox?

Eleven

"O kay, I guess I'll meet you back at the bungalow." Grandma dusted off her hands.

"Oh no you don't." Grace checked her grin as she took Grandma by the shoulders and steered her to a computer. "If I have to be here, you have to be here."

Grandma looked horrified. "But I don't know the first thing about all this." She waved a hand at the computer.

"That's what a class is for—to learn." She clicked the power button on the screen, and the computer booted up. At least they had top-of-the-line equipment and fast internet. That would make this so much easier. She typed a webpage into the search bar. "I'm going to log you in through my account, and you can follow our family lines that way. We'll set you up with your own account tonight, and then you'll be ready to go."

Grandma slumped. "You're not letting me out of this, are you?"

Grace laughed heartily. "Nope."

Several women trickled into the room. Betty, with her poofy white hair and a sparkle in her crystal blue eyes, threw out an arm and stopped the group's progress. "Where's Samantha?" Her eyes darted to Grandma and then took on a knowing gleam. "Nevermind. I'm sure there's an excellent reason you're here."

She held out her hand, and Grace shook it, confused at the abrupt change. In art class, Betty was a hoot, a good time, a best friend, and a grandma rolled into one adorable package. If she was here, this might not be the emotional drain Grace dreaded. "Hello again, Betty. I have your folder." She riffled through until she found the one with Betty's name. The next woman stepped up, and they found her folder too. Introductions proceeded that way until all ten of the students had their pedigree charts and were logged in.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to do something a little different today." Grace waited until they were all looking at her. She wrote on the whiteboard as she talked. This was no different than presenting at a conference. She could look at it that way, and maybe her nerves would settle down. She tried. Nope. She was not nervous about teaching strangers. She was a bottle of nerves in a soda can about to be shot out of a cannon because Grandma was here.

Ever since she'd told Grandma she'd changed her major from marketing to genealogy, she'd felt a quiet disapproval. Not that Grandma would *ever* say she was disappointed in Grace. Never. The word wasn't in her vocabulary. She just couldn't understand how someone could make a living doing what Grace longed to do, and there was probably a huge dose of grief that her granddaughter wouldn't join her in the family business to go along with the confusion. Which was why Grace never pushed what she did on Grandma. It was a no-go zone between them, and as long as they didn't trip wires, they were able to keep their relationship on a steady path.

Well, she was about to not only trip one of those wires but stomp all over it and then stand there when the explosion went off.

"Type this web address into the search bar, and let's see what happens." The activity was always a fun one to do with a new group, and she hoped it would bring them all some delightful surprises. "You'll have to enter a deceased ancestor into the search bar, and then you'll find out what famous people you're related to."

"Why a deceased one?" asked Grandma, skeptical.

"Because the site can't access your information because you're still alive. Records for those who had died are made public and therefore searchable." She smiled as some of the women nodded like that was the wisest thing they'd heard in a while.

"So it's safe?" asked Betty.

"Totally safe," she assured them.

A few minutes later, people exclaimed and eagerly called out the names of their famous relatives.

"Amelia Erhart!"

"Ronald Reagan?"

"Jesse James; yee haw!"

Grace approached Grandma's chair and leaned over to look at the screen. "James Tilley from the Mayflower, George Washington?" Grandma whispered. Her hand fluttered to her lips. "Loisa May Allcott. Henry David Thoreau, Neil Armstrong. Is this real?" She turned to Grace for confirmation.

Grace nodded eagerly. These were all on Grandma's mother's side of the family, so she must have put in her information. "It's legitimate. You should do great-grandpa's side, too. They were a little more rock and roll." She winked, knowing Grandma would love knowing she was related to Elvis—16th cousins, but who but a genealogist counted those things?

She checked her watch. She'd give them six more minutes to peruse the info and then set them loose to look for their family members. She'd noted several were in English records and would pull that group aside to go over the finer points of digging through some of the most thoroughly indexed records in history.

So far, so good.

Grandma patted her hand, drawing her attention. "I didn't know any of this." She pointed to the screen. "It's incredible."

There! Grace wanted to squee and jump up and down. The wire had been tripped, the explosion happened, and—instead of total destruction . . . magic! The enchanting moment when someone realized they were all connected— that the family tree was wider than they'd ever thought possible, that they were part of something bigger than themselves, something amazing. That they came from greatness and even the most quiet of life left an imprint behind.

That was the fire that burned in Grace's soul, and she could see a mirror of it sparking to life in her grandma. If nothing else came out of this class, or even her visit to Diamond Cove, then it would be a smashing success because Grandma tasted the extraordinary that Grace got to work with every single day.

Seriously–she didn't need anything else; she was so happy right now.

The door flew open, and Ryker strode inside as if shoved from behind. Harry came in after him, a grim look on his face. Silence fell, and they stared at the two men.

Grace froze and stared–two things that would have made her etiquette teacher flush with embarrassment.

Her soul leaped, and she felt like she was floating above herself, doing a happy dance in spirit form because *he* was here. Had she really felt whole and

complete just seconds before Ryker appeared and then felt as though she was even more with him in the room really just happen?

Yes. Yes, it did.

Grace hurried over, finding her voice in the process and praying she didn't embarrass herself. "Would you like to join us?" Or run off to Europe and relive every one of my teenaged kissing fantasies? We can start at the top of the Eiffel Tower, where skinny arms tried to stick his tongue down my throat.

Ryker adjusted his button-up shirt. "He would very much like to join your class."

She blinked and realized Harry was still standing there. Thinking of kissing Ryker, while he was a mere four feet away from her made everyone in the room disappear. Her face flushed. *Your grandmother is watching! Pull those hormones back into your pocket and catch your breath.*

Harry cleared his throat and ducked his chin. "Ryker was the one who wanted to come in here. I told him I would come with him so he didn't have to come alone."

Grace caught on pretty quickly that it wasn't Ryker who was afraid of coming alone but Harry. "Ah." She turned slightly so only Ryker could see her face and winked. "That was very kind of you."

"Yoo-hoo, *Bello*!" Betty waved from her chair. "Are you going to find your long-lost family? I'm told this is the girl to make all your dreams come true." She winked at Grace.

Grace flushed from her roots to her pastel pink-painted toes. "Not all of them," she corrected.

"There's Nancy. I'll sit with her." Harry ducked out of the conversation and sat by Grandma. She excitedly showed him the information she'd found.

"Perhaps I should . . ." Ryker pointed to the door. It slammed shut, and Don's face appeared in the window for a moment before it disappeared.

"Don't go anywhere," growled Harry. He kept one eye on Ryker and one on what Grandma explained.

Grace snickered. "Looks like you're stuck with me." *Please get stuck* with me. On a deserted island with palm trees and pineapples...

"There are worse places to be, *Bellissima*." His eyes drifted from her hoop earrings down to the tiny gold chain at her neck and then caressed her hair. He spoke with a delicious accent that made her knees quake with the desire to give out and propel her into his arms. She was always like that—melting for an Italian accent. It didn't even matter what they said.

Take that guy that cost her an entire pastry display and times him by a thousand (because Isladian men in Florida were as rare as a crown jewel) and you had Ryker. He was so delicious she'd *give up* cannoli for him. Heck, she'd give up everything and have his babies.

"A-hem!" Grandma cleared her throat.

What? Were her ovaries making kissy faces? Grace blinked back to the reality where she was not the mother of Ryker's beautiful children. It was a rough transition because the temptation was as deep as the ocean.

Not to mention, Ryker hadn't run screaming despite her doe-eyed fantasies written across her face. Which said a lot for him. Maybe. Maybe! He was a man who could actually handle her. And by that, she meant all of her. Because the last guy she'd allowed to see into the nooks and crannies of her intuition, personality, and the massive amounts of love waiting behind a vault door, had run back to base camp screaming that she was crazy.

To be fair, she'd crawled out of a tomb with a large (not poisonous) spider on her back that she'd jokingly called Tyrell, but still—any man worth his salt should have been able to deal with a spider. Was it too much to ask for someone who could slay crawling things for her? Sometimes, she wanted to stand at the back of a speeding train and scream, "Where have all the real men gone?"

Her eyes rolled over Ryker's short-sleeved, button-up shirt, and she decided that they must be in Isola de la Famiglia. Seriously, why hadn't she been there yet?

Someone coughed.

Grace licked her lips. None of this was on the syllabus for the day. Not that she had a lesson plan, but she needed to pull herself together–at least for the rest of class. What did Betty say? Ryker's family was lost?

Applying her professional tone, she said, "If you'd like to find your family, I'm certain I can help. I was going to go over the English records, but I'd be happy to jump into the Isola de la Famiglia archives for a brief overview. Everyone here seems to know what they're doing."

They were all deep in their records. Though some of them swore now and again. She made a mental note of who needed a course on the finer points of using the software—sometimes, that made all the difference.

Ryker blanched. "No grazie. I do not wish to look." He turned away from

her to emphasize his point.

Maybe it was because she'd had a long-awaited victory with Grandma that disappointment crashed down on her so swiftly. "But the records are so beautiful." She went to the open station and pulled up the royal family line. "The calligraphy is stunning, the silver ink around the edges divine." She turned and found Ryker starting with such longing at the page that her heart ached for him. "And it's not just the royal family recorded like this. Isoladians record every birth and death with the same care. They, as a people, believe that all life is precious. Even stillbirths are given names and burial plots."

"Si," he said, still distracted by the image on the screen.

He wanted this. He wanted it so much it knocked him silent. But something was holding him back, and she intended to find out what. She only hoped that she didn't push too hard and have to watch him run from her, too. Because a part of her felt as though it had found the root her roots wanted to twist up with and grow a family tree.

Twelve

R yker could not stop staring at the Isladian royal pedigree chart. They were his people. His family. His cousin, the king, and his beautiful wife who had not only risen to the challenge of marrying a stranger but stole a king's heart as well. They were one of the strongest couples he'd ever met, so in love, it hung thick around them as a velvet cloak and inspired lovers the world over.

His throat grew thick as he was suddenly faced with the family he'd given up in order to serve his country. A wave of homesickness flooded him, and he wanted nothing more than to waltz in the castle's grand ballroom, race through the winter palace's labyrinthian hallways, and play soldier in the fortress by the sea with his cousins. His love for them had prompted this mission—keeping the family and Isola de la Famiglia safe was his calling. Staring at their names made him feel so far away he ached.

How did Grace go right to his *familia*? It was as if she knew who he was and picked that page on purpose. He shifted his attention to her and studied her face as she brushed the computer screen where his family crest was handpainted on the image.

What would his mother think of her? His sisters?

What would they think of *him*? Especially when he came back from the dead. Sabrina would probably punch him on the shoulder and then hug him. His mother would smother him in kisses and then feed him until he burst. Food was the national love language of Isola de la Famiglia women.

"Ryker's not a traditional Isoladian name," Grace gently prodded for information. She was fetching in her ruffled and lacey dress. The tassels begged him to run his finger along the soft threat, tickling her skin in the process.

"No. Neither is Rockefeller," he replied absently. Forcing his eyes off the screen, he caught himself from blurting out that it was a fake name. One the men on the SEALs team had given him—teasingly of course. John D. Rockefeller was the wealthiest man in America during his life and lived like a king. The name Ryker meant "rich." Hence the name they had chosen for a prince in hiding who was looking for his national treasure was: Rich King.

They were not as original as they thought themselves to be.

Although, the sarcasm was right on considering the fact that he was not wealthy, nor was he ever going to rule a country.

"Do you know your birth name?" she asked. "It shouldn't be hard to search for it."

He jerked out of his nostalgia as one would a cold bath. "No. I was orphaned in America. With no memory."

She stepped closer, her hand landing on his forearm and her eyes dropping to his lips.

His heart rate increased for two reasons. One, no one touched a member of the royal family without asking for and receiving permission. Ever. It just wasn't done. Two, her skin was kissed-by-the-sun warm and she smelled like magnolias. A heady perfume to be sure, the scent wove into the very fiber of his being and made his eyelids heavy. He fought to keep his wits about him but she was a siren.

"I could run a DNA test," she said sweetly.

He blanked. "A what?"

She leaned back, creating room between them. Her scent lingered, and he placed his hand over hers to keep her from retreating farther. He wanted her near and was not ready to let her go.

"A DNA test." She smiled as she pantomimed rubbing something inside her cheek. "I'm certain we'd find a match—and your family. Isoladian DNA is quite rare."

The way she whispered made him think of bear skin rugs and roaring fires. What was happening to him? He was a soldier, a prince, trained to be stronger than pain. But it was not pain he fought against at this moment. No. It was something much stronger. He leaned down so their cheeks nearly brushed. "Do you enjoy a rare find?" He lifted an eyebrow and pulled back to stare deep into her sea blue eyes.

She nodded slowly. "Molto. Very much."

He did not think about his next move. He did not think about his family. He did not think about anything but his desire to make this creature his. "Perhaps we should walk the beach in the moonlight tonight. There is a legend of the moon shell—almost as rare as an Isola de la Famiglia orphan." He was taunting her with her own words, drawing her into his circle even as he stepped closer, bringing them within inches of one another. He took her hand, brushing his thumb along the inside of her wrist. "It is said that they only wash ashore on a full moon, and if you find one—"

"--you will soon fall in love," she finished. Her cheeks brushed with pink, and his fingers ached to touch them.

"Si," he breathed. This dove would be his ruin, and he could not stop himself from it. Like a fairy tale enchantress, she cast her net, and he fell gladly into her grasp in the very moment he thought he was catching her.

She bit her bottom lip. "Non dovrei." I shouldn't.

He lifted the hand he held and kissed her knuckles. "*Nemmeno io*." *Neither should I*.

Her eyes warmed. "If I shouldn't go and you shouldn't go—then . . ."

"It is certain that we will go," he finished the spin on the Isola de la Famiglia saying.

She laughed, the sound like water flowing through a fountain in the castle courtyard —pure and unfiltered from the mountaintop where it was said an angel touched the lake each morning at sunrise. "I guess we don't have a choice."

He gently squeezed her fingers. "You always have a choice, *la mia sirena*." *My siren*. Unlike him. He could not reveal his family, his mission, or even his name. He was in a cage, but he would never put her into one. "It is, as they say, up to you."

She leaned in and spoke softly in his ear, sending temptation across his skin like an ocean breeze. "Meet me on the beach *al tramonto*." *At sunset*.

"Prometto." He turned his head slightly and pressed their cheeks together, sealing the deal and lingering, breathing in her floral scent as if it was the last breath of air he would need.

"If you two are done canoodling, I could use some help finding my greatgrandfather," barked Carlie. She'd been an owner of a car dealership before retiring to The Palms. "He's like a stinking Houdini."

Turning red, Grace flipped around, cascading her magnolia scent over him. He briefly closed his eyes and cemented the memory of her rose-petal cheek against his cheek. Perfecto.

"I thought he was Houdini," said Betty. "You said he was a magician."

"I said he was a mechanic!" Carlie shouted back as if Betty were hard of hearing.

Grace tossed an amused look at Ryker before moving to adjust Carlie's screen so she could see what she was looking at. "Let's see what we have in the archives." She typed quickly, and soon, the three women gathered around the computer and scrolled through records.

Ryker took the opportunity to make his exit. He had a full schedule this afternoon and could not be late for his next appointment. Larry was a stinker for punctuality.

He had dodged a bullet, as his American friends would say, effectively distracting Grace from his pedigree. However, the distraction was not hard on him. If anything, it was an unexpected gift. One that he would not take for granted. He had somehow earned the favor of a beautiful, talented woman-he would not mess this up.

His phone snored. He rolled his eyes—speak of the kings of messing up relationships. The SEALs constantly changed one another's phone alert noises. He read the group text.

Sean: Tonight's plans–Pizza and pinball competition.

He grinned. There was an old pinball machine at the pizza shop. They had commandeered it on many a weeknight for entertainment, going so far as to erase the specials off the whiteboard to keep score. As a prince, he had not engaged in such revelry since university. But American men did not see arcade games as childish–they saw them as battlegrounds.

Mack: I'm in.

Sean: See you there.

Ryker: I cannot.

Liam: Can't or don't want to because I beat your butt last time?

R yker rolled his eyes.

Ryker: You won by five points. That is not a beating.

Sean: Dude's right. Me beating you by 500 points? That's a beating.

Liam: I had pneumonia.

Sean: Lame excuse.

Liam: Why don't you come over here and I'll show you a lame excuse!

Mack: What's up Ryker? You never ditch.

H e paused, knowing the Hades he was about to open up with this text. It could not be helped.

Ryker: I have a date.

Sean: Dude!! Since when do you date?

Sean: Guys—someone's kidnapped Ryker and stolen his phone.

Mack: Prank?

Ryker: Truth.

Mack: Grace?

H e squeezed his eyes tightly.

Ryker: Si.

Liam: Man! She is tight!

Ryker: I am shutting off my phone.

H e did, just as it snored two more times. The guys would have a great time teasing him even if he was not watching the screen.

He also knew that turning off the ringer would not affect the tracking device Liam implanted on the phone. He could drop it in the middle of the ocean, and it would send a signal. It was that device that allowed him the freedom to roam Diamond Cove without a bodyguard. It was a tracking device he wished he'd had access to when he'd tagged the jewels, but, alas, he'd been in a hurry, and one such as that could not be located at the last minute. But there was nothing to be done about the past.

Today, he was extremely grateful for the opportunity to meet a beautiful woman at sunset on the beach. Today, he was not a prince nor a fugitive. He was just a man whose heart was lighter because of magnolias.

And he liked the feeling—liked it very much.

Thirteen

N ancy had watched Grace and Ryker the whole time they whispered during genealogy class. It wasn't difficult because they had no idea anyone else was within twenty feet of them. Her heart lifted at the chemistry that obviously zoomed around the two of them like electrons. Sigh–she loved a science experiment gone right.

When Ryker kissed Grace's hand, she'd swooned on her granddaughter's behalf. The man was all sorts of good moves. The Secret Seven should hire him to give other men lessons. Or The Palms could start a new class for the kids that served in the dining room. Some of those teenage boys could use a role model, and Ryker was all that and a side of toast.

She leaned over to Polly. "If I had any reservations about him, that kiss wiped them away."

Polly swiped her forehead. "He's hotter than one of Rosa's tamales on the fourth of July!"

Nancy's stomach gurgled at the memory. "*They're* hotter," she corrected. Her lips burned for weeks after, and she'd chased her tamale with a half-gallon of milk.

Harry leaned in, looking like a cat that stole the cream. "We are on a roll! This is going to work."

Polly scooted closer. "Did you talk to her about what's holding her back?"

"Sort of." Nancy shook her head, her chin-length hair brushing her cheeks. She loved the new A-line cut. It felt young and healthy with a hefty dose of sass. Paired with the dress she'd not yet dared to wear, she was practically a new woman.

She hadn't had sass in decades, and it terrified her.

"With the sizzle on those two, you may not have to say anything more." Polly lifted one eyebrow.

Nancy breathed a silent sigh of relief. Talking to Grace amped up her stress levels. She wasn't sure if she was stepping on wires that would explode hidden land mines or not. They had such different mindsets and beliefs about how the world worked that the conversation constantly shifted under her feet. Although, the talk about her husband had paid off. Since then, they'd gotten along quite well.

Thank goodness Ryker was smitten just as Rosa said—and there was no doubt about that with the way his eyes smoldered at Grace. He was already gone.

But she hadn't seen Grace's face because her back was to Nancy. Grace was always a wild card. "I'm not ready to order a victory cake from Cocoa just yet," she said.

Grace stood up from where she'd been leaning over to see Carlie's screen. Polly and Harry jerked away like kids in class. Nancy smiled. She'd never gotten in trouble with the teacher before.

"What do you think of our family, Grandma?" Grace smiled fondly at the black and white photos as if the people in them were her friends. They probably were. Where the photos stopped on the family tree, headstones filled in.

Compared to other screens with blank pictures, Nancy's was a treasure trove. "It's quite the group." She pointed to her great-grandmother. "I didn't know her name was Nancy, too."

"And look," Grace scrolled two more generations back, and another Nancy appeared. "If you go back one more, Nancy," she scrolled again, "we're in France."

"Really? I always thought I came from English ancestors." She took her reading glasses out and put them on.

"We do—hence the Mayflower and etc., but this line is French." Grace hugged her from behind. "Which explains your expensive tastes."

Nancy patted her arm. "I like quality; there's nothing wrong with that."

Grace chuckled. "Keep looking. Maybe you'll learn something about yourself."

Nancy would have scoffed—had done so on other occasions when Grace talked about finding parts of herself in the past. It all sounded so new-aged

and hokie. But she couldn't deny that seeing her name shared through the generations touched a sensitive cord inside of her. Maybe there was something to looking at the past.

She only hoped Grace could take a moment to see into the future—a wonderful future with a handsome man who couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Fourteen

G race stepped out the back door just as the sun touched the horizon, eager to be on her way. With his deep voice, accent, and smoldering eyes, Ryker was as smooth as caramel and just as tempting. As if that wasn't enough to entice her, he'd done something completely unexpected when he asked her out: he'd offered an *experience*.

Saying no to hunting for a moonshell on the beach during a full moon was impossible for her to refuse. Her heart thrummed with anticipation, and couldn't sit still in her chest. It was like a two year old that wanted to ride the ferris wheel at the county fair–knees bouncing and bum wiggling. Yes, her bum wiggled when she was excited. She may have also sang along to some cheesy pop songs as she got ready because–why the heck not?

"Where are you going?" Grandma called from the patio set where she'd put her feet up on the coffee table, a mound of baby pink yarn in her lap. She had on her normal uniform of a tracksuit, this one red, with a crease down the front of the pants, but, instead of wearing sneakers, her feet were bare and her toes painted pale pink.

Grace gulped as she quickly ran through a list of pros and cons about telling Grandma she had a date as she made her way over to say goodbye.

Pro: It was the truth.

Con: Grandma would tell her friends, and then the whole Palms community would know she'd been out with Ryker.

Pro: She wanted everyone to know she'd been out with Ryker. The man was roguish, charming, and gallant in all the right ways.

Con: If tonight was a disaster, she'd have to tell Grandma, who would then tell her friends, who would tell . . . etc.

Pro: Telling her was the fastest way to get to the boardwalk and to Ryker. Yep. She was so telling.

"I have a date with Ryker." She made a show of checking her phone for the time. "And I'm going to be late."

Grandma motioned for a hug, and Grace happily obliged. They'd stayed in the computer lab an extra half hour so she could answer Grandma's questions about their ancestors. They laughed over the legal documentation about a feud between their family and a neighboring family over a brood of chickens. The neighbors claimed that because their rooster was the father, they should get half the chicks. The judge ruled in favor of their family stating that the female had done the lion's share of the work to hatch the chicks and should, therefore, be able to keep them.

"Here! Here!" Grandma had lifted a fist in the air as Grace finished reading the account of the proceedings printed in the newspaper. "You'll do this again, won't you?" she'd asked.

The hope in her eyes melted all of Grace's resolve to quit right after that class. "I'll stick around for a while. We'll see what comes up." She had feelers out with several genealogists and archivists around the world. Sometimes, she had to make personal visits to a church or cemetery to go deeper than the indexed records available online. She had a sense for it—a gift in being able to determine which headstone held the key to unlocking the past, what familial line a family Bible traveled, or which attic to search. She didn't know how she knew, just that she did.

And she was always right.

The yarn tickled her bare leg at the knee. "What are you making?" The wavy lines and tight stitches didn't look like much of anything. Neither did Peruvian bags, belts, and clothing when the weavers first started, though they turned into beautiful pieces soon enough. Grace enjoyed sitting near them to work—the rhythm of the loom was as soothing as a bubbling brook.

Grandma pressed her lips together. "A baby hat. But I'm pulling it out to start over."

Upon closer inspection, the yarn was fuzzy and wearing thin in places, as if it had been pulled apart more than once. She picked up Grandma's phone and found a YouTube channel with soft piano music. "Try knitting to some tunes."

"Why?" Grandma stared at her as if she'd worn a suit of armor to the beach instead of her new sundress and pair of sandals.

"Successful weavers across the globe hum or sing as they work. It's all about getting into the flow and music helps." She set the phone on the arm of the chair.

Grandma considered it. "Well, it can't make it worse."

Grace threw her head back and laughed. "That's the spirit."

Grandma huffed a chuckle. "Go! Your date is waiting." She glanced over her.

Grace stepped back and struck a pose. "Do I look alright?" She held her breath. She'd refreshed her curls and makeup. She'd contemplated changing, but the dress she had on this afternoon was casual and yet date-worthy, and she didn't want to change and look like she was trying too hard. Although she was trying hard not to overthink any of this.

Grandma frowned. "Do you have a shorter skirt? You should work those legs."

"Grandma–I'm scandalized." She grabbed her skirt and flicked the ends out. Grandma laughed and flapped a hand at her. Grace blew her a kiss and slipped through the magnolia bushes to the beach. From Grandma's back door, it was a short walk to the boardwalk. She took off her sandals and let her feet soak up the last of the sun, gracing the top layer of sand.

Movement on her left drew her eye, and she quickly did a double take. Rosa and her husband threw shrimp to four flamingos. The birds drew closer and closer still, trying to be the first to get a morsel.

"Paul! You share with Ringo!" Rosa admonished them.

Paul grabbed his shrimp and took off into some brush.

Her husband pointed after the retreating, pink-flame of a bird. "Maybe he's feeding Baby Jude?"

Rosa gasped. "Santa Maria! He better not be. Jude's still way too young for shrimp." She caught Grace watching and stopped to wave. "*Tu es bonita*. Doesn't she look beautiful, Horace?

"Yes, *muy guapa*." Horace smiled at her. Grace felt beautiful with the hem of her skirt brushing her thighs.

"*Gracias*!" she called back. One of the flamingos ducked his head and sneaked closer to the bag of shrimp dangling from Rosa's hand. "Watch out!"

Rosa jerked but it was too late, the bird took off with the shrimp, his buddies running after him. "No, John! Ack! You never have patience." She threw up her hands and went after the now empty bag laying on the beach, Horace in tow. The flamingos preened and one licked his beak. None of them acted as if they were guilty of any wrong doing despite Rosa's continued lecture.

Grace chuckled to herself. So far, the evening was full of surprises.

As she got closer to the pier, she spied Ryker leaning against the first post, one leg propped up behind him. He stared out across the Atlantic with a contemplative look on his handsome face. In the fading light, his skin took on a golden hue, bronzing him. He wore a pair of clean navy shorts and a white polo shirt that hugged his well-formed chest. He looked so yummy, her stomach filled with butterflies.

As if he could hear their wings beating inside of her, he turned her direction and her breath caught. One side of his mouth lifted in a grin that was as hot as Arizona sun in August. He pushed off the post and strode to her, his arms out. "*La mia sirena*." *My siren*.

She couldn't help but smile as he took her shoulders and pressed a kiss to both of her cheeks. It'd been a while since she'd been greeted in such a friendly fashion and she relished the tradition that went back for ages.

It didn't hurt that it brought Ryker up close and personal. He smelled of aftershave and soap and all things manly.

"Sei bellissima," you're beautiful. He caught the ends of her hair in his fingers. *"You smell of, miele," honey, "e gardino," and gardenias.*

"Grandma had a gift basket of honey products in the guest room. They feel amazing." She ran her hand up her arm where she'd slathered the lotion, and it soaked into her skin. His eyes followed the movement, and she heated to a new temperature. The European men she'd dated before were very touchy, and she hoped that was the case with Ryker. She wanted to be close to him. "Shall we?" she managed to squeak out.

"Si." He took her hand, lacing their fingers together, and she silently squealed with delight. Whatever she'd done in her life to deserve this moment, she didn't know–but she wanted to do it again and again.

At the edge of the sand, he stopped to remove his shoes. "You have the right idea, *sí*?"

As soon as his shoes dangled from his fingertips, his socks tucked into the toes, he took her hand again, and they started off. His grip was strong, his hands calloused but tender.

The last of the sun disappeared, and a breeze lifted her hair off her shoulders. The flamingos had bedded down for the night, and Rosa was long gone. A few other couples were on the walkway, but they had the sand to themselves.

Ryker's hand was warm, and she leaned into him as they walked.

"You are very good at your job, *sí*?" He nudged her. "Everyone in class will know their roots back to Adam."

She chuckled. "Well, once you tie into the Bible, it's not that hard."

He stopped in shock. "You have done this?"

"Weeeelll." She stooped to pick up a shell. "In the Middle Ages, royal families would validate their claim to the throne by tracing their genealogy back to Adam and Eve, but there aren't any true pedigree charts that go back that far." She held up the shell. "Not a moonshell."

He shook his head. She tossed it back into the ocean. "Tell me something about you."

He lowered his brow in concentration. "Why? What do you want to know?"

She moved forward, turning so she walked backward. His gaze on her was intense, and she felt as though she was being stalked, hunted, but not in a bad way. More like the man had his eye single to her, and nothing else in the world mattered. She was his objective and his motivation in one. "Anything," she said, her words inviting in a come hither way that made her cheeks blush. "Nothing huge. I know you're a barber, and that you charge half price for a half of a haircut."

He huffed a laugh. "You read my price sheet?"

She laughed in return. "I was in your chair for an hour; I read all the signs on the walls."

He looked out over the water, and she got the impression he was sifting through his memories to give her the best one he could find. The silence was comfortable, punctuated by the waves rolling on the shore and the occasional stop to check a shell for magical properties. The sun disappeared, and stars began to twinkle. She closed her eyes and made a wish for a kiss. Hey, a girl could dream. And while most women had rules about not kissing on the first date, she had rules about not missing an opportunity and seizing the joy in every day.

"When I first came to America, I had a freedom that I'd never had before. I could go anywhere, and no one stopped me. I could eat what I wanted, and no one cared. I thought it was *grande*." He paused, grabbed a shell, and chucked it into the ocean with barely a glance. "But then I became lonely. You see when no one cares what you do—you realize no one cares about you." He shuffled his feet, moving sand. "It was me against the world, and I felt very small."

Grace's heart twisted for him. "When I'm in records, I find islands—a person who doesn't have people—no one to tie them to the human family. I wonder what happened to them, how they lived. I want them to know that they are not alone, not really. We're all connected. All you have to do is check the DNA and the relationships emerge."

"You are saying I am big?" He puffed out his chest.

She tipped her head back to look up at him. "I'm saying, you're not an island."

He brushed her hair off her shoulder. A sweet, tender gesture before continuing on in their search. The moon came up over the water. A sliver of light that flooded the darkness.

Something sparkled in the sand. She dashed two steps forward and grabbed it before a wave washed over her feet. Squealing against the cold that sprayed up her legs, she darted out of the water.

Ryker laughed at her antics as she held up the shell. "Did you find one?"

She held out her palm to show him, a little disappointed since she'd daydreamed about finding a moonshell with him and the two of them falling under its love spell for all of eternity. Did she mention she was a dreamer? It came with having intuition–at least that's what she'd been told by an old woman in Belarus. She'd worn rags and fed birds but her wisdom was sought by everyone from miles around. "It's a common jingle shell. Look how pretty it is in the moonlight though." The pearl exterior glistened like the water itself.

"It could be a moon shell. What better way to keep something priceless safe than to hide it in plain sight—disguised as a common jingle shell?" His eyes flashed.

She stared at him, thinking there was more to his statement than the words she could hear. Was he something special hiding in plain sight? "Lock it away?" she offered.

He shook his head. "It would wither and die."

Ryker closed her fingers over the precious find. "Keep it safe, *la mia sirena*. It is said that the moonshell is so rare that mermen will hunt for the owners and seduce a woman out to sea." He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

"It wouldn't take much." She grinned wickedly. "I hear Atlantis is

beautiful this time of year."

He laughed, drawing her in for a hug and then holding her against his chest. She nestled into his crisp scent and warm arms. "You like adventure, *si*?"

"Si, l'avventura è vita," adventure is life. She fit here, in this space between his chin and shoulder as if the pocket had been carved just for her. And she fit in with his stories and fairy tales. A man who could talk of mermen and seduction while trailing his fingers up her back was a man who would not scoff when she walked him through a cemetery.

"No, la mia sirena, amore è vita." Love is life. His hand ran down her back and then up again. He moved his fingers into her hair and gently rubbed circles at the base of her neck. If food was Isoladian's women's love language, then caresses were Isoladian men's. She didn't mind one bit. He was romantic and proper, and she was safe in his arms. Safe from the world. Safe from danger. But mostly, safe to be herself—which was rarer for her than a moonstone.

"Most men don't use the L-word on the first date," she teased, even as she allowed him to tip her head with his movements. She was officially clay in his hands. If he wanted to drag her into the Bermuda Triangle, she'd let him. "They're afraid of it."

"I am not like most men," he countered. "And I fear nothing."

"Nothing?" she pushed back so she could look him in the eye. "Spiders?"

"You mock me. Spiders?" he narrowed his eyes, slightly offended.

"I was just checking." She snuggled back into him. "Fearless, huh?"

"I speak too fast, *si*? "His lips brushed her ear as he spoke, and it was all she could do not to melt right into the sea and be washed away forever. "I am afraid that you will disappear in the morning, and I will not see you again." He moved his hand so that his thumb brushed her jaw, incapacitating her more—which she didn't think was possible until it happened. She would not underestimate his powers of seduction again. Not that she fought against them. Perhaps she should make him work harder, but that was not in her. She couldn't play games of the heart.

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised. Her conscience pricked. "Yet," she added. "I'd like to see where this goes." She touched her forehead to his chin, breathing in the moment and trying to clear her head at the same time.

"Me too," he said softly.

A rogue wave came up over their legs, and she jumped. He loosened his

hold on her and she danced out of his arms, needing just a moment to gather herself. Ryker followed, reaching for her and just missing.

Running into the surf, she glanced over her shoulder to see him chasing, his eyes dancing in the moonlight. That's right. He was chasing her, chasing her into the water—the unknown. No fear. No hesitation. A man who knew what he wanted and he would have her.

She came up short, and he grabbed her around the middle, spinning them both. "Do you feel the magic?" he asked, his breath warm on her neck and her back flush against his chest. "The moonlight is laced with it tonight."

Her heart lifted, and she spun in his arms, lifting onto her tiptoes and wrapping her arms around his neck. "You don't talk like the men I know."

"I told you, I am not like other men." He brushed his fingers over her lips, lighting the fire inside of her that burned just for him.

"Other men would kiss me right now." Her mouth was dry with wanting his kiss.

"Perhaps I am like them then," he said low, his accent swirling her belly into an inferno of desire. He lowered his head, and she lifted up to meet him as he brushed his lips over hers.

She dropped to her feet, floating on a river of moonlight. This one walk on the beach was more romantic, more charged, more magical than any date she'd been on before. Who needed a moon shell when you had an Isoladian to sweep you off your feet? Not her.

She was half-gone for him already.

The swiftness scared her, but when he laced their fingers together, she didn't care one bit how fast her heart fell for him. She should. She should think things through, but she'd always been one to move on intuition and this felt right.

She'd just have to see where things went. If she ended up with a broken heart, she wouldn't be angry. Not when she had memories like these to hold close. This moment would be worth a thousand years of heartache. She prayed she wouldn't have to leave them but that their hearts could exist in this space between the moonlight and the sand.

Fifteen

R yker strode along the dock at a leisurely pace. Today, the sun was bright, the seagulls sang and squawked a beautiful tune as they bobbed on the water, and the ocean seemed at ease. He was even starting to like the white-sanded beach. How could he not when it was that sand that brought Grace into his arms?

The docks included twenty slips for sailboats and an accompanying boat ramp where Sean and the other SEALs launched for recovery dives. They could pull anything up from the bottom of the ocean, including ships, planes and even a lost cell phone for a billionaire who didn't think twice about paying the exorbitant fee Sean charged for the ridiculous dive.

They were scheduled to search a new wreck that the local's called "Allen's Reef" named after the man who first caught his net on whatever was down there. Sonar imaging said it was something big though that could mean it was anything from a ship's hull to a satellite that fell from orbit and therefore meant nothing to them. They needed eyes on the item.

Sean and Mack moved diving gear, stowing it in the compartment in the bottom of the boat. They took more tanks than needed in case of a malfunction—though it was unlikely that any piece of equipment would dare malfunction for these men. Their standards of exactness when diving were legendary.

"Look who rolled out of bed," Sean quipped with a grin. He was in a swimsuit and tank top. He moved the anchor aside to make room for a buoyancy compensator.

"It's a wee bit beyond sunrise," Mack razzed him while shielding his eyes and looking up at the sun. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten us." "You would be lost without my leadership." Ryker shot back in an easy manner. Nothing would interrupt the sense of well-being he had after sharing a moonlit walk with Grace. She was ... *sorprendente*—so full of life, wonder, and adventure.

After finding the shell, they'd settled into the sand, and she'd shared stories from her work and travel. Her life was so free—an inspiration for a man confined to a beach town. If he could not see these places with his own eyes, then he could see them through her words.

Speaking of eyes . . . hers were amazing. Crystal blue with flecks of sea foam green and a ring of dark green at the iris. In the moonlight, they were positively mesmerizing.

"I take it by that stupid grin on your face that the date went well." Liam approached carrying his diving gear. No one teased him about being out late. They reserved that honor for Ryker this morning—he was so lucky.

"I believe so." Ryker gave a vague and yet honest answer. "I would like to see her again."

Sean and Mack exchanged a look as Liam passed his gear over the side of the boat. In one jump, Sean was on the dock next to Ryker. "Let's take a walk."

Ryker sighed heavily. "If you think we must."

"We must." Sean went to put an arm around his shoulder and squeezed, then grinned when Ryker's spine went ramrod straight. Apparently, these men (and Grace—the lovely sirena) did not get the royal announcement about asking a *principe* if they could touch them before actually doing it. Grace could be forgiven because she did not know he was a prince, plus he liked when she touched him, but these . . . these ruffians knew. Instead of following protocol, the mention of it egged them on.

If Grace knew who he was last night, she might have felt obligated to follow the rules of etiquette, and he would have missed out on the thrill of her hand on his bicep and her cheek on his shoulder.

Not to mention her lips on his lips.

Now there was something he would eagerly egg on, and planned to do just that at the next opportunity.

"We're all happy you've decided to date, to make a real go of a life here." Sean steered him to the end of the dock.

"But?" Ryker asked as they stopped and stared out over the water. The ocean had some green in it today. Much better than gray, in his opinion. Gray

was dismal and sad—not at all what he felt, and if he could not stare at blue and think of Grace, then he could stare at green and remember the soft puff of air against his neck when she sighed with happiness.

Sean released his shoulder and grinned. "But we need to know that you're being careful with that one."

"That one?"

"She's almost too perceptive." He signaled over his shoulder toward Mack and Liam. "Those two told me everything she figured out about them in less than five minutes. You can't tell her anything. And you're going to have to throw her off your royal scent."

Ryker bristled at his use of "royal" and "scent" together in a sentence like that—as if they were some breed of animal. Sean met his gaze, something twitching behind his eye. His intensity did not make sense. Sean was the fun one. The man who would put itching powder in your underwear drawer.

Also, the SEALs had pressured him for months to start dating, to settle in and "get a life" as they liked to say.

This talk wasn't about Grace. Not really. Grace was an icebreaker for what was to come next.

"This is not about one date." One *incredibile*, *sorprendente*, *perfecto* date. "What are you not telling me?"

Sean chuckled.. "Sometimes I forget you were more than just a royal highness."

Ryker shrugged. "I cannot help it if my training takes over any more than you can."

Sean jutted his chin in agreement. The tension in his forehead released. "I underbid another company for a job, and they are ticked off. They're determined to make my life miserable."

"What company?" Ryker asked.

"Titan Marine Salvage." He glared at the water. "That guy is as pleasant as a jellyfish and not even close to as pretty.

Ryker followed his gaze to where two boats bobbed in the surf. They were black, with chrome trim, and flew a nondescript flag with a picture of a beer on it. He snorted.

"Why are they out there?" He worried for the treasure that he hoped they would find today.

"They want to follow me. If I come up with anything interesting, they'll try and take it." Sean shrugged.

He gritted his teeth. "Pirates."

Sean laughed. "They wish they were as cool as pirates. No. He's just going to trail us and then watch. Which wouldn't be a problem if this was any other day and any other dive. But–."

"It is not." Ryker tapped his fingers against his thumb–an old habit that surfaced when he was nervous.

"No. It's not. But we changed our dive plans. We'll settle a ways away from the target and swim to it. They won't be able to trace us."

"Anyway, I thought you should know." He turned abruptly. "Also, if you're planning on seeing this girl again tonight, we'd better get going. You can't be late, or Nancy will have your hide."

Ryker glared at the boats and then spat on the dock—an old curse his grandmother used to do whenever. It made him feel moderately better.

They headed out to the dive site, anchoring away from it. If this was the site of the *Re Del Mare, King of the Sea*, wreckage, things could change in a blink. The SEALs' official assignment was to protect him; they'd only taken on looking for the crown jewels as a personal favor. If anyone else came along and found them first, well, according to maritime law, they could keep them.

Time was of the essence.

The local fishermen were the ones who had found the mysterious mass, so it was not like it was a secret that there was something down there.

Sean and Mack went down while Liam worked the radar on the surface of the water. Ryker stood at the helm, the lookout and captain for the time being. If there was an emergency, Liam would be the rescue diver. By Naval decree, Ryker was forbidden from participating in the dives—a fact that raked across his pride like coral on bare feet.

The black boats were visible through his binoculars, and he kept a weather eye on their opponents while the men were submerged.

"So—you going to tell me about your date?" asked Liam as he adjusted a knob on the radar, then his man bun. "It's your first one since we got here."

It was his first date in longer than that, but Liam did not need all the details. "It was a wonderful night. We talked under the stars and watched the tide go out. She is an enchantress who charmed me with her stories and excitement for life."

Liam stared at him. Then he snorted—derisively. "Sometimes I forget that your people are a sappy lot."

"We are not sappy—we are romantics. There is a difference." He opened his fingers like a flower blooming. "And you are one to talk, are not Scots famous for their romanticism?"

Liam snorted again. "I'm only half Scot."

Ryker set his jaw. "Your 'hey baby' approach to women may work for one or two dates, but if you want to woo a woman's heart—win her love you will need romance, my friend." He paused for a moment and then added, "One day you, will beg me for help to win your lady love."

Liam shook his head. "No way. I'm never getting that deep again."

Again? Ryker paused before responding. A broken heart was quite the motivation to avoid love. "That is where you are wrong. When it is love, true love, it feels like no work at all." He turned before Liam could offer a counterargument.

"Whatever," he mumbled behind Ryker's back.

Ryker ignored him. He and Grace had a connection, but they needed time together for it to grow. He was no fool. Her work took her all over the world and she was free as a bird and could fly away at any moment. Perhaps she would come back. Their future was uncertain. However, he would not throw away an opportunity to be with her just because his heart would break. To do so would be cowardly.

A while later, he lowered the binoculars and turned to Liam. "What do you know of the Titan Marine Salvage Company?"

Liam pulled his shoulder-length hair into a man bun.

"If I cut your hair, you would be respectable. The type of man a woman would take home to meet her mother." He had heard that phrase from one of his clients and thought it was poetic and spoke to a man's character.

"I get it—it's your job and all that. But you gotta understand that I've been in the Navy a long time—haircuts every three weeks. I'm taking our little undercover mission as an opportunity to express my individuality."

Ryker opened his mouth to argue, but Liam held up a hand to cut him off.

"As an added bonus–it really cheeses off my commanding officer, and there's not a darn thing he can do about it." He grinned.

Ryker could not hold back the laughter. "Fine. Keep your hair. But you will use the shampoo and conditioner I bring you."

"Deal." His gaze cut to the black boats and then back. "Here's the tea on Titan."

"Tea?" Ryker wrinkled his nose.

"Tea-the inside information."

Ryker snickered. "You mean ladie's gossip?" He had a distinct image of his mother sitting with royal visitors over fine china tea cups discussing what *really* needed to happen in the castle, the country, politics and then the world–in that order.

"No, it's not, you don't understand. It's just an expression."

Ryker leaned against the captain's chair. "By all means-serve me the tea."

Liam clamped his mouth shut and shook his head as if Ryker had missed the meaning. He did not. SEALs were not the only ones who knew how to tease to build camaraderie.

"Titan was in the marines. There's always a rivalry between SEALs and marines but this guy takes it to a new level. He's been needling Sean since we got here calling him newbie and making comments that undermine Sean's business. Never outright saying he can't do the job. You know Sean, he can't just let it roll off his shoulders so he underbid the guy–by a lot and scored a great contract. By the looks of things, Titan has about as much patience as Sean."

Ryker nodded. "What else? Is he in danger?"

Liam lifted a shoulder. "We have Sean's back. I can't see Titan doing anything illegal though–he's a ruthless businessman."

"I have dealt with worse," Ryker conceded, thinking of his *tio* who would have him killed if he stood in his way to the throne. If he knew what Ryker was doing now, he'd be after him. There was no safe space for him–except a graveyard and he had no intention of landing in one of those anytime soon.

"Hey, Ryker?" Liam asked as he made a note in the logbook.

"Yes?"

"What's conditioner?"

"I am surrounded by savages." Ryker spent the next ten minutes educating Liam on hair care.

Eventually, Sean and Mack popped up, their faces grim.

"What did you find?" he asked eagerly. His whole life seemed to be more animated—it must have been the kiss. With it, Grace awakened his heart.

"Don't get excited," Mack warned as he slipped out of his diving gear and passed it to Liam on the swim deck. He pulled himself out of the water, flicking it from his red hair.

Sean came on board, salt water dripping from every part of him. "A space

shuttle. I think we found a piece of a space shuttle. It was pretty cool, you know, except for the whole time suck of having to report it."

"Time suck?" Ryker questioned as he helped stow gear.

"We're talking at least a month, maybe two." Sean climbed aboard. "Meetings. Official meetings. Hosting NASA divers."

"Press," Malcolm added.

"This just became a thing," Sean finished as he stripped out of his wetsuit.

"We do not have time for *things*," Ryker admonished them.

"I hate dealing with NASA." Liam pulled out his phone. "I got this."

Ryker's hopes for a quick escape to his date tonight drowned. They could overlook reporting the find, but his friends were too honorable to do such a thing.

Liam cleared his throat to begin the phone conversation, "Hi. I'm out here diving on the coast, and I think I found part of a space shuttle. Yeah. My name is Titan Green. My HIN numbers are" he rattled off the information for the two black boots with chrome trim.

Sean threw his head back and laughed. Malcolm smacked Liam on the back for a job well done.

Ryker chuckled.

No doubt Liam would plant the sonar information into their computer, or send it from one of their email addresses.

Titan Marine Salvage would be wrapped in red tape for weeks. Unfortunately, they would get credit for the find, and their reputation would greatly improve. Not a good thing for Sean as his competition. Sean clapped Liam on the back. The man was a true friend and an ally to put Ryker and the secret mission over his company.

In a way, today was a victory in that they checked this site off the map and could move on to another one. However, he did not feel closer to his family's jewels than he was when he boarded the boat this morning.

He had to face the reality that he could be here for ten years or more. While that was not ideal, it was what he had agreed to—for family, king, and crown. At the time, he had not given one thought to himself.

Perhaps he should have because he wanted more for his life than the sparse and often lonely situation he had carved out in Diamond Cove. And, he was not certain that he could have a home, wife and *bambini*, not when he could not even tell Grace his real name. Not unless she wanted to marry a

ghost.

Sixteen

P ie-ology was the best pizza spot in North America. The outside was all red brick, and the inside was painted light cream. There was a definite 80s vibe going on with a flower trellis covered in fake flowers and draped in teal satin and tulle–like someone had held a wedding there, and they never took down the decorations. Michael Jackson, Guns N Roses, U2, and other classics crooned over the speakers.

Not only did it have a few bowling lanes and an arcade, the pizza dough was to die for. It was so good she'd considered ordering one without toppings. But then she thought of the slight kick in the marinara sauce and knew she had to have the whole package.

Grace watched Ryker cut a slice of pizza with a knife and fork. The whole process was something to behold. Such a strong man being so delicate with his dull knife. He wore a light blue button-up shirt rolled at the forearms. Man, she really liked those forearms. They had muscles and cords and all sorts of promises for what came after them. You know, if she was going to run her hands up his arms, she'd start on his forearms and then work her way up. The idea had her practically breaking out in a sweat.

She fanned her face. "I'm having flashbacks to etiquette school." She reached for the red plastic glass and took a sip of soda, letting the carbonation roll over her tongue.

Ryker's deep green eyes popped up to meet hers. "You went to a ladies' college."

She choked on her drink. "Heaven's no!" She dabbed her lips with a paper napkin so thin she could see through it. "Grandma Nancy hired a woman to give us all etiquette lessons." She rolled her eyes at the memories

of sipping tea with her pinkie out and making small talk with her sisters and then crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue when the teacher wasn't looking. "I feel bad for her now."

Ryker smiled as he brushed his hand over hers that was still holding her glass. "Now that you are an *educatrice*?"

The way he said *educatrice*, made it sound like a seductrice. "I am not an educator–I am a genealogist who teaches classes."

"Spaghetti–Spaghetto," he quipped.

She laughed at his twist on potato/po-tah-to. "They are not the same thing." She picked up her slice and took a bite. The sauce was warm, and the fresh basil was incredible. "Where did you go to school?"

He grabbed his cup and took a long drink as if he'd eaten something spicy. She checked to see if there were hot peppers on the pizza. Nope. All clear.

He coughed once. "I trained to be a barber thirty minutes north of here." He chuckled. "You should have seen my first haircut." He shook his head. "The mannequin had to be thrown out."

She grinned, though that wasn't the answer she was looking for, and he knew it. "You've come a long way. I can't walk three feet without someone stopping to tell me what a good barber you are."

He ducked his head in modesty. "I do not know about that." He leaned over the table and whispered, "Eighty-six percent of my customers wear glasses." He winked.

She pushed his arm and giggled. "Stop. You're doing great." He lifted an eyebrow. "You're great. I'm great. This pizza is great. All of Diamond Cove is great." She set her fork and lifted her hand. "When I am with you–I feel the same. The whole world is brighter, better," his eyes dipped to her lips, "tastier."

She swallowed heavily. He was the siren, calling out to her to throw caution to the wind, leap over the table, and land in his arms never to leave. Who needed fresh basil and mozzarella? She could live off of Ryker. And from the look he gave her, he wouldn't mind a nibble at her either.

His grip tightened as he brought her hand to his lips. She expected him to kiss her knuckles and braced herself for the feel of his breath over her hand, which would have the effect of throwing a propane tank into a campfire.

Instead, he turned her hand over and kissed the inside of her wrist. Her pulse kicked up to 3000 beats per minute, and she gasped. She wasn't ready,

not for that. Not to have him take the gesture from sweet to seductive.

She turned her hand over and captured his fingers, needing something to hold onto. He gripped hers right back. Her phone rang, and she jumped in surprise. Glancing down at the screen, she paused.

"Do you need to take that?" Ryker asked, even as his thumb ran over her fingers, sending goosebumps all the way to her heart.

"Um," she hedged. "Normally, I wouldn't, but this is my sister."

He squeezed and then let go of her hand. "Please." He motioned to her phone.

She scooted out of the booth. "I'll just be a minute." She hoped it would only take a minute. Even though she lived with Grandma at the moment, Elizabeth was her emergency contact. Mom's extended honeymoon had turned into a "we bought a flat in London" and she wasn't close enough to make decisions nor in the right time zone to be of help.

She hit the answer button just as she stepped out to the sidewalk. The air was warm and chased away the goosebumps created by the incredibly handsome man who ate pizza with a fork and knife.

"What are you doing tonight?" Elizabeth asked without saying hello. "Chad's driving up to visit, and I want to introduce you. Can you come?"

Grace paused. "Uh ... I'm sort of on a date." She rolled her eyes at herself.

"How can you sort of be on a date?" Elizabeth asked.

"There's no sort of. I am on a date."

Elizabeth started laughing. "I told you not to drink the water."

"This has nothing to do with water and everything to do with his Isoladian accent."

Elizabeth sucked in air through her teeth. "That's like your kryptonite."

"Right!" she agreed quickly. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched Ryker through the large front window as he scrolled on his phone. She hadn't seen it out once since he picked her up. When he needed to check the time, he looked at his watch. His expensive-looking, totally manly, leather banded watch. Darn it all if he wasn't too sexy for his own good. "Not only does he speak like a lion trying to talk me into his den, he has the manners of a gentleman and the body of Hercules."

"I'm canceling our sisterhood."

"What?! Why?"

"Because I've sent you dozens of pictures of Chad, and you haven't sent

me one of-"

"Ryker," she filled in.

"Ryker-hot name by the way."

Grace pulled the phone away and sent an image from the night she and Ryker walked the beach. "It should be there any second. He has a shirt on so don't be disappointed."

"You're hair!" Elizabeth shrieked. "Oh my gosh! I'm having so much hair envy right now it's eating me alive."

Grace laughed. Ryker glanced up as if he'd heard Elizabeth's shrieks through the glass, and their eyes met—fire and lightning passing between them. "Was there a reason you called?" she asked breathlessly, anxious to return to her date.

"Yes. I wanted you to come visit and maybe try on wedding dresses with me, but I realize that I'm going to come in second to this man. I'm not thrilled about it, but I totally get it. So go! Go frolic with your Hercules and call me with the tea tomorrow."

"Love you." She hung up and made her way back inside, wincing as she sat down.

Ryker caught the fleeting look and grabbed for her hand. "You are hurt?"

She flicked her free hand. "Not in the way you think." Shifting, she tested her muscles. For the most part, they were fine. It was just when sitting down that they screamed at her. "It's nothing."

"It cannot be nothing," he insisted. And because his voice was her kryptonite, she had to tell him.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment before she even started. "Sore muscles. I went to an old lady workout class, and it kicked my butt." She shifted. "Literally."

"What *old lady class*?" he tried to say old lady class with her same accent and failed miserably, making her laugh over the top of her embarrassment. Had he done that on purpose, looked silly so she would feel less ridiculous?

"We sat in chairs and used resistance bands and did all these moves for over an hour." She pantomimed pulling on the bands like they were barbells. "The instructor had us stand up and sit down at least 400 times and–I guess I'm a little out of shape."

"No," his eyes smoldered. "I do not think that your backside is out of shape."

"Ryker Rockefeller, have you been looking at my butt?" she asked,

aghast.

Though she was only teasing him, his ears turned pink. "A gentleman would never," he insisted, even as his lips twitched with a smile.

She shoved his shoulder. "Who said you were a gentleman?"

"No woman has tested my nobility in such exquisite ways, *la mia sirena*." He gently touched her cheek. She was officially goo for this man. Her knees didn't work. Her whole body leaned into his hand, and her mouth couldn't make a sound.

In an act of mercy, he removed his hand and asked, "Is everything okay with your family?"

She had to take a breath and fill up her lungs so her spine could gather itself and hold her up again. There. She might be able to make it through dinner without sliding under the table like someone had removed her bones.

"The family's great. Elizabeth is planning her wedding and wants sisterly support." She nibbled at her pizza.

"Hmm," he replied while keeping his eyes on his plate.

"Do you have any siblings?" she hedged. The moment she heard her own tone, she wished she'd asked with more confidence instead of acting like she was trying to sneak information out of him. They were on a date. Dates were for getting to know one another, and asking about family was a perfectly reasonable topic of conversation.

Except when it came to Ryker.

He lifted a shoulder. "I could."

"What does that mean?" She took a bigger bite, needing something to chew on.

"I mean, it is possible." He wiped his lips with his napkin and then carefully laid it back in his lap. "I am certain in your line of work, you find relationships that were previously unknown."

"Yes..." she led him on, hoping he would tell her more.

"So there is always the possibility of a sister," he blinked quickly, "or brother. I could have a brother, maybe." He drank the last of his soda. "Would you like more?" he stood quickly.

"Yes." She would like more information about his family and background.

"Si." He took her glass and then bent quickly to press a kiss to her cheek. *"I will miss you while I am over there and you are over here."* He went to the drink station to fill them both. She watched the muscles in his back flex and move as he filled their cups.

She sighed happily. He'd given her precious little about his past, but he was all in every moment they had together. For almost any woman, that would be enough. But for her? Well, time would tell if she could exist in the now with him or if she needed more. It was just who she was—a woman who lived for a different time.

And she couldn't change that—not even for love. She'd fought it for years because she loved Grandma so much. During that time of her life, she wasn't happy, not really. At least she'd learned from the experience.

The problem was, she didn't know what that meant for her and Ryker.

The answer was in the future–and Grace wasn't all that great when it came to tomorrows.

Seventeen

"A re you certain we will not be arrested?" Ryker asked, a spraypaint can in hand as he watched Grace make a large red swoop across the freshly painted white concrete. He wore a white apron over his shorts and polo shirt. Grace had a matching one over her faded and frayed jean shorts and distressed tee. Her long, tan legs looked amazing in those shorts and he had a hard time not stareing.

"I promise. This is totally legit." She consulted the laminated sheet in her hand and then made another, smaller red swoop a foot below the first one.

She used the back of her hand to wipe a loose piece of hair out of her face. She missed and so he stepped forward and tucked it behind her ear, never wanting to miss the opportunity to touch her.

The way Grace let him in, into her space, into her heart, and into her life, was a gift he did not take for granted. She leaned into his touch and fell into his kisses, and he was lost for this woman in every way.

They had dinner with Nancy twice this week, ate a picnic on the beach with four pesky flamingos, and met for smoothies for breakfast.

And it was not enough to satiate his need for this woman. Every part of him cried out when he saw her: Mine!

He wanted her all to himself. He wanted every smile. Every laugh. Every wrinkle that developed over years of togetherness. And most especially, every kiss throughout all of time. If he had a time machine, he would go back and snatch any kiss she had given another and hold it in his heart.

He *wanted* to commit to this woman. Which was a strange sensation for a man who believed no power was stronger than his loyalty to king and country. The desire was most definitely at odds with his current predicament.

He had not solved the problem of how to marry her without telling her his real identity. Yes, he knew that marriage was probably far down the road and that Grace was still in the early stages of their relationship—but he was a strategic planner by nature and a prince by training, and thinking three steps ahead was not an option but a necessity.

Ryker took out his phone and took her picture.

"What are you doing?" she giggled as she switched out paint from red to light blue.

"I want evidence for when the police arrive." He took another picture of her incredulous smile.

"Stop." She playfully slapped his arm. "We aren't going to be arrested." She paused and then lifted a shoulder. "Besides, a first offense is a two-hundred dollar fine-totally worth it."

His mouth fell open. "No. No offense!"

Laughing, she leaned into his side and lifted up to press a kiss just under his jaw. He gulped. "I'm teasing. Come on–we're helping Diamond Cove."

He turned, their lips almost touching. "By defacing public property?" His hand tightened around her, bringing her closer.

"By creating together."

"*La mia sirena*, if you want to create something, we could have made gelato."

She giggled as he trailed kisses from her ear to her collarbone, where she was ticklish. She lightly shoved him. "Later." She panted between bouts of laughing. "We'll gelato later."

He paused. "I have not heard *gelato* used in such a way. Does it mean something besides dessert?"

She sauntered out of his hold and glanced over her shoulder at him, her lashes lowered. "I think it can mean both."

He did not hold back his growl as he surged forward, grabbed her around the middle, and pulled her back flush with his stomach. "You tease me. But I will collect."

"I'm counting on it, *Bello*." She used the nickname the grandmothers at The Palms used for him.

He tickled her side, and she skirted away. He let her go, this time. He would very much like to kiss her until they were both exhausted, but to do such a thing without a word of commitment between them was not done. If he ever did see his sisters again, he would like to do so knowing he was a

man who had lived in such a way that they would be proud to call him their brother.

"Explain to me how to do this?" He pulled his laminated card from the apron pocket and then looked at the white wall.

She moved them to a sign where the master plan was printed and placed her card on the corresponding square. "This is the mural they want here. Instead of hiring someone to paint it, they have locals check out cards." She tapped his. "And come and paint their section. For example, I'll paint the front half of the flamingo."

"And I will paint the backside." He lifted one eyebrow. "Did you do that on purpose?"

Her eyes widened in false innocence. "It's not like you have a thing for backsides." She hurried away before he could tickle her again. When she turned around to see if he was watching her backside, he pointed to the only cloud in the sky. "Maybe we will have shade, *si*?"

She quirked a grin and went back to spraying the wall. His card had numbered instructions on the back. "What happens if it is horrible?"

"They'll paint it white and let someone else try."

"No worries then?"

"None." She smiled. "Just living in the moment."

He nodded. "That I can do with great success."

"What about the other places you've lived? Did you leave a mark there?" She kept her face on her work.

Ryker hated to brush her off. He wanted to tell her every bit of his history, including Christmas morning surprises and New Year's resolutions he did not keep. "I did not think of it then," he replied. Which was the truth, though not what she wanted.

She smiled, but it was watery, and he was not happy that he brought a cloud over her sunshine.

He sprayed blue and then white to make the ocean. "This is nice, *si*? Working side-by-side on a project."

"Si."

A deeper thought settled inside of him and he glanced at Grace, wondering if he should share it.

"What?" she asked through her smile. She could not seem to look at him without smiling, and it made his heart light, light enough to lift like a balloon–one that she held the string. "I like leaving a mark here." He stepped back, checked the card, and then sprayed two black lines for the flamingo's legs. "It feels permanent and such a thing as a person does to their homeland."

She cocked her head. "I hadn't thought of it that way. But you're right. And this is concrete, so it will be here for quite some time. Even if we're horrible and they paint over it, it's still here."

"Is this a place you would want to stay?" he ventured, hoping she did not understand how much her answer meant to him. He, the man who almost died, faked his own death, won over a group of Navy SEALs, and thwarted an assassin, was breakable. For her. Only for Grace.

She continued to work, focusing even more on the mural now that she was into the details. "I really like it here. For me, it's not about finding a home as much as a home base. I'll always travel."

He nodded. That was to be expected. "I would like to officially put Diamond Cove on your list for home bases."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "You're too late. I already wrote it there."

He put an arm around her and stepped closer, wanting to feel her body melt into his. She did not disappoint. "When? When did you write this down?"

Her eyes sparkled. "The night we found the moonstone."

"Bene." Good. He leaned closer, whispering in her ear. *"How do we cross off the other options?"*

Her breath hitched, and he reveled in knowing he had this effect on her. "Too late. I already did that, too."

"When?" he breathed the word.

"The first time you kissed me."

"That was the same night." He pulled back to look into her luscious blue eyes.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. "I was a goner for you, Ryker." She ran her hand up his forearm, his arm, his shoulder, and then tickled her fingers at the base of his neck. "Still am."

He touched his forehead to hers. "You are brave, *la mia sirena*. Brave with your heart and brave with your words. *Amarti é un dono*." *To love you is a gift*.

She gasped. "You . . . you love me?"

He kissed her softly. "I love you with all of my heart."

"Ryker," She wrapped her arms tight and kissed him. He turned her and pressed her up against the wall, slowing down the kiss and taking his time to explore her lips, her neck, and her jaw. He let his promises, his commitments, every one he wanted to make now and all the ones he knew would come, flow from him and into her. She tasted like mint and kissed as if she could not help herself.

When they were both quite spent and liquid, he kissed her cheek one more time. She grinned wickedly.

"What?" he asked with suspicion.

"I didn't get to say it back, and I'm pretty sure that when I do, we're going to do that again." She kissed his neck. "And I'm not upset about it."

"Do what again?" He tucked her hair behind her ear. "Make gelato?"

Giggling, she swatted at him and then took both his cheeks in her hands and pulled him close. Her lips brushed her as she spoke the words he had longed to hear. "*Ti amo*, Ryker Rockefeller."

He moaned with pleasure as the words seeped into every lonely nook and cranny in his soul. They were the balm of healing and hope he did not know he needed. He grabbed her thighs and lifted her up, pinning her against the wall once again, and then kissed her with every bit of passion that dwelled in his Isolad\$ heart.

Grace was it for him. No other woman would ever compare nor be able to find a place in his life or heart because she was in it, through it, and around it. She was everything. With her, he could finally let go of the past and see a future that he was excited about in Diamond Cove.

Zighteen

G race hurried up the sidewalk to the main building at The Palms. Today was a very big day, and she was too excited to walk at a normal speed. Elizabeth was in town, visiting Chad, and they'd come for lunch with her and Grandma. Not only was she going to officially meet her future brother-in-law, she was going to wrap her sister in her arms and hold her so, so tight.

She'd spent the morning on a conference call with Celsest, going through each of the images she'd taken of the church register. They were crisp and clear. She wasn't lying when she'd said it was her best work. The ink on the image was as real as if she were leaning over it.

The fact that the project had reached this stage left Grace reeling. Where had the time gone? It seemed like only yesterday she'd pulled into Diamond Cove in that horrible van with—what was his name? She giggled at her mental snub. Maybe it wasn't nice, but she was so grateful she hadn't settled for an imitation of a man when a real one was waiting to be discovered.

Discovery was the best.

Celeste was losing her interest in staying in the small town—she and Diego disagreed over her staying in San Juan or him following her around the globe. He didn't want to leave his little flock of believers, and she didn't want to stay forever.

"Sometimes your life's calling can get in the way of your love life," Celeste sniffed. "I thought he'd want to be a traveling preacher. I mean, it's not my thing, but we could do it, ya know? This totally sucks."

Grace agreed wholeheartedly. She didn't even want to think about what it would be like to leave Diamond Cove. Eventually, she would have to. And, if she was going to stay, she'd need to find a place. But things with Ryker were going well. They were in this bubble of time and she didn't want to burst it by changing things up.

Grandma didn't mind the company. They'd gone shopping when Winnie told them Leather & Lace put out a whole new selection of dresses and added a jean wall. Not that Grandma bought anything—nor had she worn the one dress she did buy—but she had a ton of fun picking things out for Grace and planning dates for her and Ryker.

That's how Grace came up with the spray painting idea. Actually, it was Walt who told Grandma about the painting project on the old cement wall on the way into town. He knew all sorts of hidden places and activities in Diamond Cove and was a treasure trove of ideas.

T hey'd had dinner together last night at a French restaurant on the pier. The lobster rolls were absolutely delicious, and she'd relished every single bite. They'd taken a box of eclairs, and a bag of shrimp, o the beach. They fed the shrimp to the Fab Four so they'd leave them in peace to eat dessert and then fed each other eclairs between kisses.

Her man tasted like chocolate and cream and said all the right things in his deep accent that made her want to lie down in the sand and make a sand angel. She was so incredibly happy.

As long as she was with Ryker and stayed in the moment, she was happier than she'd ever been in her life. There was a huge lesson there, right? Like, thirty-seven YouTube pep talks told her to keep at it and not let go of the here and now.

But, when they were together, and she wasn't in an old lady workout class that was still kicking her butt (thank you!) or teaching a genealogy class (Betty had broken right through that dead end last week), doubts crept in like flamingos at a picnic.

Ryker dropped hints to his past. She'd pick them up and put them in her pocket, and pull them out for observation later. He'd wanted to go to La Bella Bella for dinner last night, claiming their marinara sauce was the closest thing to authentic IS\$ that he'd found in Diamond Cove.

She'd played it cool, not letting him know that he'd strayed from the "I'm Italian" story by admitting such a fact. Sure, he could have visited the country and tasted their marinara sauce, but the *way* he said it was the same way Grandma said, "My lemon-scented cleaner is the best on the market." They

spoke with ownership.

There was more to his life story than he let on. While she could respect his need for space and give him time to learn that he could trust her, she filed away the things she gathered about him that he didn't know he told her.

The list was small—for now. She'd continue to pile them up until she had a clear enough picture to ask him for specifics.

Things will change between you, a voice whispered in the back of her head.

She shoved the warning away. Normally, she heeded that voice and allowed it to guide her in her life. It was a wise voice. One that had always served her well. But she wasn't ready to let go of what they had just yet, so she filed the warning away too.

If she kept this up, she'd be stuffed with files, not have any answers, and be frustrated with herself.

They don't have to, she told her inner voice.

It wasn't like Ryker had a calling to cut hair in Diamond Cove, he could do that anywhere. With some work, she talked herself out of identifying too deeply with Celest's situation before she broke into a panic. *Besides*, she continued her internal soothing conversation, *we're in love*. *Love is the strongest force on the planet*.

She pulled open the large front door, expecting to see Sweetie sunning herself in the fountain with Bear lounging nearby. Instead of the serene scene, there was a room full of men and women talking over one another.

"I'm just not going to go," Betty said loudly.

"If you don't go, I'm not going," added a gentleman Grace had yet to meet who stuck close to Betty like she was his and he was hers, and they were not to part.

"Please!" Samantha waved her arms. "If you'll all calm down, we'll get this taken care of."

"How?" demanded a woman who was almost six feet tall and thin. She towered over the other ladies, her handbag swinging dangerously close to their foreheads. "Hank is puking his guts out by the dumpster! Who will take us to the park today? Hank knows right where to pick us up and times it so we don't have to stand around waiting like all the other shuttle people." Her face had grown red with the effort of yelling over the rest of the chatting group.

Between her tirade and the red, white, and black shirts decorated with

mice and ducks, it was obvious that this group was headed out to the local amusement park for a day of revelry.

"This didn't happen before you started working here, Samantha!" the woman continued.

Betty gasped at her audacity. "Samantha isn't at fault. You leave her alone, Deloris." She stepped forward, her chin out.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" Deloris charged back.

"The truth is we never got to go to the parks before Samantha came to work here," Betty countered.

"Ha! I'm right!" She poked Betty in the arm.

Samantha moved to step between them. "Ladies, we can argue all day long or we can look for a solution."

"Nobody asked you," griped Deloris in such a way that said she wasn't happy that Samantha made sense.

Betty bared her dentures, looking ready to spit them at the taller woman.

All of this happened so fast, and was so shocking because every interaction she had with The Palms' residents was positive, that Grace was taken completely off guard. She glanced around for a way she could help the group but came up as empty as an Egyptian tomb.

"Le signore," ladies cooed a deep, accented voice that was all caramel and dark chocolate. Grace's, and everyone else's, eyes snapped in Ryker's direction. He strode forward, commanding attention and orderliness and her butterflies to completely freak out. My gosh, the man is stunning when he takes control of a room. Grace pulled her dress away from her body, feeling warm in all the places.

His neatly trimmed beard outlined his jaw to perfection. Grace crossed her fingers. She'd been hoping for an opportunity to run her hands over that jawline and lose herself in his kiss all morning long.

Ryker was a gentleman and didn't press his advantage, which gave her the freedom to love on him like a wild cat. Not that she'd hand over the keys to the kingdom or anything, but a woman wanted what she wanted, and Grace wanted to kiss Ryker until she passed out from exhaustion.

With as much pressure as she felt building inside of her, she might very well drag him into an empty classroom or broom closet. She had a feeling he could take it though. He fully admitted he wasn't like other men. In fact, she was counting on it.

Ryker moved Samantha out from between the two women and took each

of their hands. "You are both too beautiful to be this upset. Tell me what is wrong."

The anger that fueled the women so deeply only seconds before evaporated right before Grace's eyes. They simpered at Ryker. "Well," said Deloris, "Hank, our driver, is indisposed at the moment. We simply cannot make it to the parks without him." She'd suddenly developed a thick southern belle accent and a twitch that might have been her attempt to bat her eyelashes.

"We've never missed a park day before," Betty added. "I think we're thrown off and a bit upset by it all, Bello." She fanned her hand over her chest.

Behind Ryker, Samantha harrumphed and folded her arms over the bodice of her red dress with white polka dots. She spotted Grace and wove through the crowd to stand beside her. "That man could charm a toad into a stockpot," she chuckled in admiration..

"The accent helps. But–you're not a Ryker fan?" Grace asked in shock. How could she not be?

"He's annoyingly perfect," she replied. "And I've been trying to calm them down for fifteen minutes, so I'm a little on edge." She shook out her arms.

"Oh no, *i miei amici,*" *my friends*, Ryker continued, "You must not allow yourselves to become upset by this. We will find a driver, *si*?"

They sighed happily at him—as if he'd offered to rub their feet and feed them chocolates. Both of which had happened to Grace. The man could charm her into a stockpot any day.

Samantha huffed and hurried to assure them all. "I've already called a service."

"Si! Samantha is prepared, *si*?" He didn't wait for a response. "You will board the bus and wait for him. Perhaps he will be handsome and single with abs for days, *si*?" He winked making half the room twitter. Amidst the giggles, the crowd shifted and then streamed out the doors to the waiting shuttle.

Ryker approached them, a cocky smile on his face. "Samantha, what would you do without me here?"

Samantha blew out a raspberry. "I'd stare at a lot of hairy men."

Ryker wagged his finger at her. "If I had a little sister, I'd want her to be as spirited as you."

"Samantha?!" Betty called from the door. "You're replacement driver brought a chicken. She says it's tame and calls it Kyle."

Samantha hurried off without saying goodbye. Now that the room had cleared—except for Missy, the receptionist who was on the phone—it was much quieter. Ryker sidled up next to her and hooked their pinkies together. "You came to see me, *si*?"

"No." She turned to face him, their bodies so close she could smell his citrus aftershave. "I'm having lunch with Grandma, Elizabeth, and Chad." In a moment of clarity and excitement she asked, "Do you want to join us?" She held her breath.

It was one thing for him to know Grandma Nancy, she lived here, but introducing him to her sister from out of town and her sister's fiancé was a big step. One she hadn't known she was ready to take with Ryker until that very moment. If he refused, she'd know where they stood in the relationship department. I love yous, and late-night kisses were allowed–family was a whole other level.

"I would love to." He leaned down and pressed his cheek to hers, "But I would love to be alone with you more, *la mia sirena*."

"Allettante," tempting, she replied. Boy, was it ever. Images of broom closet kisses filled her mind, and she had to step back to take a deep breath. He maintained his hold on her hand as they went to the dining room.

Grace tried to calm her frantic heart. They were doing this. They were taking the next step in their relationship. It was . . . big. Bigger than she'd thought when the words flew out of her mouth. Connecting her family and Ryker together was cosmic big. Big picture big. Life AND death big.

Grandma, Elizabeth, and Chad were at a table by the far wall. Don breezed by carrying two trays. His wife, Amelia, was in the last stages of Alzheimer's, and bringing her to the dining room had become too taxing on her body; Grandma had told her about it last night. He'd taken to picking up their meals and feeding her at home. Their story was a true love story for the ages. Grandma had gone over to eat with them yesterday, and Rosa was going today. Grandma's friends treated Amelia as if she was part of their group and a dear friend.

She and Ryker threaded through the tables. "Good to see you two," said Harry. Virginia waved, her mouth full.

They replied and continued on. Cocoa stopped them with the dessert tray. "Don't forget to try the walnut cake. It's my latest concoction, and I think you'll like it."

"Thanks." Grace grinned as she accepted a plate with a piece of cake. Ryker glanced over his shoulder at her. She lifted the plate. "Normally, I'd save dessert for last, but I may have to make an exception for this."

The greetings continued as they walked. Grace was surprised at how many faces and names were familiar. She taught three genealogy classes every week, each one more popular than the last. If this trend continued, she'd have to open up another section. Which wouldn't bother her in the least. Teaching the residents was a far cry from teaching teenagers! They were eager to learn, delighted in every family connection made, and worked on their own time to make progress. Not to mention, they were grateful and complimentary. She always left the class feeling appreciated.

The back door flew open, and Mack breezed in. She hadn't seen him since that fateful day in the barbershop. Ryker often texted his friends, and it didn't go unnoticed that he hadn't offered to double date with them. When she asked, he laughed and said that they didn't date. They just worked. She let it slide, because she was living in the now-bubble. But it was one of the things that popped up when she had three seconds to herself.

Mack stepped in front of Ryker, who'd been talking to a gentleman who had stopped him to ask about finding a new scalp lotion and didn't see him come in.

Grace smiled at Mack. "Hey, it's go-."

"I need a haircut, bro," Mack said as he landed a large hand on Ryker's shoulder. His brogue had thickened, and his words were barely discernible to the people sitting around them. He seemed to have widened too—his shoulders huge and his chest puffed out. He didn't look at Ryker, but scanned the dining room going this way and then that way.

"Now?" Grace asked, surprised by his bluntness. "We were just sitting down to lunch. You're welcome to—"

"No, thanks, wee hen," he cut her off–again. This time, he winked.

She blinked in surprise. His tone was kind, friendly even. And he used a nickname—so that meant he liked her. Right?

Mack turned abruptly and walked out.

Maybe not?

Ryker's hand slipped from hers as he followed. She stared in shock as they went out the back door, not once looking back.

Grace's mouth hung open. "Did he just steal my date?" she asked no one

in particular. "For a haircut?" That rankled.

She shook off the shock and looked around to see if anyone else noticed the strange occurrence. Everyone ate and talked as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Maybe in their world, it hadn't, but she'd never had her date yanked away by his friends for an emergency haircut. What was that about? Mack's hair was fine. He hadn't looked unkempt. His hair looked like he'd spent an hour styling it that morning.

Making her way to the table, she put on a smile to greet her sister's fiancé for the first time.

Elizabeth jumped up and hugged her close. Her hair was up in a twist with fresh highlights. No doubt she'd wanted some of the sunshine from Diamond Cove with her at all times. The distance between her and Chad wasn't that far, but it was hard on her.

Grace held on tight, relishing the feeling of being loved and accepted just as she was and everything she'd ever been before. Elizabeth was only an inch shorter than her but she wore heels so Grace looked like the shorter of the two of them. She wore a pair of navy slacks and a crisp white shirt with enough starch to make Grandma proud.

Chad was right behind Elizabeth with his greetings. His honey-blonde hair was styled, not unlike a Ken doll, and he wore light blue golf shorts and a polo shirt. No crease on the arm–Grandma must not have gotten to him yet.

He hugged her, though not as tightly. "So good to see you without a Zoom logo over your head."

She laughed at his joke even as half her brain was still caught in Ryker's quick disappearance.

"How was Mexico?" he asked as they took their seats.

She set the dessert plate in front of her, though she suddenly didn't feel like eating. It took her a second to dial into Mexico. It felt like a different life. "Fruitful," she replied as she looked up from her plate and tried to engage herself in the conversation. She was here for Elizabeth, not for herself.

But she felt . . . abandoned.

Grandma Nancy glared at the back door where Ryker had disappeared. Did she see him run out too?

Maybe Grace had moved too fast by inviting him to meet her sister. After all, Elizabeth and Chad had been dating and engaged for almost a year and this was her first time seeing him in the flesh. He was taller than she thought he'd be. "Will Ryker be joining us?" asked Grandma as she placed her linen napkin in her lap.

Grace's ears burned with embarrassment. "No. He . . . apparently . . . had something more important to do." And didn't even glance my way before he left. She'd never seen someone run so fast. It was like he couldn't wait to get away from her.

Grandma glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, obviously catching the crisp tone of Grace's voice. She drew in a breath, not wanting to let Ryker's rude—didn't even say goodbye—departure ruin a happy family lunch.

They would talk about it. That's what people did, they talked things through.

Of course, people who did that wanted the relationship to work. Perhaps he didn't. Maybe he'd seen where this was going and decided he wanted no part of it.

Maybe he didn't want *her*.

Usually, she was the one running away from a relationship. Maybe that's why she was having a come apart. She recognized the signs.

However, she didn't enjoy being on the other side of things.

She gulped back the lump in her throat. She was overreacting. Feeling insecure when there was no reason to doubt him or them, no proof that this was anything other than a hair emergency.

She rolled her eyes at herself. A *hair* emergency?

It was possible a family lunch freaked him out. Why had she dropped this on him when she knew he had family issues?

Swallowing, she lifted her chin and tuned in to Elizabeth's explanation of the tests they'd passed on her germ bomb invention. Jumping to conclusions never helped a situation.

She'd have to wait to see what he had to say. There had to be an explanation. A good one.

Mineteen \sim

R yker wanted to fight against Mack and his insistent removal from The Palm's dining room and his lunch with Grace and her family, but he knew better than to try.

Not because Mack was rather large and a Scottish-born force of nature– Braveheart had nothing on him–but because Mack would not have taken such quick action in public if the situation didn't call for it.

Which meant Ryker was in real danger, and their hurried departure out the back door of the dining room and current skirting of the pool area was to save his life.

As a result of the danger that hunted him, everyone around him was in a kill zone and he would not stand next to Grace, holding her hand and make her a target. The very thought that his actions could do such a thing made him sick. If he were at home, he'd throw himself in the dungeon for being so careless. The months of anonymity and lack of threats had lulled him into a false sense of safety. A mistake he would not make again.

Though it almost killed him to do so, he had left in such a way that anyone watching would think she meant nothing to him.

He glanced over the pool area where grandparents played with children, and the minigolf course where preteens worked on their putting skills so they could one day join the adults on the larger golf course. He slid on his sunglasses.

"Who?" he asked Mack, wanting to know where the danger was coming from so he could watch out for it.

"Bounty hunter," Mack spit out the job title as if it were as attractive as pooper scooper at the Animal Kingdom. "Sean's up top."

Ryker squelched the impulse to glance at the roof of The Palm's main building where Sean covered their escape. Grayson and his sniper expertise would have been better–but he, Wolfe, and Knox were still on special assignment.

They made their way to the front of the building and stayed close to the dumpster and then the hedges.

"Killing someone in public will expose all of us," Ryker cautioned even though he knew some instances were unavoidable.

"We thought of that," said Malcom as they cut across the grounds. Mack had a destination in mind and Ryker was only a half-step behind him moving at a casual stroll. First rule of evading capture, don't draw attention. "But you dying a second time would be a much bigger problem."

"Concordato." Agreed.

"Liam is in the water." He nodded toward the large pond ahead of them. The residents used it for paddleboarding and other recreational activities. It would not take much for one of the SEALs to submerge. Liam and Sean always had dive equipment in their vehicles, a convenience allowed by owning the salvage company.

Ryker scanned the area as they approached the one and only bridge over the pond to the library. There! In the reeds, a black barrel was barely discernible. Even now, Ryker couldn't be sure if it was Liam's gun or a long stick.

The library was not one of their strongholds, nor was it an escape plan they had laid out and practiced when they first came to Diamond Cove. Each man knew their part in every scenario. Aaron had even played the attacker, which had brought a new challenge to the game—Aaron would make a fine assassin himself. "Why are we in the open?"

"Bait."

Ryker drew in a quick breath. "This is not how it is done. I am not *chum*," he threw out the term for shark bait that he had learned on a fishing excursion with the team when he first arrived in Diamond Cove. It was touted as a team-building experience, but he suspected it was an initiation of sorts. One he had passed with flying colors thanks to his military training.

"Keep walking; go straight to the library."

Ryker cursed in Italian.

Mack veered off with a friendly wave. To the casual observer, they looked like two friends going about their days.

Isola de la Famiglia guards would never leave him alone, nor would they parade him across a bridge without cover.

He wasn't a coward—he was a prince. He was also a graduate of *allenamento di base* and earned the title of *marina speciale* in the Isola de la Famiglia military ranks. He trained regularly with the SEALs he was assigned and trusted them. Though sometimes he struggled with their cowboy ways.

He felt eyes on him, though he couldn't be sure if they were friend or foe. As he crossed the bridge, he caught sight of the three small alligators who called the pond home, floating near the stick/gun barrel he'd seen earlier.

Liam was there.

That man was like catnip to animals, birds, and reptiles. They loved him on sigh,t though no one could figure out what special powers Liam possessed to make it happen. Half the time he didn't notice the bird on his shoulder or the dog sitting on his foot or the lizard climbing up his leg.

Ryker reached the middle of the bridge and continued without hesitation. Every part of him screamed that this was a bad idea. He was too exposed, too vulnerable out here. No cover. No place to run. *Niente*!

Where was everyone? The place was so quiet. Oh. Lunch. Chef Bruno's cuisine was not to be missed.

He advanced—expecting a shot to ring out. Or, if the bounty hunter was any good, he wouldn't hear a thing at all. The foreboding in his gut was in deep contrast to the bright summer sunshine and cheerful insect noises.

The doors to the library came into view. His legs cramped with the need to run to them, to find safety in the shadows there.

The award-winning Palm's Library was at one time in history, an observatory. The glass dome on top allowed for enough light in the day to browse the shelves or have a wonderful conversation with the librarian.

Kate had a keen mind and quick wit and was knowledgeable on many subjects. She was also dating a rock star, Axel Clayton, which was funny to him because they were opposites in many ways. She assured him that opposites attract was a trope in romance novels for a reason.

He tended to befriend women. Kate. Samantha. Cocoa. Grant said it was because he didn't have game. It wasn't that—he missed his sisters. If he survived this bounty hunter, he may actually see them again. One day.

More importantly, he'd see Grace again. A sudden desire to live so he could be her prince, her man, the love of her life surged through his veins like

fire, consuming his thoughts. No one would care for her the way he could the way he vowed to care for her from this moment on. He would see her happy every single day until the day he perished!

For Grace, he *would* live. Because Grace didn't value him for what he could do for his country, she didn't care about his title nor wealth—or lack thereof at the moment. No, she cared about the man he was when the moonlight rippled across the waters. That was a woman worth living for.

He made it to the doors and reached for the handle.

The soft scrape of a shoe sounded like cannon fire to his hyper-alert ears and he instinctively ducked. The arm that had aimed for his head whooshed through the air.

Fueled by his new purpose in life, Ryker stepped into the attacker's space and shoved him into the granite pillar with a grunt at the same time punching right below his sternum. He felt the man's ribs bend and heard him gasp. A tiny yellow puff ball blurred through Ryker's vision and stuck in the man's skin.

The bounty hunter slumped, and Ryker backed away, allowing him to slide to the ground in a heap. He shook out his hand, not because it hurt to punch the guy, but because he had this strange sense of not feeling his limbs a side effect from a surreal experience of fighting for your life.

Sean dropped out of the palm tree wearing a tan tee shirt and tan pants. He ran forward, the dart gun he kept under his car seat pointed at the suspect. He grabbed his phone from his back pocket. "I got him."

Ryker turned incredulously. "You got him?" he mimicked the American accent, adding sarcasm.

"Yeah, I got him." Sean pushed the man onto his side, revealing a dart in his left shoulder. He reached down and pulled it out, clipping it to his belt where three other darts resided.

Ryker harrumphed. "You waited long enough."

Liam surged from the water in full submersible combat gear, including a rebreather. The three baby alligators followed him on shore and stared up at him. He gave Ryker and Sean a thumbs up and then began stripping out of his gear. He was done in less than thirty seconds and looked like any other guy wearing a swimsuit and tank top and carrying a beach bag. He stopped to motion for the alligators to return to the water, which they did, before beginning his patrol around the island at a tourist's pace.

Sean turned back to their attacker.

"Closing in to secure your position," Mack's voice came through the phone. They turned to see him cross the bridge.

"Is Kate safe?" Ryker asked, feeling protective of the rock n' roll bookworm.

"She's oblivious. I knocked over half a shelf of books before coming to get you. She thought it was Chester, the ghost, and was scolding him when I slipped out."

Sean struggled to check his grin. "You tangled with Chester? Man, I thought you hated ghosts."

Mack shuddered. "I do." He brushed off both his shoulders and whispered something in Gaelic. "That should keep him off my tail until we're out of here." He frowned at the bounty hunter. "How long until he wakes up, Sean?"

Sean shrugged. "I didn't give him that much juice. He'll be awake before we're at base."

"Bien. I want to know how he found me. Why did he come after me?" Ryker looked back and forth between the SEALs. "Diamond Cove must be safe." If not, they'd need to relocate and that would mean leaving Grace. That was no longer an option for him.

"Too bad we can't use Sweetie to frighten him into confessing," Mack joked.

"Who says we cannot?" Ryker asked. He would do anything to get the answers they needed.

The three men glanced at one another, waiting for one of them to protest. When none of them did—after all, this guy would have killed Ryker and taken home a paycheck—Mack spoke into his phone. "Liam, change of plans. We're headed to Aaron's alligator rescue . . ." He began giving instructions.

Ryker chuckled in admiration. "This is not how it is done, buckaroo."

Sean laughed. "No one says buckaroo." He smacked Ryker on the shoulder. "Nice take-down by the way."

Ryker beamed. "It was. *Grazie*. I should get back to lunch. I have some apologizing to do to a beautiful woman."

Mack's hand shot out to stop him. "Sorry, Romeo. We can't let you go just yet. We don't know if this guy is a lone ranger or the head of a pack."

Ryker sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

He stared longingly across the bridge. "I was rude." He thought of the

hopeful way she'd invited him to meet her sister and her sister's fiancé. Meeting the family was important and a step forward for them.

And he'd walked out without saying goodbye in an effort to save her life but it was not like he could tell her that. If he were advising his sisters, he would tell them that they should expect to be treated with respect and honor and should dump this sorry *borsa di ossa*.

He pulled out his phone to send Grace a text and promised to see her soon.

Sean snatched it out of his hands. "Sorry. Until we know how he found you, it's radio silence and bodyguard duty."

Ryker's heart sank. It must have shown on his face because Sean added, "We're not thrilled about it either."

"Let's roll," Mack said into his phone, starting a flurry of action as the team efficiently extracted the bounty hunter from the site.

Ryker prayed for inspiration. His relationship with Grace was new and he sensed she had reservations about him. She was too perceptive not to notice the way he danced around questions. So far, she had–what did his friends say?--given him a pass. But after today, she would want answers.

Answers he could not give.

He would need to ask her to forgive him and give an explanation though he would have to make it up because he could not tell her he was attacked by a bounty hunter.

And yet, when faced with death, she'd been his hope.

Perhaps he was a Romeo—a man who fell in love quickly and completely.

If he was not careful, he would also be like Romeo and his family situation would lead to tragedy for both of them.

He would need to proceed with caution and yet be bold. Grace deserved a man who knew his heart and acted fearlessly in his efforts to woo her.

He was and would be that man no matter what his SEAL bodyguards said about it.

Twenty

"W hat in the world?"

Grace's head came up at the aghast note in Grandma's voice, and she grimaced. In her efforts to forget about Ryker, she'd thrown herself into work like a good Matthews would. Post-it notes covered the wall next to her, color-coded by generation. Papers covered the table, and her laptop was open with no less than seventeen tabs. Colored pens and pencils littered the area. Not even the chair next to her escaped as it had three books with multicolored tabs stacked upon two plain paper spiral notebooks and lots of loose sheets.

"Sorry about the mess, Grandma. I'm in the middle of researching and, I, well, I tend to think big." She tossed her pen on the table and leaned back in her seat. A string from her cutoff shorts tickled her leg, and she yanked it off, throwing it in the nearby trash.

Grandma sat in the one free chair and sifted through the papers. "It's gibberish."

Grace wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Grandma had taken to reading pedigree charts as easily as income sheets. They made sense to her. This line went to that person and those lines were their parents. Order. Just like a balance sheet, there was a lot of work that went into filling out those lines.

"It's clues. This one," she pointed at the sheet Grandma held, "is the mother and father, with the church they were married in and the date. I have their marriage record open in this tab." She pointed to her laptop screen.

"Thomas and Margaret," Grandma read. "Who are these people?"

Grace allowed herself a quiet victory in the fact that Grandma referred to

them as people and not numbers or pieces of paper. It was a small step that represented a rather large change in her thinking. "They're a client's ancestors. These are their children: Richard, Henry, Thomas, Mary, and Margaret." She motioned to another paper.

"The mothers named their daughters after themselves?"

Grace nodded. "It was quite common during that time, though it's fallen out of style."

Grandma took a moment to look things over again. "What's the problem? Why do you look upset?"

"There's another child in the family; I can't find a record of her."

Grandma frowned. "Then how do you know there is one?"

Grace bit her lower lip. What she was about to share would take a giant leap in thinking patterns for Grandma to accept. Sometimes, she had more than intuition to go off of, though she rarely told anyone about it. She held her breath as she spoke, "She keeps telling me not to forget her."

Grandma went still. "Are you telling me there's a ghost in this room?" She turned slightly and looked over her shoulder and then under the table. "Please don't tell Rosa. I'll never get her to come visit if she thinks ghosts come here."

"There's not a ghost." The only ghosting happening in her life was Ryker. She'd tried to call him earlier, and after one ring, his voicemail came on. Talk about a rejection! It stung so strongly that she'd contemplated running away from Diamond Cove. But she wasn't ready to leave Grandma just yet, and not having a place to run to would make her a coward.

Grace paused and then said, "Not a ghost like you're thinking—not like Chester in the library." She'd heard about Chester in one of her classes this week. Rosa crossed herself three times while relaying all she knew about the supposed ghost who played pranks on the librarian, moved things around, and blew out candles. Grace was unconcerned about Chester but very concerned that someone had taken candles into a library full of dry books! Who does that?

"Tell me," Grandma leaned forward.

Grace searched her face and found sincerity. She moved slowly into the explanation. "Most of the archived records online aren't gathered as families. They're entered as individuals based on an event. For example, when a child is born, the archivist enters the child and then enters both parents. If there's more than one child in the family, the parents are entered every time. So they

are these little two-to-three people groups of records. My brain picks up on the patterns of names and dates in the records—a name kind of pops out at me, and I see it over and over again. It's obvious that they're the same parents." She paused to see if Grandma followed her explanation.

Grandma nodded for her to continue.

"Anyway, I organize them into families, consolidate records, and update the database. Like this." She clicked on a tab to show the pedigree chart she'd spent the morning compiling. "It helps other researchers and," she paused, "I don't know. I feel like the families want to be together, and they're happy when I do this." Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She'd never told another soul the reason she spent time creating families.

Grandma tipped her head. "What did you mean the little girl talked to you?"

"Umm," she rubbed her lips together. "I can feel her." There was no cold brush over her skin nor shiver up her spine. The experience was warm and kind, like a tap on the arm from a shy child. Her feelings were never dark or sinister—they were beautiful and full of light. She continued, "She's a little thing with a little voice. I'm guessing she died very young. She asked me not to forget her in the family chart. I wouldn't, but I can't seem to find her."

Grandma's chin dropped, and she studied the papers. "There has to be a clue in here."

"You believe me?" Grace blurted. Of all the people in her life, Grandma Nancy was the most practical. Things like ghosts and spirits and hearing voices didn't have a place in her life of cleaning products, business meetings, and organizational charts.

Grandma smiled softly. "We all have gifts. Yours is . . . a bit . . . different, but it has a purpose. Let's see if I can help you find this little girl."

Grace blinked back the tears. Impulsively, she threw her arms around Grandma's neck and hugged her. "I want to know what you did with my grandma, you alien."

Grandma laughed and hugged her back. "Would it make you feel better if I told you to clean this up and wipe the table down with lemon cleaner?"

"In a way." Grace sat back in her chair, amazed by the changes in her grandma. "I also like that you're interested in all this." She waved her hand over the table. "It's nice to share what I do with you."

"Well, let's get going. There's a little girl who needs her family." She pulled down her reading glasses from the top of her head, picked up several papers, and glanced over them, then went back and looked closer, comparing dates.

Grace worked the computer, clicking through Ancestry, FindMyPast, and other websites. She'd opened up one of the English Historical Society pages to search their private records when Grandma tapped her arm. "I think you made a mistake here, dear."

"I did?"

Grandma pointed to the birth record for Mary. "You have her born in 1667 but on this record over here it says she was born in 1669."

Grace grabbed the sheets and compared the dates. She clicked the tabs checking and double-checking everything. "That's her!" She drummed the table and threw her hands in the air. "You found her."

"What are you talking about?" Grandma removed her glasses.

Opening the family pedigree, Grace added Mary born in 1669 to the page and then pointed. "Back in those days, if a child died, they would name another one after her or him as a memorial."

"How odd."

"It seems odd to us because we're all about individuality and we have pictures and other ways to remember someone who passes on. But back then, it was an honor and a tribute—a way to remember." She hugged Grandma. "There were two Marys in the family. If this one died before the other Mary was born, that means she was under two years old."

"That's so sad."

Grace stared at her.

Grandma looked down and brushed off her shirt. "What?"

"It's just—she's been dead for over four-hundred years. Yet you feel for her passing." She gulped. "I get that."

Grandma paused and thought about it. "They are real people. They lived lives. They loved and lost. Speaking of love," her eyebrows rose and Grace sensed the shift in the conversation from work to personal, "How come you are in here with dead people when there is a living man who wants to spend time with you?"

"Pft." Grace popped out of her seat and went to the sink to refill her water cup. "He's not answering my texts. I think he's ghosting me." She took a sip of water to hide the pain on her face. It wasn't a long relationship. The truth was, Grace hadn't told another man–ever–that she loved him. That word–that word was sacred. At least to her. It wasn't something she wanted to give to someone until she knew he was the one. And Ryker? He was all the things she never thought she'd find and then some. It was impossible not to hurt after he'd taken her so high and then dropped her flat.

Grandma narrowed her eyes. "Why? Did you have a fight?"

"No." She sat down in her chair again. "I don't know why he won't talk to me." Unfortunately, she'd spent a lot of time thinking this over when she should have been sleeping. "My guess is—and remember I'm spitballing here." Grandma made a face at the term spitballing. "He's an orphan and he never talks about his family or his past. Which is so hard for me to understand because this is what I do." She motioned to the mess on the table. "If anyone would understand a broken family, family secrets, or whatever, it would be me, right?"

"Right!" Grandma nodded emphatically.

"He doesn't trust me with his private information—maybe that should have been a sign, but we haven't been seeing each other that long, so I wasn't pushing him."

"That's smart."

"But then, I invited him to meet Elizabeth and Chad, and he ran off. I was impulsive and didn't think about how it might affect him to be thrust into my family. We're not perfect, but we're pretty amazing, and we're all close." She ran her finger around the edge of the cup.

"Maybe it's for the best. If he can't open up to me about where he came from then what hope do we have for a future together?" She took a long drink of cold water but couldn't get the sour taste out of her mouth that those words left behind. They were wrong, and a part of her knew that. She just didn't know what to do about it.

Grandma frowned. "You like him?"

"I love him."

Grandma gasped.

"I know! It's big, right?!" Her shoulders caved in as if they could protect her heart. "He's funny, charming as every woman at The Palms knows, a gentleman." She stared into her drink, thinking about their first date and the stars that winked as they held hands and searched for a moonstone.

Grandma smacked the table, making Grace jump. "What's wrong with that man?"

Grace laughed. This was not the grandma she'd left the day they moved her into this condo. "Right?! I'm totally girlfriend material." She puckered up and sashayed her hips.

"You're adorable," Grandma agreed. "Don't give up on Ryker just yet. Sometimes, a man needs a knock upside the head to think straight." She pulled out her phone and began texting. "Or a nudge in the right direction."

Grace's eyes widened. "Don't you dare nudge him, Grandma."

She dropped her phone in her lap as if it zapped her. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Grace gave her the side-eye. Grandma smiled softly. Innocently.

"Thanks," Grace hedged. Something was off, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Feeling better, but only slightly, Grace began cleaning up the papers, organizing them in case she had to come back to them again.

Grandma's phone beeped. And beeped and beeped.

"What in the world?" Grace asked.

Grandma shook her head. "I'm late for a mee—" she cut off, "—group paddleboard class."

"Have fun." Grace's attention shifted to the Post-it notes and how she would stack them to maintain order.

A bottle of lemon-scented cleaner appeared on the table. "Don't forget," Grandma kissed her cheek.

Grace chuckled. "I would never."

"That's my girl." She bustled out the door, leaving Grace to her work and solitude.

She checked her phone once more to see if Ryker had responded. He had not. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't be upset if she ended up with a broken heart. And she wasn't mad—not about that. She was mad because Ryker cut out on her in such a cowardly way.

"It goes against everything Isoladian men are known for!" She snatched two Post-its off at the same time and slammed them on the table. "He should know better."

Being angry felt better than being rejected, so she grabbed onto that emotion and held tight. Heaven help him if she did see him today–she'd let him know exactly what she thought of his ghosting with a few choice Italian words.

Twenty-One

"H e ghosted her." Nancy finished recounting her conversation with Grace to the Secret Seven sitting around the kiddie pool with their legs shin-deep in warm water, proud of herself for using the slang term correctly.

Rosa crossed herself and muttered in Spanish.

"Not that kind of ghost," Winnie assured her friend. "Ghosting someone is when you don't take their calls." She looked beautiful in a floral swim coverup and matching headband.

"Oh!" Rosa switched from ghost warding to mamma bear mode and shook her fist while hissing something foreboding sounding in Spanish.

"I feel exactly the same way," Nancy proclaimed, looking down at her tracksuit with the pant legs rolled to her knees. Why didn't she change before she left the house? Didn't matter. What mattered was getting Ryker's head on straight. And Nancy loved straightening things. She cracked her knuckles.

Polly's eyebrows shot up. "Are you feeling okay? You're not usually this . . . passionate."

Nancy drew in a breath. "I feel alive." The sun warmed her hands and she pushed up her sleeves and drew in a deep breath of chlorine-scented air.

"Good." Walt adjusted his NASA hat to block the sun out of his eyes. Even he had on swim trunks and a tee shirt. "The question is, what are we going to do about this?" He glanced over his shoulder to make sure they weren't overheard.

Their emergency meeting was poolside because Rosa's grandchildren were visiting, and she was keeping an eye on them in the playground pool. She wore a large sun hat and a red swim wrap with small tassels. She'd like Leather & Lace and would probably wear what she bought there–unlike

Nancy, who kept the dress hidden in her closet. Why was it so hard to wear a dress?! It was just a dress.

The rest of the group huddled close, Don and Walt keeping an eye on those around them, which didn't look suspicious at all.

"Is that a bracelet?" Polly asked, pointing to Nancy's wrist.

She glanced down at the jade jewelry, and covered it with her other hand. She'd forgotten that she put it on this morning in a wild moment of abandon. This was why she didn't change her clothing, because everyone would notice. It was hard enough to feel like she was a different person on the inside– coming to The Palms had done that to her–but to have everyone see that she was different was . . . scary.

Polly smiled softly. "It's beautiful and goes with your skin color."

"Thanks," she released her hold over the stones.

"Well," Harry leaned forward, "I saw the whole thing happen. His big Viking of a friend came in, and the two of them took off like a shot." He smacked his palms together and then shoved one forward.

Don nodded. "That's how I saw it. They moved like they were under fire."

"I could excuse an emergency, but he hasn't answered her calls." Nancy tugged on her jacket. This tracksuit was one of her favorites and always helped her feel in control.

"Whatever he's running from, he needs to face it." Don slapped his thigh with his palm. "And we'll help him."

"They need to get together and talk things out." Polly was a level head with a big heart.

They all thought for a moment.

"Bowling!" Winnie shoved a finger in the air in an ah-ha gesture. "You get little breaks when you bowl, but you're stuck together until the last frame."

Harry considered her. "The atmosphere is fun—keeping it light."

Rosa nodded. "And sometimes they dim the lights and turn on the disco ball. *Aya*! So romantic! Let's get them bowling."

"How?" Nancy prompted.

Don pulled out his cell phone. "I'm calling Sean. They're friends, and if I tell him to be at the bowling alley tonight, they'll be there."

"What if he doesn't bring Ryker?" asked Nancy.

Don narrowed his eyes. "He will. Or he'll have to answer to me." He

winked, stepped out of the kiddie pool, and away from the group, his massive calves dripping water as he went, to talk to his grandson.

Polly's eyes widened. "Does anyone else feel sorry for Sean right now?" They all nodded.

"I'll bring Grace. She could use a break from work." She hadn't taken time to think over the things Grace shared with her about hearing voices and creating families. It was . . . different. Then again, Grace had always marched to the beat of her own drum. That was to be admired. Nancy snapped her notebook closed. "Who feels like going bowling?"

Rosa shook her head. "We have the *nietos* until tomorrow morning."

"I'm out too." Harry patted his stomach. "Virginia and I are going to dinner with one of her old college roommates." He grimaced. "I'm not supposed to call her old."

Polly elbowed him. "We are old."

"Yep. But you can't tell my wife that," Harry replied.

"I'm out too," said Winnie. "I'm working on a new design project."

Nancy nodded to her. "That leaves Don, Walt, Polly, and me."

"I'll drive," offered Don as she hung up and rejoined them.

A lump of fear lodged in Nancy's throat. Don drove his car—and golf carts, and anything on wheels—like he was driving a tank: everyone better get out of his way or else. Polly and Winnie found it thrilling, but Nancy preferred to avoid near-death experiences. Without a reason to object, she'd have to deal with it.

In matchmaking, sacrifices must be made.

She did love it when the team came together like this.

Twenty-Two

R yker glared at Sean sitting in the waiting chair in the barbershop. He was not here for a haircut–he was here as a bodyguard.

"Can't you cut hair faster?" Sean asked, checking his phone for the 100th time that afternoon. "I could be on a dive."

"Trust me. I wish you were at the bottom of the ocean, too." Ryker finished sweeping up after the last appointment in preparation for his next one. The new shaving cream and after-shave honey products arrived this morning, and he was anxious to try them on Griff who complained after every appointment that his scalp ached or itched or sometimes both.

Sean occupied himself by doing knife tricks with his five-inch diving blade. Actually, Ryker changed his mind, Sean entertained himself by making Ryker's clients nervous by doing knife tricks with his five-inch diving blade. They stared at him in the mirror, their eyes wide and flinching every time he pretended to fumble and recover.

The knife tricks did not bother Ryker. He had not been able to talk to Grace and he missed her. It made him grumpy.

"Grandpa's calling." Sean stood up. "I'll take it in the hallway."

"Do not hurry back!" Ryker called after him.

As they had three thousand times in the last three days, his thoughts jumped to Grace. He wondered what she was doing, if her classes went well, if she'd been able to locate the grandfather for one of her clients, if she planned another trip, if she was thinking about him as he thought of her.

He wanted her.

He wanted her laughter. The world, his life, and the universe were brighter when she laughed. Her blue eyes sparkled and he felt as if his soul expanded.

He missed her wit. She did not shy away from teasing him, in Italian most times. The way her lips created words was enchanting. After one conversation, she had picked up his accent like a chameleon. She had given a hilarious impersonation of Mack's brogue one afternoon that positively delighted him.

His mother would love her.

She was kind to others, listened intently, noted and complemented their strengths. All who attended her class left feeling competent and capable. She had a gift to empower others.

She would make a wonderful princess.

Sean returned, looking sheepish with his hands shoved in his pockets.

"*Che cosa*?" Ryker asked. Sean wasn't the type to be embarrassed.

Sean smiled, and alarms went off in Ryker's head. "Wipe that frown off your face–we're going bowling with Grandpa and his friends tonight."

Ryker scoffed. "I do not want to go bowling." He did not want to go anywhere—except to see Grace. And since he was—possibly—in danger and would therefore put her in danger, he could not visit her.

There was also his obnoxiously friendly bodyguard to consider. How would he whisper sweet words of apology into her beautiful ear with Sean standing five feet away, ready to burst into the conversation with one of his jokes? This was not how apologizing to a beautiful woman was done.

With his phone in Liam's care, he had no way to communicate with *la sua sirena*, and it was killing him. The taste of freedom Grace had given him was enough to make him yearn for more. Just at the moment he had seen the light, the coffin lid slammed shut above him.

Stupid bounty hunter.

The bounty hunter had woken up with Sweetie on his chest and told them the price on Ryker's head: a cool million American dollars. He claimed he did not know who put the hit out. After some research, Liam found that he was a professional who took jobs all over the world, but had never been caught. He also claimed he wasn't going to kill Ryker–just knock him out and haul him back to the dropoff point.

They'd turned the man over to the Navy Police for further questioning. Mack did not believe they would get any more information from him than Sweetie had when she'd opened her mouth wide and yawned. The bounty hunter did not know it was a yawn and barked like a sea lion. Apparently, in all his "years" he'd never come face to face with as many teeth.

"I'm Grandpa's favorite and I'd like to keep it that way." Sean grinned but ran his hand through his thick, dark hair—clearly a genetic gift from Don. Something he did often whenever his Grandpa Don came up.

"You will go bald doing that," Ryker warned him.

He stopped and glared. "You're messing with me."

Ryker lifted a shoulder. "Continue doing it and see how that works out for you." He turned away to hide the grin that threatened to appear.

He went to the mirror and checked his hairline. Giving Ryker a smirk.

Griff came in and sat down without so much as a hello. For him, a visit to the barber was as bad as seeing his dentist.

Ryker went to work trying the honey-scented products on Griff's head. Twenty minutes later, Griff was done. There was no itching, no sense of tightness, and overall a nice shine. "I think you found a winner," Griff pronounced.

Ryker half-smiled. He had found a winner in Grace but she was as out of reach as a magical moon shell. For now. He was not a man who gave up easily. "I will order more of their products I think."

He hurried through his next two clients until his shop was blessedly client-free, then cleaned up.

"Time to knock down some pins," Sean said, looking at the clock on his phone. "Can't be late."

Sean whistled all the way to the three-lane bowling alley. They parked and headed inside.

"I did not know you enjoyed bowling so much?" Ryker asked as they got out of the vehicle.

"I like bowling just fine." Sean lifted a shoulder. "Besides, Grandpa and Grandma are my only family in town."

Ryker smiled woodenly. Sean caught the stiffness and groaned. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget that you're—"

Ryker brushed his hand through the air, batting away his concern. "I will see my family again." He pulled open the door and stepped inside to a welcome cool breeze. The smell of disinfectant and wood floor polish greeted them. "We have a bowling alley in the castle. I am quite good at this."

Sean clapped him on the back. "Sure you are." Don and his group of friends from the retirement community stood around a couple of lanes. Don grinned as they approached.

"There you are!" Don clapped Sean on the back, making Sean stumble forward a step. Ryker held out his hand, American-style. "*Caio*, Don."

They shook hands. Don didn't let go, but pulled Ryker along with him. "I'm glad you made it, son."

"Son?" Sean's eyes sparkled with mirth as they followed.

Don ignored Sean as Sean gave each of the ladies there an individual welcome, and then Walt and Harry too because they grumbled about being left out. "We'll add you to our team, Ryker," Don said. We've got the place to ourselves tonight."

"That is well," Ryker smiled at Polly and Harry, who were tying their shoes.

Don stepped up and put Ryker's name in the computer.

"Oh no!" Polly stood up and began counting people. "We have too many for this lane. I'll move over to that one." She gathered her shoes and moved.

"If you're bowling over there, I am too," said Harry. He glanced at Sean. "You're on my team."

Sean dusted his hands together in apparent glee. "Oh, it is so on, Gramps."

"You don't stand a chance," Don said with a flex of his arm that could've been intentional or could have not been. It was hard to tell with Don sometimes.

"Well, considering we outnumber you—" Sean prodded.

"Not anymore." Nancy put down a light blue bowling ball.

"Maybe I should go," said the most wonderful voice on the planet from behind him.

Ryker spun around so fast the room kept turning when he stopped. In the middle of it all was Grace. She wore a pair of cutoff jeans—the ones that made her legs look so very long. "*La mia sirena*," he whispered, not quite sure what incredible twist of fate had brought Grace to him at this moment.

Grace bit her lower lip and glanced away. "Hey, Ryker."

"I need a different sized ball." Nancy hurried away.

"Nachos?" asked Polly.

"Of course." Harry grabbed Sean's arm and pulled him away.

"Shoot. I forgot to get a ball." Don left too, and they were alone, but not alone.

Ryker did not care who watched them. No one else was in the room but he and Grace. He stepped up to his fate and brushed his fingers down her arm. *"Sei bello, la mia sirena."* He continued in Italian. *"You're beautiful, my siren. Only the most impossible of situations has kept us apart."*

She dropped eye contact. "Perché non hai repost al telefono?"

She'd tried to call him! "My phone was taken." He wanted to be as honest with her as possible. "I have not had a moment to myself nor an opportunity to seek you out, though my heart has yearned for you the whole time we've been apart."

She studied his face. "There's more, Ryker. You're not telling me everything."

He nodded. His love was as perceptive as she was beautiful. "It is true. But you must understand that there is a good reason for this."

She captured her lower lip with her teeth. "What?"

He glanced at Sean as the group made their way to the other lane, ignoring him and Grace and chatting so loudly it was obvious they were trying to show that they did not pay them any mind.. "I would very much like to give you all the answers you seek, but I cannot."

In the next lane, Don threw his bowling ball down the alley and it hit the floor with a thud that made the room vibrate. The few employees on duty all spun toward the lanes.

Polly clutched her chest. "A little finesse, Don. We aren't trying to kill the pins."

"Can you tell me why you can't tell me?" Grace pressed her hand on his arm. It was clear that she wanted to believe him. A part of him hated himself for holding back from her, but there was no other way.

"Because it is not my secret alone to share. Others are involved." He nodded toward Sean. It was true—at least, mostly. The men who protected him were in as much danger as he was—because they chose to be. A fact he was supremely grateful for and one he did not take for granted. He would not put them at risk any more than he already had.

He held his breath, hoping the explanation was enough to win him into her good graces.

Grace nodded as she processed this information. "Will you be able to tell me at some later date?"

He cupped the back of his neck. "I do not know."

She tipped her head to the side. He could see her weighing the information against what she wanted—what she deserved from a man. After a moment, she hiked her purse up on her shoulder. "Okay. Well. I'm glad we

had this talk." Her voice was thick as if she were covering up tears that threatened to fall. She went to Nancy and kissed her cheek. "Have fun. I'll see you at the bungalow."

Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at Grace and then at Ryker. Sean's happy-go-lucky smile fell, and he folded his arms and shook his head as if he were disappointed in Ryker's actions—even though he had no idea what he'd said.

She pushed out the double glass doors, and awkward conversation resumed. Ryker ordered a plate of loaded nachos and sat at a table, no longer wanting to bowl.

Harry sat down. "May I?"

Ryker pushed the plate to him—not truly hungry. "You may."

Harry picked up a chip and took a bite. "Seems to me, you're having a bit of lady trouble."

Ryker huffed and slouched in response.

"Do you want some advice?" He selected another chip.

Ryker reluctantly sat up taller. "I cannot imagine what you would have to offer that would help in my unique situation." He was not trying to be rude, but Harry had no idea he was talking to a prince in hiding with a possible bounty on his head and a group of Navy SEALS dogging his every footstep.

"I might surprise you." Harry grabbed a napkin and wiped his fingers. "My advice is this: When a woman knows you value her, she will wrestle an alligator for you. When she thinks you don't value her, she'll let it eat you."He got up, wrapped his knuckles on the table, and said, "Think about it."

Ryker was still thinking about it that night as he puttered around the kitchen. He'd not eaten the nachos, and his stomach complained.

Other than telling Grace his secret—and in the process reveal top secret, multinational information—how could he show her he valued her? There had to be a way and he would figure it out–and make the SEALs help him.

For the first time in hours, he smiled.

"Call the men!" he yelled to Sean, who was lying on his couch, watching a movie on his phone.

Sean bolted to his feet, his eyes wide. "Call the what now?"

"Nevermind. I will do it." Ryker snatched his phone and texted Mack and Liam. "Get over here now," he mumbled as he typed. He grinned as he tapped the send button. He threw Sean's phone back to him and went to the kitchen to pull a pad of paper out of the drawer. "We will need a plan."

"A plan to what?" Sean asked as he checked his texts. "Liam will not like your princely tone."

"He will not like *your* princely tone." Ryker pointed. "Not my phone." Sean typed furiously. "Ryker had my phone." He hit send.

The door burst open, and Mack and Liam came in, looking ready for a fight. Good. They were going to need that fighting spirit if they were going to pull this off.

Twenty-Three

T he computer lab, normally a palace of genealogical discovery and delight where her students exclaimed over their triumphs, seemed rather drab today. The normally bright lights soured her skin, turning it pale and drab, while the hum of computers brought on a headache she'd battle the rest of the day.

This morning was the fourth session for beginners. Most of them had some computer knowledge, but learning new software was always a struggle. Each genealogy website had its own design and interface which was why she'd decided to start with Ancestry.com and keep the other sites for the intermediate classes.

This was an enthusiastic bunch. Samantha had them on a waitlist for several months and, as Jerom said, "We ain't gettin' any younger," so they dove in head first. Not ten seconds went by between someone calling her name.

Last week, she needed a nap after class. A wonderful, sweet nap with her head resting on Ryker's chest as they swung softly in a hammock he'd hung up between two palm trees. So sweet.

"Grace! Dear, I'm lost over here." Mrs. Thompson waved her arm in the air.

Grace sighed internally and moved to sit by Mrs. Thompson. Ever since talking with Ryker, where nothing was revealed nor figured out, she felt drained and wanted to curl up in bed and sleep for days. Grandma would have none of it and insisted that the best strategy was to continue on as if Ryker hadn't meant the world to her.

Except he had. He did. He does.

Her world, with Ryker in it, was bright and new and full of laughter and tickles and teasing and yummy desserts and wonderfulness.

Take all those out and what did she have?

"Absolutely nothing," Mrs. Thompson exclaimed.

Grace checked herself to see if she'd spoken out loud. "Excuse me?"

"I got nothin'." Mrs. Thompson shoved her glasses up her face. "It's like my family spontaneously germinated in California." She had faded red hair, and her lenses were so thick they could stop a bullet. "I just can't seem to find my people," she bemoaned as Grace pulled a rolling chair up to sit down. "I think all our records were lost in the fire."

"What fire?" Grace asked, doing her best to focus on the problem at hand and not Ryker. He'd asked her to forgive him but didn't offer any hope that things would change. How was she supposed to take that? What was she supposed to do, pretend that he'd spontaneously germinated in Diamond Cove?

"The great fire," Mrs. Thompson continued. "In 1906."

Dates, history, and her comment about California clicked together, and it was suddenly much easier to concentrate on the screen. "You mean the San Francisco fire?" She typed in a search, and black and white images filled the screen of the city in ruins.

Mrs. Thompson nodded.

"Well," she paused as she took in the horrible news. "How do you know that's where your family comes from? Starting with what you know and how you know it was the best way to find a hot lead." She'd helped dozens of people skip a record that had been destroyed or gone missing and keep finding their ancestors.

They chatted for a few more minutes. Grace pulled up a blank document. "I want you to write out everything you remember and who told you that your family came from San Francisco. Okay? I'll review it tonight and see if I can come up with a plan."

"Those spit tests will help too, won't they?" she asked, her gray eyes full of hope.

Grace hurried to assure her. She'd had the class do DNA tests the first week. The results could take up to six weeks to come in though. For now, the computers were their best tool. "They are part of the puzzle. Once we know your DNA, we can search those countries for your family names. And, if you want, it can help you find living relatives who are interested in connecting. They may have information you don't."

"It's all so interesting," Mrs. Thompson said to herself as she began to type. "And mysterious."

"What is?" asked Mrs. Goodman, sitting on her right.

"I might hold the key to unlocking my entire family," Mrs. Thompson tapped her cheek. "Right here, and I didn't even know it."

Grace hid her smile and added a flair for the dramatic to her mental profile of the Thompson family. Perhaps that's what took them to San Francisco. The town was considered a rowdy group who embraced live theater long before it came into fashion for the rest of the country.

She managed to stay in the moment for the next ten minutes as she helped others sort through records and figure out which ones were relevant to their family lines.

"But it's spelled wrong," insisted Mrs. Hampforshire as she slapped her hand on the table. Grace had found the birth record for a child in the 1700s, but the last name was spelled Humpforshire. There were half a dozen reasons it was spelled like that, but based on the other information provided, she was certain this was the six-times-great-grandfather of Mrs. Hampforshire's husband.

"How do you know *you're* not the one who's spelling it wrong?" Grace challenged.

Mrs. Hampfordshire pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes. "That would be something the Hampfordshires would do."

Grace chuckled lightly. "It's possible that the scribe recorded it wrong at the birth or the transcriber switched the 'a' to an 'u' when inputting the information into the computer. Why don't you put him in your chart and then see if he has any brothers or sisters." She just couldn't help but nudge people to put families together.

The door squeaked open, and Grace turned to see who had interrupted class. Her breath caught in her throat as Ryker strode in as if he could go anywhere he pleased and no one would stop him. He was gorgeous, and her traitorous heart leapt at the sight of him. All the butterflies woke up and panted like Bear on a hot afternoon.

Stop it, she scolded them. He couldn't just show up here.

As she moved to intercept him, Mack came in and shut the door behind him. Before she could send them on their way, Ryker lifted a hand and addressed the class. "*Ciao* researchers." Every head swiveled at his deep voice with that delectable accent. "Mack would like to know about his Scottish family line."

Grace's soul split into two parts and argued with one another. The sensible side of her, which was, admittedly, already weaker than the heart-side, said that she should kick both of them out of class, and Ryker's attempt to give her a pity research project wasn't enough to pick up their relationship.

The heart-side of her swooned at the idea of researching Mack's family. Half brothers, one raised in Scotland and one in the US, had to be a story she could sink her fingers into. Coupled with the fact that Ryker understood how much of a draw that would be for her and had somehow convinced Mack to show up here today, had the ice wall around her heart melting. He knew which hand to deal to his advantage.

For once, the sensible side won out—Grandma Nancy would be so proud. Mack's history was not the one she really wanted. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but you aren't a registered student of this class, and I can't let you in."

Ryker's eyes softened, and the ice wall cracked, making her shudder. "Please, *la mia sirena*, Mack has a deep wound in his heart, and you are the one who can help him. The only one."

Darn his Isoladian charm. It didn't help that up close Ryker smelled so good—like soap and aftershave and some kind of sweet pastry that made butterflies flutter like eyelashes.

She stepped in front of Mack to create space between her and Ryker. With all her might she checked him out. Despite the Scot's big muscles and handsome face, the butterflies in her stomach were not impressed.

Mack's eyes were set in a determinedly resigned way. Nothing about his posture said he wanted to be here. "Is that true?" She lifted one eyebrow.

He nodded once. His eyes darted to Ryker. "I'm not anything special but my mother was."

"Ahhh," Mrs. Goodman's hand covered her heart. "You can't turn him away, Grace. Not when it's his mother."

"Have a heart, Grace," added Mr. Knight. He claimed he was English through and through, but Grace suspected there was a little Irish and possibly Swedish thrown into his line.

"All right, everyone," Grace addressed the room, "let me talk with him privately and I'll let you know."

Several people nodded and they all went back to work. They had twenty minutes left and no one wanted to waste it.

She took Mack by the arm and moved him back toward the door. No sparks with a touch and she could breathe as easily as ever. "I'm happy to help with the research, but I get this feeling that you're not entirely sure you want to do this." She glanced toward Ryker, who was writing on the whiteboard. His body was in the way, and she couldn't make out the words.

Mack hesitated for a moment before he spoke, his voice tinged with apprehension. "There're ghosts in my family tree."

Grace nodded her understanding. "Genealogy is about more than just the good parts of our history. It's about understanding the complexities of our past and finding a sense of connection with the journey our ancestors took. By exploring your family's story, we can gain a deeper understanding of who you are today." She drew a breath. "You wouldn't be the first person to uncover unsavory ancestors, and I assure you, I won't judge you based on their actions."

Mack considered her words, his apprehension slowly giving way to curiosity. "All right," he finally agreed, a hint of reluctant enthusiasm in his voice. "I'll give it a try." He glanced around.

"Okay." She went to her bag and handed him a card. "Email me your full name, birth info, and your mother's and father's if you have it. There's another class coming in in about a half hour so I'm afraid we won't get much done today."

He took the card. "Sounds good. Ryker." Ryker turned to look at him. "I'll be in the hall." He gestured over his shoulder before leaving, shutting the door once again. That man was OCD about open doors.

Grace was called over to help someone and didn't have the chance to kick Ryker out.

The next ten minutes were a flurry of questions as people scrambled to get to a stopping point. Strangely, it was easier to concentrate on all this with Ryker in the room. A new energy filled her, and she could ignore him completely while enjoying the connection that hummed between them.

Her timer went off, signaling the end of class–a necessity she'd adopted because otherwise, no one left on time. They stacked post-it notes and papers, making notes and drawing arrows. All the while, she felt Ryker's gaze on her. The sensation was wonderful, like she was floating in the ocean with turtles and dolphins and bare-chested mermen who made her feel desirable and valuable.

"Goodbye. I'll see you next week," Grace told them as they left.

Mrs. Thompson stopped and put her hand on Grace's arm. "Don't send him away," she nodded toward Ryker. "Not until you hear him out."

Grace's smile froze. "I'll do my best."

Mrs. Thompson laughed. "That's all we can ever do when it comes to men." She winked. "The trick is finding one who will do the same."

Grace leaned in and asked, "And you think he's one of those?"

Mrs. Thompson considered him, not bothering to hide the fact that they were talking about him. "I think he does his best in every aspect of life—but when it comes to love, he'll fall —they all do. That man, though, he'll get back up when he falls down. Every time."

Grace's head spun with her explanation. It wasn't exactly linear, but the gist of it was that Ryker was a good man. "Thanks for the advice." She hugged her.

Mrs. Thompson was the last one out. Mack leaned against the wall on the other side of the hallway. He stepped over and shut the door, giving her a wink and some privacy.

She rounded on Ryker. "Why are you really here?"

"I wanted to see you." He took a step closer. "I do not like being away from you, Grace, it feels . . . incorrect."

She knew exactly how she felt; but wasn't ready to admit that to him. Unbalanced by his confession, she moved around the room, turning off computers and straightening workstations. "Ryker, I can't be with someone who keeps secrets."

He rubbed the back of his head. "*La mia sirena*, you ask for more than you know you are asking."

She pulled up short. "What do you mean?"

He wagged a finger. "You are much too smart. If I tell you even a little, you will unravel the mystery. I cannot. There is more at stake than you and I, although it is difficult for me to say so. I am truly torn. Please do not ask me to choose between you and—" he cut off, searching for the right word, "*i miei doveri*," my duty.

Grace sucked in a breath. His duty? What kind of duty required a man to hide his past and true identity? In Isola de la Famiglia they placed family at the top of their responsibilities and treasures. Loyalties to family and country ran deeper than the ocean.

Family and country . . .

She cocked her head as she studied Ryker's face. Pronounced

cheekbones. Strong jaw. Thick but tame eyebrows. And those eyes. Not to mention his posture was positively royal.

An idea popped into her head.

One that was tantalizing and delicious.

What was more rare than an Islodian in America? An Islodian *prince* in America.

That couldn't be right, though. There were, she tapped the ends of her fingers against her thumb as she counted, five princes around Ryker's age. Scratch that—four because Angelo was crowned king. Four princes. Two who stayed out of the spotlight as much as possible. One who was second in line to be king and stayed close to the castle. Which left . . . It couldn't be . . . could it? But—he'd *died*!

Her fingers tingled with the need to get on a computer. Why had she just shut them all down?!

"Will you have dinner with me?" His dark eyes pleaded with her.

She gulped. If her hunch was correct, she'd found the lost prince of Isola de la Famiglia. Why was he hiding in Diamond Cove? With a Scotsman? She glanced at the door.

If he was the prince—oh my gosh, why did she turn off the computers?! —then here, in Diamond Cove, and right now, maybe all he could give her.

Heart thudding wildly in her chest, she let the words slip quietly from her lips, "I'll go."

Twenty-Four

"N о."

Ryker's shoulders dropped, and he sagged.

Contrite and probably feeling bad for destroying all of Ryker's hopes and dreams with one word, Mack rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, it's not like we don't want to help you."

"It's just that we don't want to help you," Sean said with a smirk as he shoved Mack. Mack shoved him back. They eyed one another to see who would make the next move. The situation could blow off or turn into a wrestling match–furniture beware.

"It is dinner—a simple meal that lasts less than an hour—with a beautiful woman who loves me." Ryker continued to argue his point. He was not ready to admit defeat. Somewhere in these men's chests beat hearts—actual hearts—he would reach them if it was the last thing he did.

Grace had agreed to go out with him, which was a miracle. He was not a selfish man, he would take that one miracle and hold it tight. "I get one chance and if tonight is not perfect, I will lose her forever."

"It's a security risk." Mack dropped to Bob's couch. The springs protested loudly. "I like Grace, I do. But our mission is to keep you alive and taking her to dinner in a public restaurant with large windows doesn't help."

Ryker turned to Sean.

"What do you think?"

Sean pointed to his chest. "Me? You want to know what I think?" He stood taller. "I feel so important right now. Hang on. I want to savor this moment."

Liam sauntered in, a canary perched on his shoulder. The yellow and

green bird did not make a peep but groomed the loose, curly hair at the base of his neck. "There's another hit on you. We intercepted the message."

He put his laptop on the desk and backed off.

Ryker and Sean crowded around to read the information.

"...1.5 million dollars dead or alive..." Ryker mumbled as he read.

Sean let out a low whistle.

Ryker ran his hand over his face. He wore facial hair but insisted on sculpting it. The look was supposed to help him blend in and not look like the prince of Islodia de la Famiglia who was clean shaven with chin-length hair that he'd cut short. "How do they know I am alive?"

"They don't. At least I don't think they do." Liam fell back on the chair. "The hit is for Ryker Rockefeller in Diamond Cove."

"How the heck did you manage to tick off someone 1.5 million-dollars worth since getting to Diamond Cove?" Mack asked in awe. It might be the most respectful look he'd ever given Ryker.

"Did you give some guy a bad haircut?" Sean asked.

Ryker drew himself up. "Never!"

"We shouldn't have let him wander around on his own," Liam threw up his hands in an over-dramatic fashion.

Ryker ignored him because he was teasing.

"How's that American accent coming along?" Sean asked.

"Why?" Ryker asked right back.

Sean lifted his palms. "It might come in handy. Especially if we have to relocate."

Ryker was not leaving Diamond Cove–not when Grace was here. He cleared his throat and lowered his chin. "Perdy well, pardner."

Sean, Mack, and Liam exchanged a look and burst out laughing. "Who's your teacher?" Sean asked through gasps.

He rolled his eyes. "Gray gave me John Wayne videos to study. He said having an unusual accent would help cover my real accent."

They laughed all the harder. Liam's canary twittered and ran around the back of his neck to the other side of his head to work there.

Sean pulled himself together. "I guess this means we have to cancel your date." He kicked the coffee table. "Shucks."

"No!" Ryker stood tall, pinning each of them with a look in turn.

"But—" Sean began to argue.

"I will be chum." Ryker pointed to the sky. "We will draw out the sharks

and you will take him down."

"Without Grace noticing?" Liam asked, dubiously.

"Si. You are SEALs—the third most elite military group in the US—act like it." He would have stormed out to accentuate his point, but he would have to ask one of them to go with him and that would have ruined the effect.

Sean's brows shot up. "Third? What do you mean third?"

Ryker grinned. "Exactly what I said."

"He's so in love he can't see reason," Mack whispered to Liam out of the side of his mouth.

"Si! I am in love. I do not care if you tease me or mock me, or call me a love-sick puppy. I love Grace, and I cannot live without her." His chest heaved with the emotion Grace stirred inside of him.

Sean landed in the swivel chair behind his desk and spun slowly from side to side. "You know... Grace doesn't seem like a flowers and expensive dinner kind of girl."

Ryker narrowed his eyes and waited for the punchline. With Sean, there was always a punchline.

"I think she'd like a private dinner in say . . . the library–don't you think, Liam?" He swiveled that way, waiting for an answer. His casual posture and attitude were meant to rake across Ryker's straight spine, but Sean might be helping him and so he bit his tongue.

Liam nodded slowly. "La Bella Bella caters. The owner owes me a favor for updating his online security."

Mack threw his arm over the back of the couch. "I did an addition on a beach house for a guy who can help with transportation." He picked at a seam on the couch cushion. "Grace might get a kick out of something other than a golf cart."

Hope blossomed and then blew up inside of him. "*Si*. *Si*!" It didn't matter if Mack came up with a motorcycle and a sidecar–he'd take it as long as he could be with Grace.

Sean shifted and then stood. "I'm on lighting."

Mack opened his mouth. Sean pointed at him. "Shut up. It'll be better than your stupid *transportation*." He said the last word in a mocking tone.

Mack scoffed. "We'll see."

Liam placed a call to La Bella Bella, asking for the owner.

Ryker ran his hand along his jaw. "We do not have much time."

"When do you pick her up?" asked Mack with a yawn.

"Seven-thirty."

Sean sprang into action, he bumped Ryker from behind as he passed. "What are you standing around for? We have a date." He headed to the back of the warehouse and began moving boxes around.

"We?" Ryker asked.

Mack approached, his face serious. "If we do this, you have to know that you are our priority. If it comes down to saving you or Grace, we'll take you."

Ryker grit his teeth. "It will not come to that."

Sean and Liam exchanged dark looks.

Mack slapped Ryker on the back. "You better come up with a good apology and a way to keep her around. I'm not wasting my *transportation* favor on a disaster, got it?"

"I have that covered. She will not be able to resist my charms."

"Riiiight," Mack replied. "Liam! I need a ride."

Liam grabbed his keys off the hook by the door, and they left. The moment the door opened, the bird took flight.

Ryker's stomach churned. With these three in charge of his date, he would have to be good. Who knew what they considered lighting and dinner and–*gulp*–transportation? They rarely ate food that required forks, and Sean wore flip-flops for heaven's sake.

He rubbed his palms together, hoping inspiration would strike before he picked up Grace because, at this moment, he had nothing.

Twenty-Five

A knock at the door had Grace's stomach fluttering and moisture gathering at her hairline. She snatched a tissue off the side table and patted at it. No way was she going to greet Ryker in a sweaty mess. She barely had time to get ready for tonight and had not had a second to look up the missing prince online.

It was so infuriating! Every time she turned around someone desperately needed to talk to her about their genealogy, and she hadn't gotten out of the main building until six. At that time, she had to decide between an internet search or getting ready for her date.

After a quick look in the full-length mirror to make sure she hadn't tucked her dress into her underwear, she hurried to the front door.

Grandma had let Ryker in and he looked incredible in a moss green button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his corded and tan forearms. All the air whooshed out of her lungs, and she pressed her hand to her chest. This man commanded the room and her attention. He couldn't help it, it was the way he was made.

Ryker–always so in tune with her–turned and his jaw dropped. "Grace. You are the most beautiful woman who has ever lived."

Grandma clasped her hands together in front of her and smiled with pride as if she'd made this moment possible.

"You look good too," she replied as she stepped forward. She and Ryker kissed on both cheeks, his lingering against hers. A perfectly acceptable greeting in front of her grandmother even though she'd taken the opportunity to breathe in his spicy scent.

She would expect nothing less proper from Ryker even if she wanted him

to dip her low and kiss her long and slow. Her body was all over getting close to him—humming in anticipation and fogging up her vision so he was the only one in the room—and yet her brain held her back. She was after answers—not kisses tonight.

Although . . . kisses would be so much more fun, her heart-side argued.

Grace mentally rolled her eyes at herself. Her two halves needed to come together soon or she would go nuts.

"Your chariot awaits," Ryker offered his hand.

Grace paused, knowing that if she accepted, she would be going into the lion's den of temptation with him. Ryker was all that she'd ever wanted. The only man who had ever been able to handle all of her–all her stories, all her intuition, and all her passion. It was unfair that he came with the exact type of baggage that left her doubting a future with him.

Grandma cleared her throat.

Grace blinked and took his hand. The moment their fingers touched the humming in her body kicked up three notches, consuming her.

Ryker tugged her gently out the door and motioned to the curb. "I hope this will be suitable."

Grace turned and then gasped. Her hand flew to her cheeks in surprise.

Parked in front of Grandma's pink bungalow was a white Cinderella horse drawn carriage. The lanterns glowed softly, even though it wasn't dark. The driver wore a gray jacket with tails and a tophat, which he removed as he bowed for Grace.

She blinked. Was he trying to tell her he was a prince without actually saying the words?

"Come," he said in his come-hither accent deep voice that made her rational side fall over in defeat as her heart did a victory dance.

He handed her into the carriage as if it was second nature and then settled in the seat next to her. Their driver did not ask for directions. They circled around The Palms, drawing stairs and fond smiles from the residents who were out and about.

She waved at Don, who sat on the front porch with Amelia. She had a quilt over her lap and a soft smile on her face.

Rosa was on her lawn with a gaggle of grandchildren. They all clapped and waved as if seeing a real prince and princess. Ryker chuckled beside her. He clasped her fingers and brought them up to his lips for a kiss. "They think you are a princess, *si*? Wave to them." He waved, and the movement was so perfect she lost her senses and threaded their fingers together.

The carriage stopped in front of the bridge that led to the library. Fairy lights lit the way up to the library steps. "We're going to the library?" she asked.

"Si. You will like it." He offered his arm, and she slipped her hand in the crook, snuggling close. He'd gone to so much effort. He must have worked all afternoon to make this happen for her.

The large library doors swung open with ease, and they were greeted with a fire in the stunning fireplace. The room was cozy with the glow of three dozen candles. She glanced around quickly and didn't find a dry-paged book in the vicinity, thank goodness.

The twinkle lights continued along the floor to the stairs and then up.

She stopped and glanced above them to the glass dome. "Are we going up there?"

A brief flash of uncertainty swept across his face, and then was gone. "We will follow the lights and see where they take us-together." He moved his arm and then slid his fingers down her skin before taking her hand.

Grace touched the banister with reverence.

"You like the finish work?" he stopped to ask.

"I appreciate the workmanship." She smiled. "Someone took time to make an impression, and I am impressed." She hugged his arm and pecked a kiss to his cheek.

His eyes smoldered. "I hope the rest of the evening will also impress you."

"Me too." She leaned into him as they continued up the stairs. If he was the prince, did she expect him to spill royal secrets? Was it fair of her to ask so much? Then again, could she love and marry a man without speaking his real name?

The lights continued over the top stair and then circled a table with a white tablecloth and two tall candles. Steam came off the plates of Italian food and the smell of fresh garlic bread hung in the air. The sun had set, and they were now in that space between day and night. In no time, they'd be able to see the stars overhead.

Ryker held out her chair, and she sat down, touched that he had gone to such lengths to romance her tonight.

"Ryker," she started and then stopped, trying to gather words. She

laughed at herself. "I think you've knocked me speechless."

He chuckled and took her hand in his across the table. "Then you know how I feel every time I look at you, *la mia sirena*."

"Why do you have to make it so hard to resist you?" She wanted to cry with the effort, and her eyes stung.

Ryker was by her side, on one knee and pressing kisses to her hand. "No tears. Grace. Please. I am not trying to make it hard for you."

She managed to hold them back. "I know. But fighting how I feel about you is the hardest thing I've ever done. It's like warring with myself."

"I have an idea," he kissed her hand again. "You should stop fighting and throw yourself at me. I will catch you, *si*?"

She burst out laughing, the threatening tears drying up in the process. "Eat your dinner, Romeo."

He winked before rising and taking his seat. They began to eat and Grace allowed herself to relax into the fresh basil and garlic. She was weak. So, so weak for this man.

She shouldn't feel as happy as she did right now. Not with all the unanswered questions and the past stuck between them. *Please, give me something*, she silently begged.

Twenty-Six

R yker was losing her. He could feel it in the way she looked at him, the questions that swirled in her mind might as well have been written on billboards.

They talked about nothing during dinner, and he fought the panic that threatened to overtake him.

She dropped her napkin on her plate and sighed heavily–the sound like a gun cocking.

He reached for her hand, and she hesitated. The four seconds it took her to allow him the touch felt like an eternity.

"There are so many things I cannot tell you," he started.

She stiffened.

"But I can share what is in my heart." He drew circles on the back of her hand. "I miss . . . my family."

Hearing the words out loud was like a whip cracking open a bag of grain. He did not share these things with anyone—even his friends.

Grace flipped their hands and put his hand between hers.

"I am alone in the world," he continued, "and it must stay that way. It is difficult for me to say such things."

He swallowed against the tightness in his throat.

"Why are you telling me?" she asked softly.

"Because when I am with you, I am complete in a way that I have never felt before. My love for you is even stronger than the loss I feel."

"Ryker," she whispered his name.

"I am afraid that the only things I can really share with you are the burdens of my soul." He dropped his eyes. "And the love in my heart." He couldn't bring himself to look at her, and if she was going to walk away from him, he did not want to watch.

Grace stood, and his heart dropped. She would leave now, and he would be alone in the world. The prospect was not so dreadful before Grace, but after her, it would destroy him.

She moved around the table, and he braced for a goodbye. Her hand brushed his cheek, pulling his gaze up to meet hers. She slipped onto his lap and wrapped her arm around his neck. "I will take the burdens of your soul and the love in your heart and hold them close."

He nudged her nose with his. "But will it be enough? Will I be enough for you?"

She kissed his jaw. "I want more memories like tonight, Ryker. And I want them with you. If it means our history starts in Diamond Cove, then that's what it means."

He smiled against her cheek and then kissed her in that same spot, moving until his lips hovered over hers. "You could break me, Grace. I am in your hands."

"Likewise, Ryker. I've never been this . . . connected to someone before. It's terrifying and thrilling, and I think it could swallow me whole and I wouldn't fight it. I won't fight it." She closed the distance, and they crashed together.

Ryker kissed her hungrily, wanting all her promises, all her tomorrows.

Grace kissed just as fiercely, drawing his secrets out one by one until he had shared them all through his lips. He may not have said anything out loud, but he'd placed his truth inside her loving care.

Twenty-Seven

G race slammed her laptop closed and smiled innocently at Grandma, who stood in the doorway to the second bedroom. She didn't want anyone to know that a prince lived in Diamond Cove, and she certainly didn't want to blow his cover. She'd just pulled up the pedigree chart for the royal Isola de la Famiglia family when Grandma cleared her throat.

Grandma wore a pair of navy pajamas—with a crease down the center of each front of the pant legs.

"When do you have time to iron your pajamas?" she blurted out. She hadn't seen her iron anything the whole time she'd been here, and yet, those creases were always there.

Grandma glanced down at her legs. "I don't. I take them to the dry cleaner with my tracksuits."

Grace stifled her smile. Typical Grandma Nancy. She patted the bed next to her in invitation and mused, "I can't remember the last time I set foot in a dry cleaner's."

Grandma settled in and took her hand. "It's not your style. But that's okay. You're beautiful just being you." She brushed a stray piece of hair off Grace's forehead. "I love your free spirit."

Grace gave her a dubious look.

Grandma laughed. "Sometimes it drives me crazy," she admitted. "But I can see how your intuition guides you, and I'm glad you're here. Everyone loves your classes—you've brought new energy to The Palms. Even Samantha says so."

Grace lurched forward and engulfed Grandma in a hug. "I love being with you."

Grandma hugged her back, squeezing tight. Releasing her, she asked, "Did you and Ryker work things out?"

"It was a magical evening. The carriage ride... The food ..." She snuck a peak at Grandma from lowered lashes. "The kissing."

Grandma lightly slapped her arm. "Good for you."

Grace laughed as she drew her knees up and hugged them, resting her chin on her knee. "I love him—maybe too much."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Grace lifted a shoulder. "I can't see into the future. You don't happen to have a crystal ball around here, do you?"

Grandma rolled her eyes. "If you happen to find one, let me know." She stood up and straightened the covers. "Get some sleep. There's a brand-new day tomorrow." She kissed Grace's head.

"Love you, Grandma."

"Love you, too." She left, and Grace listened to her footsteps all the way down the hall and then for her door to close. Then she dove for her laptop and opened it eagerly.

Tracing the family line with her eyes she came to Alessandro de Luca and stopped. His death date was right there. Almost ten months ago. Now that she had his real name, she searched for images.

The first ones that came up were of his funeral. Goodness, the casket was stunning. Walnut wood with silver trim draped in dark green satin.

His parents rode in a horse-drawn carriage, his mother draped with a black lace veil. His dad's chin was set, and he stared straight ahead.

His two sisters, dressed in black, and his cousins walked behind by rank. One male and his younger sister wore full military dress uniforms. The older sister dabbed her red-rimmed eyes, her grief written all over her face. The younger one was resolute but had tears on her cheeks. Her long brown hair, the exact same color as Ryker's, was pulled back into a long ponytail.

So much tradition wrapped up in dying. Fascinating. Every culture had their way. Some were cremated, while others were buried at sea. She soaked it all in as she scrolled.

By page five, she started to wonder if they'd taken any images of Alessandro when he was alive. The casket wasn't ever opened. The pictures from inside the church took up three more pages.

How odd.

She redefined her search. This time, the images that appeared were all of

a young prince who couldn't have been older than eight. She had toddler pictures and baby pictures and the first day of primary school pictures.

Not even one likeness of him as an adult.

"The plot thickens," she whispered. There had to be pictures of him somewhere. She pulled up her contact list and sent inquiries to two of her European associates. Checking the clock, she groaned. It was four a.m. over there. She didn't care. She'd wait until one of them woke up.

She was just about to make herself some tea when her computer dinged.

Subject: RE: Image of Prince Alessandro de Luca Request.

Dear Grace,

I would ask what was keeping you up so late, but I've spent many nights dreaming about his Royal Princeliness. This is the easiest picture I could send you. Enjoy!

Grace tapped the attachment. An image of a plate set on a fireplace mantle filled the screen. She burst out laughing and then slapped her hand over her mouth and listened for Grandma to come out of her room. When there was no stirring, she relaxed into a soft giggle.

On the china plate was a hand-painted picture of Ryker.

The plate next to it was half-visible and she guessed it was his sister.

"Where can I get one of these?" she joked as she compared the image to Ryker.

His hair was shorter now, and he wore a beard. In the plate-pic, he had natural highlights the color of honey. The painted green eyes didn't do him justice. She couldn't deny that this was Ryker and that Prince Alessandro was in Diamond Cove.

But why?

Something inside of her said to find out, and she lifted a hand to hold it off. "We just made up." she huffed. "I swore to myself that making memories with him would be enough." She set her computer aside and grabbed the blanket, pulling it up to her chin as she laid back on the pillow.

A member of the royal family slept in this town.

A dead man walked among them.

She'd kissed a ghost.

"I'll never be able to sleep now!" She threw the blankets off and sat up. She had to tell him she knew. *He* may be able to keep this secret, but she couldn't hold back that she knew.

Her intuition said to go now.

"Now?" It was barely light outside. She'd been up all night. Ugh! This is what mysteries did to her-they turned off the part of her brain that produces sleep hormones.

Glancing down at her shorts and tank top, she hurriedly grabbed a zip-up sweatshirt and carried a pair of flip flops out the back door—the door farthest away from Grandma's bedroom. Once on the beach, she hurried to the trail that led up to Main Street. From there, it was only a couple of blocks to Ryker's condo.

She was almost there when a car blinded her with its headlights. She turned her head to the side, and, when it had pulled past her, she turned to glare. She gasped. Ryker was in the passenger seat.

Staring after them, she kicked it in gear and followed as best as she could on foot in flip flops. As long as she made it around a corner before they turned off the street, she was able to track them. She may have cut across a couple of yards and a parking lot too. It wasn't long before she realized they were going to the docks.

That was creepy.

Saturday morning Scooby Doo cartoons taught her that bad things happened at the docks at night. No one of good report hung out there after dark.

Still, she had to talk to him. If he was doing secret princely things, well, she was in this relationship, and she'd offer to help. Help how? That she didn't know. But she had skills. Maybe she could translate old records or something. Yeah, because that's what fugitives did early in the morning on the docks.

The vehicle turned a corner, and she lost sight of them. By the time she got to the salvage company's building where the car was parked, she secondguessed her decision to come. A cold, stiff breeze blew off the ocean, raising goosebumps on her legs. Boats bobbed in the water, and the wood creaked.

She put her hands in her sweater, put the hood on, and hugged herself.

Wanting to see what she was interrupting, she peaked in a window. Before she was off her tiptoes, big arms came around her middle, and a hand clamped over her mouth stifling any sound.

She kicked and thrashed to no avail. Her assailant carried her inside the building and dumped her on a couch in the office.

"Caught this one looking in the windows." Liam yanked off her hoodie.

She blinked up at Ryker and his rather large friends. Had they had this

many muscles during the day or did they grow more at night? Or, maybe it happened when someone stormed their castle.

Ryker shoved Liam out of the way and crouched in front of her. "What are you doing here, *la mia sirena*?"

She bit her lip and glanced at the wall of men glaring down at her. There was no denying what she knew or why she was here. She wanted to be honest with him and not have secrets. These guys were part of whatever was going on with him. They should know she knew too. She drew in a breath and reached for her proof. She turned on her phone and the plate picture appeared. "I know who you are." Her words sounded quiet even to her.

Ryker's shoulders fell forward.

"No way!" Sean took her phone. "We scrubbed every picture off the internet." His thumbs moved around. "A *plate*?" he asked Ryker.

Ryker closed his eyes. "The king had them made the year my cousin married."

The guys passed around the phone, laughing and bemoaning that the plates were in existence at all.

"I'm checking eBay." Sean scrolled. "Bingo!" He tapped. "Aaaaand they're on the way."

"Can you get me a set?" Grace asked hopefully.

"On it." Sean kept scrolling. "It's Ryker's card on file anyway."

Ryker ignored all their chatter as he stared at Grace. She met his gaze, silently asking him a thousand questions.

What does this mean for us?

Will you stay with me?

Why are you dead?

His thumb brushed over her skin. She leaned toward him and he released her hand to cup her cheek.

"La mia sirena—"

Before he could say anything else, something clattered across the floor and then hissed.

"Gas!" Liam yelled, throwing a couch cushion over the canister and his body on top of that. Men shouted. Sean dropped, rolled, and came up with a gun in his hand pointed at the door. She didn't know they were packing though it made complete sense now.

Ryker grabbed her hand, and Mack grabbed Ryker, shoving him toward the wall behind the desk. "Hold your breath," he commanded them. Mack pressed a button and the wall moved. Ryker's grip on her hand was so tight she lost feeling in her fingers, and her shoulder hurt from being pulled. Mack shut the door behind them—he was always doing that!—and Ryker ran down a dark hallway to another door.

This one opened to the outside. "Go!" Ryker pushed her through first. She stumbled in her flip flops as she gasped for fresh air.

Twenty-Éight

R yker released the breath he'd been holding since the sound of the canister hitting the floor. He didn't know what type of gas it was, but he prayed Grace hadn't breathed any in. He ran his hands over her arms and then her neck, the pounding of her pulse under her silky skin and rapid intakes of breaths reassuring him she was fine. She gripped his shoulders and then moved her arms around his neck and crushed herself against him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"I am if you are." He moved back so he could evaluate her. His eyes had adjusted to the lack of light back here, and he could make out the worry on her face. "*La mia sirena* do not worry for me or these men. Worry for those who have attacked us. They will not walk out of there."

He kissed her cheek and then her nose, and as his eyes drifted shut to seal his love for her with his lips he was suddenly yanked out of her embrace.

"You dirty dog, she's young enough to be your daughter," growled a sinister voice in his ear.

Grace yipped in surprise and then dropped her hand over her mouth. Their eyes met and he silently told her to get out of the way. She stepped back.

Ryker kicked both feet in the air and then dropped, pulling the man forward and down with his momentum. Using that motion, he grabbed the back of the guy's shirt and pulled him forward, slamming him onto the pavement with a sick crunch. Ryker moved on instinct and sank his knee into the man's throat. "I will crush you if you move."

Inside the building, Mack's bellow echoed.

The man stilled, knowing he'd been beaten. His breath was loud,

wheezing through the small space Ryker allowed him. He tapped Ryker's leg like a beaten MMA fighter. Ryker laughed. "You think I would let you out?"

"I think you'll let him out," said a silky female voice. "We only came for you and that 1.5 million dollars, mob scum."

Ryker jerked his gaze up to where a woman pointed a taser at Grace. Grace hands both her hands up as if she could ward the thing off. She glared at the woman, ready to go to battle.

Ryker had no idea how much training either of them had, and he wasn't about to put Grace into a fight with a bounty hunter.

He lifted both his hands and then rushed to his feet and backed away so the guy couldn't sweep him. "Let her go."

"So she can run off and tell the others where you are? I don't think so." She motioned for Grace to move closer to Ryker. Get up, she said in Italian to the man on the ground.

Grace's head cocked to the side, and she looked at him. Did they really not know that he and Grace also spoke Italian?

"I'm trying, Lena!" barked the guy. He'd be barking for weeks to come with the damage to his windpipe. Ryker cocked a grin at him. He looked like he wanted to take Ryker's head off in return as he doubled over and concentrated on breathing.

"Let's go." Lena kicked at Grace, who scuttled out of the way. All Ryker saw was red. He lunged at the woman. She screamed and pulled the trigger. A shock rocked his system, making him jolt and stumble.

Grace charged the woman, taking her to the ground like a linebacker. They rolled, grunting and cursing in several languages, as they each struggled to gain an advantage over the other.

Ryker's brain cleared and he glanced down to see that only one of the taser barbs had caught his shoulder. The other lay on the pavement. He tugged it out and struggled to his feet to help Grace. Before he could get to her, the SEALs surrounded them.

Sean cuffed the man.

Mack pulled the women apart. Grace calmed immediately. Once she was on her feet, she ran for him. He opened his arms and held her close, knowing this would be the last time he would be able to do so. Diamond Cove was no longer a safe haven, and they would have to relocate. Wherever he was going, Grace would not be able to follow.

Twenty-Nine

G race sat on Ryker's lap in the office. They only had one couch cushion since Sean used the other to muffle and absorb the substance that came out of the gas canister. Therefore, they'd opted to share. His royal backside was being abused by the springs, but he refused to move.

Sean had retrieved a blanket from one of the boats and handed it to them. Grace wrapped them both up and laid her head on his shoulder, mentally and emotionally exhausted.

Ryker kissed her temple. "I cannot believe you fought for me." He traced the red, angry welt on her cheek where Lena had scratched her.

"She fought dirty." Grace breathed in his clean aftershave scent. He was so manly taking on that bounty hunter in hand-to-hand combat. "I didn't know you could fight like that. It's hot."

"I am a man of many talents," he murmured against her hair, sending all sorts of wonderful chills and thrills across her skin.

"Yes, you are," she agreed.

Mack came in, looked at them, rolled his eyes, and then sat on the coffee table. "We need to leave—soon."

Ryker hissed through his teeth. "Are there more of them?"

"We're working on that." He glanced at Grace. "She needs to go home."

Grace tightened her grip on Ryker. "I want to stay."

"You know the rules." Mack surged to his feet. "Work it out," he told Ryker.

Grace turned to him, hopeful. She put a finger over his mouth. He kissed it but didn't make a move to remove it. "I'm in love with you."

His stunning green eyes went a shade darker; if she had to give it a name,

it would have been the color of passion.

She hurried on, "I don't want you to leave. I don't need to know why you're here, why you faked your death. I just want you." She moved her hand and pressed her lips to his, wanting him to know in every way that she meant what she said.

He cupped her cheek and turned her head, taking control of the kiss. His was like the ocean, wild and with a rhythm all its own. All she could do was hold on while he carried her away.

When they were both spent, he brushed his fingers over the welt once more. "I will not put you in danger." He stood up, cradling her in his arms, and moved to the door.

A feeling that things were very, very wrong seized her chest, making it difficult to breathe. He set her on her feet and motioned to Sean. "Please, ensure she makes it home safely."

Before she could process what was happening, he stepped into the office and shut the door.

Sean gave her an apologetic smile.

She turned from him and pounded on the wood. "I HATE shut doors!!" she yelled.

Sean touched her arm.

Feeling the whole rejection—she'd poured her heart out and laid herself bare in front of Ryker, and he'd pushed her away—she slumped against the door. "I can't leave," she whispered. "I can't make myself leave." The action was physically impossible. Grandma Nancy would hold her head high and waltz out of here, but Grace didn't have that inside of her. She followed her heart and it brought her here. If she walked out now, she'd be leaving it with Ryker.

"I've got this," Mack moved Sean out of the way and lifted Grace into his arms. His solemn exterior matched how she felt inside, and she leaned into him. He put her in Sean's car and drove her to Grandma's bungalow.

It was still early enough that the only movement was the landscape company trimming hedges. He walked her to the door, silent. Her tears were noisy enough to wake the dead. How a man so big could move with such stealth was a mystery to her. She reached for the knob and he dropped a hand on her shoulder. "Be strong, wee one."

"Take care of him," she asked.

"It's my job." He straightened. "And he's my friend." He left like a

shadow at dawn.

Grace stumbled in and landed on the couch, burying her face in a pillow. The image of Ryker's face on a plate flashed in her mind and she laughed through her tears. "It's not funny," she said out loud.

Then she sent an email offering to buy the whole set from her friend.

Thirty

R yker paced the salvage company's office. Last night–this morning–time ran together when he was in a cloud of despair.

The empty gas canister sat on Sean's desk next to the treasure map. Lena said it had been filled with fluothane, a sleep gas. Had Sean not acted quickly, they may have all dozed off—not to wake up again because there was enough inside to put an elephant to sleep—or kill a room full of men.

Their plan had been to gas the guys and walk out with Ryker. If that didn't work, and the guys got out, they were going to corner him alone, which they did. Which did not turn out well for them.

He grimaced at the memory of the welt on Grace's cheek. It was the only visible wound she'd sustained in her fight with Lena. How many more did she have that he did not know about? He hated himself for not protecting her.

"You look like crap," said Sean as he came in carrying two boxes of pizza.

"It is eight a.m." Ryker ran his hand through his hair. He had slept for one hour on the spring-ridden couch. The SEALs had split up, each one scoping out their own apartments and places of employment. Lena was woefully inadequate as a bounty hunter, but she had gotten past their perimeter, and they weren't taking any chances.

So far, they'd taken two more bounty hunters into custody. They were in transport to the base. Prosecuting them through the courts would be tricky, considering they'd tried to kill a man who was already dead. The SEAL's commanding officer thought they may just stay in custody for a bit—giving the SEALs time to move out of Diamond Cove.

The man with Lena turned out to be her little brother. Little was a relative

term as he was twice her size. She thought his might would be enough to bring them success—and with lesser men, it may have worked. Not with Ryker and certainly not with the SEALs.

Liam had gone into his cyber cave to root out what was really going on and why Ryker Rockefeller was a target. He was not chipper when he did not sleep and he grumbled something about commemorative plates screwing everything up as he left.

Sean dropped the boxes on the coffee table. In the scuffle last night, one of the legs had broken off. Mack had glued it back together and clamped it in place.

"Thought you could use a taste of home." Sean opened the box and waved the scent of pineapple and ham toward him.

"We do not have Hawaiian pizzas in Isola de la Famiglia." He sat up and took a piece anyway, his stomach growling. "But I accept your offering." He took a bite. It tasted like disappointment and heartbreak.

"Don't act so grateful," Sean quipped as he took two pieces to make his sandwich. He sat down on the chair opposite Ryker and glanced at Ryker's face. "If it's that bad, don't eat it."

"I must eat to maintain life even if my world is dark and lonely."

"Oh, jeez." Sean threw his crust into the garbage can.

Ryker chewed. "The attacker last night said that I was too old for Grace. Do you think that is true?"

"What?" Sean swiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No."

Ryker flopped back on the couch. "I have lost my moonshell—the most rare and sought after of all shells. Her beauty shines forth no matter how dark the night. Her love is like—"

"Did you put a quarter in him or something?" asked Mack. He grabbed the bottom pizza box and ate out of it.

Liam drifted in, following his nose like a bloodhound. "Pizza? For breakfast?"

"It has bacon," Sean said around a bite.

"Hmmm, bacon." Liam scooped up a piece. "You're not going to believe what I found."

"What?" asked Mack as he reached for his third slice.

"Ryker Rockefeller," Liam said smugly.

"Present." Ryker lifted his hand.

"Not you! There's *another* Ryker Rockefeller. He's twice your age and is

in the witness protection program because he was part of the mob. I guess he was one bad dude."

Ryker slowly sat up. "You mean to tell me that the bounty hunters were after another Ryker Rockefeller, and I just happened to show up in Diamond Cove with his name?"

Liam nodded. "Looks like it."

Ryker lunged at him. Liam deflected his first attack, and soon the two of them were locked in a struggle. "I lost the love of my life—my eternal flame—because of the stupid name you picked!"

Liam didn't fight back as much as he deflected. "How was I to know there was a Ryker Rockefeller! It wasn't just me—we all named you."

They crashed into the coffee table, breaking off the clamped leg. Mack jumped in, pulling Ryker off, and Sean did the same with Liam. Ryker shook off Mack's hold, breathing hard.

Sean patted Liam's back. "We have to do something with him."

Mack nodded. "We could marry them."

Ryker rolled his head in that direction, mildly interested in their crazy idea. There was no way he could get married. He wasn't a citizen of this country. He was considered dead. "How?"

"Sean's a boat captain." He motioned to Sean. "International waters aren't that far away."

Ryker snapped to attention. "You are joking with me? This can be done?"

"I don't want to brag or anything, but I have an online certificate that says I can, legally, marry two people." Sean brushed off his shoulder.

Liam flipped his hair off his face like one of those actors in the superhero movies. "If you married her, she'd be a princess of Isola de la Famiglia, and we'd have to protect her."

Time stopped. Ryker looked every one of them in the eye. "If you are teasing me."

They all lifted their hands up. "No way," said Sean. "Not about this."

Ryker was on his feet and out the door. "Get the boat ready."

"Whoa there, your highness." Liam stepped in front of him. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To capture my lover's heart once and for all," Ryker lifted a hand in the air.

Sean came up behind him and slapped him on the back. "How about we spend five minutes planning this out." He sniffed Ryker's shoulder. "And you

shower?"

Ryker sniffed himself and winced. He smelled like Bob's couch. "You are right—for once. I cannot approach Grace looking and smelling like a man who sleeps in a warehouse."

"What's wrong with my warehouse?" Sean asked, offended.

"I will shower. You figure out how to kidnap my lady love for a sunset wedding." Ryker pounded Sean's shoulder. "I will be wed before nightfall."

Liam whispered loudly. "Is anyone going to ask Grace about this?" "Not it," said Sean.

Mack rolled his eyes. "She's going to say yes."

"You know this? How?" Ryker demanded.

"I was the guy who took her home last night. Trust me–she's not going to say no."

Ryker grinned. "There! You see. She cannot resist my charms."

Liam shrugged. "If you want to go down like that, I'm going to be there to watch."

"Me too," added Sean.

Ryker grinned at the group. "You may tease me and not treat me as one should treat a prince, but you have my back. And for that, I will let you stand up with me at my wedding."

"You'll *let* us?" Sean's forehead wrinkled.

Mack chuckled. "Let's give him this one. It is his wedding day."

Ryker's smile grew. What started out as the darkest day would turn into the brightest night. He had found a woman to love and make his family. He may have left his homeland behind, but he was starting a new family and that gave him hope like he'd never had before.

Thirty-One

N ancy stared at the pad of paper with a list of tasks, feeling like she was having an out of body experience. What a strange conversation she'd had with Sean. He was an imp and a troublemaker and a darn good friend to Ryker.

"What's this all about?" asked Harry as he, Polly, and Winnie filed into the conference room.

"We should wait for everyone." And I should be freaking out because Sean asked to kidnap Grace, but I'm not. Like grandpa, like grandson. Don thought kidnapping people was a viable answer to any question they came up against. Well, not any question—but more often than it should.

Walt, Rosa, and Don came in. Don had coconut cupcakes on a platter that he set in front of Nancy. She could almost forgive Don all his plans, which started with kidnappings when he brought in his baked goods. She smiled and pushed it farther down the table. "I'm keeping it together—barely. Just don't let them get too far away."

Samantha ran in, her white eyelet knee-length dress flowing around her legs. "Can we make this quick? I have a group waiting to make piñatas."

"Yes." Nancy straightened her back. "Ryker would like to marry Grace . . . tonight."

Everyone cheered.

Nancy held up her palm. "Grace has no idea. It's supposed to be a surprise."

Smiles faded into confused and concerned looks.

"A surprise wedding?" Polly asked. "Is that . . . legal?" she said the last word like she wasn't sure it was the right word to use.

"It's legal as long as Grace agrees at some point," Rosa replied. "Does she love him?"

"Yes. But she hasn't come out of her room all day."

"That's not a good sign," Walt ventured.

Polly patted his arm. "You're absolutely right."

Rosa pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Aya! Did they fight? If they are fighting, a wedding is not the answer."

"I don't know." Nancy lifted both her shoulders and her palms. "I was hoping you all would help me figure out what to do."

"Where is he planning this surprise wedding?" asked Walt. He knew all the nooks and crannies of the Cove.

"International waters," Nancy replied.

"Sounds fishy," Harry said.

Winnie elbowed him. "That was punny."

Nancy turned to Don. "You know Ryker and his friends best. What do you think?"

He stood up and said, "I need to make a phone call." He walked out of the room.

Polly tilted her head. "What do *you* think, Nancy? She's your granddaughter."

Nancy fiddled with her yellow legal pad. "My logical side says to tell Ryker to ship out and leave my granddaughter alone." She sighed. "But my intuition says that this is the right thing for Grace."

Polly nodded, encouraging Nancy to keep talking.

"With Elizabeth, I would hold fast to logic. But with Grace . . . It seems intuition is her guide. How can I ignore mine when it comes to her?" She glanced from face to face, each one waiting for her to make the decision.

They were not going to push her one way or the other. Which was good of them but also—she wanted someone to tell her what to do because it felt like she was swimming without a life jacket.

Don stepped back in—his phone in his hand.

"Well?" she asked.

He looked down. "It's a legitimate proposal."

"Okay then. Umm. I need a second." Nancy closed her eyes and went still. The air conditioning hummed. No one moved. In the silence and stillness, a sure feeling came over her. She popped open her eyes. "Let's kidnap Grace." "Whoop!" Harry threw his hat in the air.

Polly clapped.

Rosa lifted her arms and shook her hips.

Samantha grinned.

"This isn't our first wedding, folks," she referenced Julia's and Logan's wedding disaster that they'd stepped in and saved. "We can do this if everyone helps out. I don't want to just kidnap her and have her show up–I want her to arrive in style."

"What did you have in mind?" asked Rosa.

"Samantha, do you have the photos?"

"Right here." She pulled them out of her folder and laid them on the table. Everyone crowded in. "These are vintage wedding dresses from the 1920s."

"They look like those bohemian dresses at Leather and Lace," said Polly.

Winnie nodded. "I don't have time to sew this. It's too much."

"I know. We need to find one like this. Spread out, scour the local thrift shops and online marketplaces. Someone out there has to have a dress for my girl."

They all turned to Harry. "It could take all day." He scratched his jaw, and then he looked up, his eyes sparkling. "But I know where we can start."

Nancy glanced down the length of the table and noted Samantha's creased forehead. "Samantha, thank you for the pictures. I think we can handle it from here."

Samantha laughed with relief. "My day is packed. I'm off to make piñatas." She gathered her laptop and ran out of there as if her skirt was on fire.

"Don, do you think you could get a boat? We need a way to get her out to the wedding."

He tapped the side of his nose. "I happen to know a guy."

"I thought you might." Nancy laughed, her insides all bubbly. Her granddaughter was getting married!

"Polly, can you help me with a special assignment?" Nancy asked.

"Sure," she replied easily. "What can I do to help?"

"Bride preparation and distraction. We're going to give her a spa day, watch romance movies, doll her up, and then ship her out in time." Nancy stood up. She paused and then grabbed the plate of cupcakes. "I might need these."

"For what?" Polly asked.

"Barter." Nancy didn't explain. They went up to the salon and she exchanged the cupcakes for spa supplies—and a few hints about how to keep Grace's hair looking beautiful while flying across the waves to meet her groom.

She may be following her intuition, but quality hair advice was never thrown aside.

Thirty-Two

"I 'm too tired." Grace melted into Grandma's couch. Grandma and Polly had just said they were going on a dinner cruise and her bones turned to mush at the thought of having to go anywhere.

She'd been through four hours of massage, facials, creams, body scrubs, hair washing, conditioning, deep conditioning, masks, blowout, and style. The traveling massage therapist found a few sore spots on her hip and ribs from her tussle with the bounty hunter.

She still couldn't believe she'd taken on a bounty hunter. Not that she'd told Grandma the story. When Grandma finally broke into her room and demanded Grace get out of bed, she'd recoiled at the welt across her cheek.

It burned something fierce this morning.

"Where did that come from?" Grandma demanded.

"I—" Grace's hand had flown to her cheek, and the memory of Ryker softly tracing the wound flooded her with such tenderness her eyes welled up with tears. "Magnolia bush," was all she could get out.

Grandma hugged her and then dragged her into the front room where she and Polly—and a hired massage therapist—spent the day pampering her and feeding her whole foods. Grandma said she was off of sugar for a while and didn't need temptation in the house.

As if bran would lift her spirits. Grace wanted to swim in sugary treats. Bring on the peanut M&Ms and Sour Patch Kids.

"Can't we stay in tonight?" she asked hopefully. Running into Ryker—or any of the SEALs—would do her in. She just couldn't face the reminder of how she'd come so close to having the perfect man only to lose him in some gallant, gentlemanly gesture to protect her from harm. Assuming they hadn't left town yet., She didn't think he'd left. She would have felt it.

Winnie burst through the door carrying a white bohemian maxi dress that was spectacular. It had a tie around the waist that finished in tassels. The V-neck had an intricate embroidered pattern and the lace! It was to die for!

Grace had never seen a dress so beautiful.

"Put it on." Winnie thrust it at her.

"What? No. I couldn't."

"I saw this and thought of you. You'd better try it or you'll hurt my feelings." Winnie grinned.

Grace pushed herself up. "Well, we can't have any hurt feelings." She took the dress and went to her room to change. The women behind her twittered like excited birds.

With the dress on—it fit perfectly—she wandered to the mirror. Besides the pink in her eyes from holding back tears, she looked amazing. Her blonde hair was in large curls, gathered to cascade beautifully over her left shoulder. Her makeup was subtle, and her skin glowed. The welt had gone down considerably and was only visible if you knew to look for it.

She stepped out of her room, leaving the door wide open, and heard two gasps. Polly and Winnie rushed forward and fussed over her.

"You are too much, Winnie. This dress is amazing." She swished the fabric from side to side.

"You're so pretty." Polly dabbed at her eyes.

Grace touched her arm, concerned.

"Don't mind me. I always cry at-" she cut off. "--dinner cruises."

"Where's Grandma?" she asked, anxious to show her the tiny tassels that brushed her legs.

"I'm here." Grandma stepped out of her room wearing the blue and green dress they'd bought on their shopping trip. Her chin-length hair was sleek and her eyes bright.

Grace rushed to her. "You look so beautiful!" She threw her arms around her and hugged her tight.

"Thank you, dear. You've inspired me." Grandma's eyes shone with tears. The bracelets—yes, more than one!—clanked on her arms. She reached up and tucked a flower over Grace's left ear. "You're ready."

"Ready for what?" Grace asked, soaking in the love in Grandma's embrace.

"The dinner cruise—of course!" Winnie clapped her hands. "We're all going."

Polly led the way out to the curb, where Don waited with his golf cart. He offered his hand to help them each in. When he got to Grace he paused and gave her a side hug. She appreciated his kindness. Maybe Sean had told him about the breakup?

The golf cart had them at the docks in no time, and they were soon zooming across the water on a boat. Don drove. The ladies insisted Grace sit behind the windshield so her hair wouldn't be messed up. They were too kind, and it made her want to cry all over again.

Elizabeth had told her that there was magic in Diamond Cove. As far as Grace could see—the magic was in the residents and their big hearts.

Don pulled alongside a larger boat called Bluebell and tied off. A rope ladder came over the side. "Sorry, ladies." He grumbled. Tipping his head back, he cupped his hands around his mouth and called, "I have ladies aboard!"

A moment later, a swing lowered. Don grinned. "Whose first?"

Grandma jumped forward. "I've always wanted to try one of these."

Grace's mouth fell open. "You have not!"

Grandma laughed with abandon. "I have! And I'm checking it off my bucket list tonight."

Don held the seat steady as Grandma climbed on. Then she was hoisted up, kicking her feet as she went, her dress tucked under her legs for modesty.

"I'm taking the stairs!" Polly declared.

"Right behind you." Winnie grabbed onto the rope ladder, and the two of them made steady—albeit slow—progress.

Once Grandma was over the side of the boat, the swing came back down. "Are you ready?" Don asked.

She nodded. "Thank you for helping me feel better." She sat down, tucking her dress in as Grandma had done.

"It's all going to be okay," he assured her. His dark brown eyes were full of empathy and sparked with mischief.

She looked up at the bar hanging over the side of the boat, the rope holding her chair wrapped over it, and hoped it held.

As she rose into the air and was able to look out over the sparkling sea, she breathed in the salt and water and the beauty of the moment. She wasn't healed—not by a long shot— however, she could let this moment be one of

peace. Maybe being in the present was a gift Ryker had given her that she could use every day as a way to remember their time together.

As the swing cleared the side of the boat, she twisted toward the deck and almost fell out of the swing.

"Elizabeth!" she exclaimed, launching herself at her sister. Right behind her was Maisie and her mom and new step-dad. They surrounded her with their arms wide open, gathering her into their protective and loving circle. She began to cry. "I can't believe you're all here."

"Believe it," said Chad. He was a head taller than the rest of them. His bronzed skin glowed in the late evening light, and his pearly whites stood out.

Grandma must have arranged for them all to be on the dinner cruise. She searched for their matriarch but couldn't see past the cluster of people around her.

"Are you looking for someone?" asked Elizabeth, her eyes twinkling with delight.

"Grandma. I want to thank her for getting you all here." She hugged Maisie again. Her sister had put on some weight, finally getting back the roundness in her cheeks. The hollow, sunken-in phase of grief had scared Grace. "Did she have to use a crowbar to get you out of the house," she teased.

Maisie poked her in the ribs. "You have no idea."

They laughed together, tears still falling down Grace's cheeks.

"I thought maybe you were looking for Ryker." Elizabeth glanced at her nails as if she were bored.

Grace's stomach plummeted, and she grabbed it, pressing her palm over the swirling inside.

"I mean. You're totally in love with him, aren't you?" Elizabeth asked, meeting her gaze.

Grace nodded numbly. She couldn't deny it if she wanted to.

"Good!" Grace squealed as she stepped to one side. Maisie stepped to the other, opening a path. Grace's gaze traveled up the red carpet line, past the rest of Grandma's friends, past Aaron and Cocoa, and Sean, Mack, and Liam to Ryker, who stood under a magnolia-covered archway wearing a tuxedo.

Grace couldn't breathe at the sight of him. He was too perfect. Too handsome. He strode to her, his hand held out. She rushed forward and grasped it. "What are you doing here? Are we safe? Are you safe?"

He lifted one cheek in a bashful smile. "We are safe." He cleared his

throat. "I am here—and you are here," he softly brushed her cheek, "because I am on the most important mission of my entire life." He got down on one knee.

Grace blinked as she realized what he was about to do. She teetered, her legs about to give out.

Maisie stood behind her, one hand on her lower back to help her stay steady. "Hang in there just a little longer," she whispered. "The best part is yet to come."

Grace nodded, her heart suddenly beating a thousand beats a minute and flooding her body with strength.

"Grace Margaret Matthews, you are the woman of my dreams. I had to die in order to find you, but you came into my life on these white sandy beaches, and I would be a fool to let you slip away from me because I am afraid."

"*Que lindo*. He's doing an excellent job," Rosa whispered loudly to Harry.

He nodded. "Wait until she sees the ring."

Grace met Ryker's eyes, and they shared silent laughter at the commentary happening around them. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a ring box. When he cracked it open, everyone took a step closer to them to look at it.

Grace, who had been crying most of the day, now fought the desire to burst out laughing.

The ring was a five-piece set made from rose gold, crystal, turquoise, and sea shells. It was the most unique wedding ring design she'd ever seen, and she loved it at first sight. The rose gold was the color of the sunset on the ocean, the crystal reminded her of the glass dome on the library, the turquoise stone was the same color as her eyes, and the sea shell? Well, she'd first kissed him with a moonshell in her hand. He couldn't have chosen anything more beautiful or perfect for her.

"Will you marry me—"

"Yes!" She nodded.

Everyone cheered and stood back, giving them room to hug and kiss.

"Now?" Ryker said against her lips.

"Now what?"

"Will you marry me now?"

She pulled back and stared into his handsome green eyes. "Now, now?"

She glanced over at the flowered arch. Sean stood under it in full dress uniform, holding a Bible open in his hands. The rest of the SEALs, including Aaron, lined up on the groom's side. They looked so handsome in their uniforms—so serious.

"Uh . . ." Her gaze darted to her family. Her sisters were in matching dresses—different colors, but the same dress, and her mom wore a variation of it in gold.

The sun touched the water on the horizon, and the sky turned a beautiful salmon pink, bathing them all in its glorious, warm light. It was a sign. A sign that this was a moment outside of time. It would exist forever in the past that they would build upon, the present where they expressed their love, and the future that they would build together.

"Yes. I'll marry you right now."

At her acceptance, everyone who wasn't in their place hurried to it. Grandma's friends—her friends now—and her parents and Grandma filled the white folding chairs on deck. Her sisters stood by her.

It was all so busy, and then everything was still. Even the sea seemed to calm for this moment and the boat stopped rocking.

Ryker took her hand and said the words that pledged his heart to hers forever.

When it was Grace's turn, she felt the brush of her ancestors on the breeze and knew they were as happy for her as everyone on the ship.

Before the sun disappeared, she became Mrs. Ryker Rockefeller. Ryker kissed her slowly and happily until his buddies started whistling. Grace laughed. Her tears had been turned to joy, and she was whole with both her logical side and her heart side in complete agreement.

Everyone lined up to congratulate the couple. Cocoa had brought a display of tarts, wedding cookies, and cake. They talked and laughed well into the night. The guests eventually loaded onto Don's boat, and he shuttled them back to shore.

Grace and Ryker settled in on the deck with a blanket. A fire roared in the gas fireplace before them. The SEALs had to stay aboard, but they'd taken up sentry positions as inconspicuously as possible. Grace didn't mind them there —she liked his friends, and she adored them for being so loyal to Ryker.

Grace fed Ryker a piece of the wedding cake. "What is so funny, *la mia sirena*?"

"Grandma always said I'd never find a husband while hunting dead

people."

Ryker nudged her nose with his. "You married a dead man."

She brushed her fingers across his temple and then down the back of his head. "I guess I did."

"At the moment, things are not easy for me. They will be complicated for us."

"I know. But I'd rather have a life with you that's complicated than be alone and have it easy."

He kissed her cheek and then her neck. "*Ti amo*," I love you, he whispered, then continued in Italian for only her ears, "You are now a princess, but you will always be my queen."

His deep voice and accent made her belly swirl and her headlight. She placed her hands on both sides of his face and kissed him deeply, then whispered back in his native tongue, "I don't want to hear another word in English until we are off this boat."

He chuckled against her neck. "Prometto."

Grace leaned into his kiss, knowing he would keep his promises to her. All of them. In this, she found safety and a place to settle her wandering spirit. Her wanderlust was gone and the only place she wanted to be was in Ryker's arms. Instead of feeling confined or trapped, her soul expanded as if it could breathe for the first time.

She'd enjoy being close to her family, a job with roots that made her soar with happiness and her heart match in Diamond Cove.

Z piloque

N ancy glanced down at her light blue sundress and smiled. It wasn't the boho fashion that Grace loved, but it was loose and pretty, and she felt like herself—not the old Nancy who ran business meetings in her sleep, but the new Nancy she'd discovered in Diamond Cove.

Even the new Nancy had work to do. Samantha was running late, but they could start without her and Nancy would catch her up once she arrived.

She called the Secret Seven meeting to order. "Well done, everyone. Well done. Grace and Ryker are settling in and are so very much in love. It does my heart a lot of good." She tapped her chest, just over the organ that had malfunctioned and forced her into retirement. In an odd way, she was grateful for the circumstances that seemed so horrible at the time but had brought about so much good.

Polly beamed.

Walt ducked his head in modesty.

Don puffed out his chest.

Winnie patted her hair.

Rosa fanned her face and batted her eyelashes.

And Harry . . . stared at the table.

It was his turn to set up one of his grandchildren, and he fidgeted in his seat.

"With so many matches—and another wedding on our board—I think we are ready for whatever Harry has for us today. Take it away, Harry."

"Ahem." Harry cleared his throat and closed his eyes for just a moment behind his wire-rimmed glasses. He took a deep breath and stood, a little wobbly on his feet. He reached for the edge of the table and steadied himself. "Are you okay, Harry?" Nancy's studied him, concern building. His eyes were unfocused. She put out a hand as if to help him.

"Of course." Harry waved her off. "Hazards of getting up ... in years."

"Ha ha," Don said dryly, but he watched Harry with a sharpness that said he was ready to jump into action should Harry need him.

Harry walked to the murder board haltingly, his forehead shiny with beads of sweat at his

brow. His already pale Scottish complexion went pallid. "My turn, huh?" He chuckled half-heartedly.

Nancy eyed him carefully. A set of nerves was one thing, but this felt like something else.

"Time to set up my...gr—" His shoulders rolled forward slightly, and he put a hand to his

chest. "My grandson...Lucas."

He was not okay. Nancy stood, almost toppling her chair as she rushed to get

to Harry's side. "What's wrong?" This felt all too familiar. Though the last time she was in this situation, she was the one having chest pains and shortness of breath.

He breathed out a laugh that held no mirth. "Just felt like someone was knuckling my

sternum there for a second."

"Oh my! He's having a heart attack!" Rosa, too, jumped from her chair.

"Should we call 9-1-1?" Winnie asked.

"I'll call Virginia." Polly fumbled with her purse to find her phone.

Nancy spun and grabbed her chair. "Sit down," she commanded Walt–her boardroom voice taking over. He did and she started pushing him out of the conference room. Don came around and took over. "Too the lobby," she instructed. It would be easier for paramedics to get to him there.

Harry nodded, hand still at his chest.

"Walt?" She caught his concerned gaze. "Find Ty."

Ty Curtis wasn't a doctor, but as The Palms' physical therapist he'd be easier to find, and

he'd been trained in CPR. Walt rushed out of the room. The rest of the Secret Seven followed, clumped together. Polly had Virginia on the phone and was talking her through what was happening. Rosa prayed, her hands pressed together in front of her shirt, her squinted into slits. Nancy was the last one out. She shut the door firmly behind her. If something happened to Harry, it was important that the Secret Seven match Lucas for him.

Harry had never let them down and she'd make sure they did the same thing for him.

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USA Today Bestselling and Award-winning Author Lucy McConnell loves Christmas, romance, chocolate and Elvis.

She believes that clean romance books should keep you up past your bedtime, tickle your funny bone, and have a happy ending.

With that in mind, she's written over 100 novels full of fun and flirty characters who navigate the turbulent waters of romance with open hearts, a sense of humor, and creativity. If you enjoy sweet romance stories with great kissing scenes, you'll love her books.

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