

# Seaside Cowboy's

Marriage of Convenience



ALEXA VERDE

# **Seaside Cowboy's Marriage of Convenience**

Seaside Cowboys

Book 3

~

By Alexa Verde

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# SEASIDE COWBOY'S MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

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# About Seaside Cowboy's Marriage of Convenience



*A lonely reclusive heiress, a friendly veterinarian, an act of desperation... Can people so different fill the empty parts of each other's lives?*



Poor rich girl Kennedy Crawford still blames herself for her cousin disappearing when they were children. When Kennedy's loving uncle who practically raised her wants to see her married in his lifetime, she turns to Austin Lawrence, the trustworthy, reliable town veterinarian with a golden retriever personality (and a brand new puppy), offering a fake engagement. But a long-hidden secret between their parents could tear them apart.



Austin's had a crush on the sad, reclusive heiress for years, but the difference in their social status stopped him from approaching her. He's not one to pretend, but how can he refuse to help her now?



What will happen to their growing feelings for each other when a new clue that Kennedy's cousin might still be alive takes Austin and Kennedy on a dangerous journey neither one of them expected?



*Welcome to Port Sunshine, a small coastal town where a family of cowboy brothers discover the treasures of love and uncover the mysteries of their pasts.*



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# Dedication



This book's dedication is by my wonderful reader, Shelly B.,  
in loving memory of her mother.



Her chosen dedication:

*In memory of my dear mother, Carol—taken too soon by  
COVID—who taught me the love of reading and proofreading  
too :)*



# Chapter One



MARINA'S WEDDING WAS the first social outing Kennedy Crawford voluntarily attended in many years. The business functions she couldn't avoid in her job didn't count. She squirmed in her wooden seat in Marina's mother-in-law's backyard where they were holding the reception. The mouthwatering scents of barbecue and roasted potatoes floated to her, but she didn't feel hungry. Rather, awkward.

Being among people in large gatherings put her stomach in knots, so she'd gone the opposite way from her socialite parents who'd loved to party. And unlike them, shy and introverted Kennedy didn't have many friends to start with. Any real friends, not those who'd tried to befriend her because of her inheritance. Her rib cage constricted. She didn't want to spoil the happy event, so she ducked her head and hid behind a large glass of tea.

Her budding friendship with Marina was too precious to let Kennedy refuse the invitation. Marina was a glorious bride in an off-the-shoulder white dress she paired with a wreath of wildflowers, beaming at her newlywed husband. And he looked back at her with so much love.

Wistfulness unraveled Kennedy's carefully managed emotions. But really, what did she have to complain about? She straightened her back and took a bite from a barbecue rib to keep up the appearance, arranging her features into a cheerful mask. No point in moping, especially at a wedding. She was fortunate to have what she had, and she knew it. And if she'd been lonely, she had only herself to blame.

After all, it was her fault she'd lost her cousin, who'd been as close as a sister. A soul twin.

A knife turned inside her, cutting loose a familiar pain. She welcomed the pain because she deserved it. And because the

moment she stopped feeling it would be the moment she'd forget Zoey, and Kennedy didn't want that.

"Would you like me to refill your iced tea? Or bring you something else to eat?" Austin's concerned voice reached her as he leaned closer, giving her a whiff of his fresh aftershave.

Right. She'd forgotten she wasn't alone. "No thanks. I'm good." A wisp of hair escaped the updo her stylist had decorated with crystals, and the wind threw it in her face. She tucked it behind her ear with an impatient gesture.

"Okay. How about the next dance, then?" He smiled at her.

Keeping the smile in place got more difficult. "Thanks for asking. But I'll have to respectfully decline."

"Oh. Okay." Disappointment flashed in his eyes, and he deflated in his dashing tuxedo. Great looks and great character sure ran in the Lawrence family. "How about the one afterward, then?"

Seriously?

She suppressed a groan and thumped her ice-tea glass onto the table so fast the liquid nearly sloshed. "I don't dance."

"I understand." He shifted away.

Great. Stifling a groan against the guilt, she hid behind the glass while sipping the cold drink. Sunlight sent golden flecks through the amber liquid. While she didn't know Austin well, everyone in town seemed to like the friendly veterinarian who always had a kind word not only for people but also animals. Her uncle often said one could judge someone's character by the way they treated children or animals.

She shouldn't have been rude. She was irritated with herself, not him. Partly because Zoey would never fall in love, never get married, never smile again. All because of Kennedy. Partly because Uncle called this morning and said they needed to talk. At lunch tomorrow.

She stole a glance at Austin. Surprising how he hadn't left his surly neighbor—namely, her—but rather stayed in his chair, sipping tea.

As the groom's brother and a groomsman, Austin showed up without a plus-one. Apparently, someone had thought to punish him by seating him near her, who was also without a plus-one.

Why couldn't she be nicer to him?

Because she'd be ice water to his fire. And not only because of her cerulean-hued party gown where crystals studding the bodice glimmered like water drops while the reddish tones in his fiery hair lit him up. She'd been called out far too many times for her frosty attitude. It was a miracle she'd not only survived in the hospitality industry but also made wise decisions in it. She'd douse his enthusiasm in no time.

"That doesn't mean you should be rude to him. It's just one dance, not a lifetime together." Uncle's voice rang in her ears.

He'd always been her voice of wisdom. And everything important she'd learned, she'd learned from him. Never mind that her parents had sent her to one of the best schools in Europe to study. Also, to be as far away from them as possible after she'd started asking inconvenient questions.

What did Uncle want to talk about? Her stomach clenched, and the barbecue turned sour there. His tone had suggested the conversation wouldn't be easy.

Marina caught her gaze and lifted her lemonade glass in a silent toast. Kennedy did the same with her own glass. Then Marina shifted her gaze to Austin, frowned, and said something to her newlywed husband.

Kennedy's heart fell into the grass. "Sorry," she mouthed to Marina. Not a great start to a friendship.

Her uncle also often said it didn't cost anything to be kind. She felt like she'd kicked a puppy—or at least the puppy's caring doctor. So she leaned to Austin. "On the other hand, I can make an exception. I'd love to have the next dance."

"Really?" His face lit up.

“Really.” Wow, could it be so easy to bring someone joy? How would she know? She seldom brought people joy, something her mother stated too many times.

“I’m glad.” He got up and gave her his hand.

She took it, and for an inexplicable reason, tingles erupted over her skin. Weird. She was immune to romance and male charm—wasn’t she? His large palm, somewhat callused from physical labor, cradled hers. She liked the feeling. Often, the hands she shook in business were smooth, greasy from lotion, and sporting a diamond ring or two. She’d often had to put on appearances in those meetings, and other people had, as well.

Austin was... was real, down-to-earth, and it made her pause and take notice.

He led her to the space cleared on the grass for dancing. Kai and Marina joined them with the handful of couples already there, having eyes only for each other.

Kennedy placed her free hand on his shoulder, the tuxedo smooth under her fingertips, his shoulder hard beneath it. Hmm. No padding? His fingers curled around her other hand, and he led her confidently but without trying to get too close, not using the opportunity to hold her too tight. He whirled her around when the dance required it, and her head started spinning. Then she made the mistake of looking into his eyes.

“Why do you always look so sad?” Those blue eyes studied her with a genuine interest. Not as if he tried to score, like other guys did with her, but as if he cared.

Not many people on this earth cared about her—not her wealth—and one of those people had a difficult conversation in store for her. Was it connected to Uncle’s physical? He was supposed to get results today.

“Do I *always* look sad?” she deflected. Years of practice.

“Well, every time I saw you at the library. At first, I thought it was because you had to study. And I don’t know any people who like to study.” His gaze flicked to the newlyweds. “Except Marina maybe.”

Kennedy shrugged. “It’s just my facial expression, I guess.”

He held her hand, but he also held her gaze.

Why couldn’t she look away? Her heart shifted.

“What would cheer you up?” Concerned notes coated his voice.

“You already did.” She meant it. She felt lighter dancing with him, even talking to him somehow made it easier to breathe.

“I hope so.”

The music stopped, and a strange disappointment uncoiled inside her. She hadn’t wanted to dance to start with.

He led her back to their seats. She nodded to her empty glass, her throat parched. “You know, I’d love more tea.”

He brightened again. “Coming right up.”

“Thanks.”

He returned with a carafe filled with amber liquid and ice cubes and poured some into her glass. They’d melt fast in the sun. But what was much more surprising was how much her resolve seemed to melt in his presence.

Her hand shook and knocked the glass over, sending tea flowing across her dress. Ruining it in a second.

“So sorry.” He snatched the glass, his features crumpling.

She reached for some napkins. “Not your fault. *I* knocked the glass over.”

“But *I* brought the tea.”

Marina rushed to her. “I’ll take you to the bathroom. Let’s try to save your dress.”

“It’s okay.” Kennedy wasn’t going to worry about her ruined dress. She knew too well that some things couldn’t be saved.

Her dress was the least of them.



At home to check on his pet during the clinic's lunch break, Austin rubbed Caramel's head gently, tenderness spreading inside him after the puppy finished her kibble. But another feeling spread inside him, too. Disappointment.

He frowned. "I can't believe I missed my chance with Kennedy. If there was a chance, I ruined her beautiful dress!" Which probably cost more than he earned in a month. Twice more. Or was it three times?

Caramel gave a baby bark as if she couldn't believe that either. Then she lifted herself on her hind paws and hung onto his slacks with her front paws.

"Let's get you outside so you can get your business done." He picked up the little one, and she licked his face with enthusiasm.

He chuckled. It was difficult to remain upset around animals, which was why he loved what he did for a living. Then he frowned. Yesterday, a furry patient with an upset stomach had thrown up on him, and then two days ago, there'd been that cat who couldn't make it because of his age. His rib cage constricted. Well, *mostly* loved what he did.

Austin took the puppy outside the small ranch house he'd built close to his spacious childhood home. He breathed in fresh air filled with the scent of grass, grateful for God's beauty around him. He'd wanted to be right there at the ranch for any sick animals or birthing complications or vaccinations or the myriad of other reasons ranches needed vets handy.

And fine, for his mom's cooking.

His mouth watered at the memory of today's bacon-and-scrambled-egg breakfast. Then his stomach growled, missing more of Mom's cooking because he'd gotten held up at the vet clinic and didn't make it to the family lunch.

But he missed Kennedy much more.

"Do you think I can find any way to correct my faux pas?" he asked the puppy.



Instead of replying, Caramel tumbled off to explore every bug and plant in proximity, wobbling on paws too large for her little body. Probably because she didn't know what a faux pas was. Or thought it was a *fox paw* like he had when he'd been little.

A gorgeous orange-and-black monarch butterfly landed on Caramel's nose, and the puppy froze. Then she sneezed, and the butterfly flew away. Caramel ran to Austin to complain.

He leaned to her and stroked her smooth latte-hued fur. "That's life, buddy. We can't keep someone that beautiful close to us for a long time. Especially if we mess up."

"Are you talking about the butterfly or Kennedy?" Kai's voice made Austin look up at his older brother.

Caramel ran up to Kai, sniffed his cowboy boots, remembered Kai was a friend, and ran to chase a much more interesting object. A ladybug.

Austin straightened out. "Both. What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be with Marina?"

As a newlywed, Kai spent nearly all his free time with his wife. They'd postponed the honeymoon because they were renovating his house on the family ranch. His face under a black bandanna radiated so much happiness that envy pinched Austin's heart, just a pinch, but enough to make its teeny presence known.

Kai jiggled a large paper bag. "I would, but she and Mom sent me your way because you missed lunch. There's a sandwich with brisket, pickles, and onions inside."

The bag indeed emanated a mouthwatering aroma.

"Thanks. That's kind of them." Austin's chest expanded as he accepted the gift. He couldn't begrudge two of his brothers the marital bliss they'd found. "How are Mom's cooking lessons for Marina going?"

"You don't want to know." A line creased Kai's forehead, the expression typical of his wife. While some owners would eventually resemble their pets, Austin found that some married couples started subconsciously mimicking each other's

gestures and expressions. Though it usually took way more time.

Caramel did her business and moved after a slug. The slug moved in another direction, clearly not keen to make her acquaintance but unable to run away. Or fly away. Caramel barked happily, finding herself a buddy. He'd better take her to visit her sister at Kai's place.

"But Marina is trying so hard, so I eat everything she cooks and say it's great." Kai lowered his voice as if Marina could hear him. "Even if it tastes like cardboard. I love her too much to tell her."

"Why don't *you* cook?" Mom taught her sons how to cook from a young age. Bake, too, for that matter. Austin had never developed much love for cooking, though he could do it if needed, but Kai was great at it.

"I volunteered!" Kai threw up his arms. "Lots of times. But Marina wants to do this for me."

Austin rolled his eyes. "Poor baby. His beautiful and successful wife loves him so much she makes an effort to learn things that are challenging for her, and he's complaining."

"I'm not complaining! Honest. I'm the happiest man alive. And I mean it. I dreamed of Marina for so long that sometimes I still have difficulty believing she's my wife now." The lopsided grin that used to make all the women in his vicinity swoon made its grand appearance. But the family knew Kai had eyes only for one girl. His best friend, Marina.

Ignoring another wistful jolt to his heart, Austin scooped up Caramel. "Sorry, buddy. We gotta get going. I need to return to the clinic so I can help other puppies like you. And kittens. And birds. And turtles. And many other pets."

Maybe Austin wasn't meant to have his own family. His siblings and Mom and his furry patients were his family already. One giant rambunctious family he adored.

*Thank You, Lord, and please keep them safe and happy.*

Kai fell into step with him as they walked back to Austin's house. "Marina is also suggesting a double date for you with

Kennedy.”

Austin stopped, nearly tripping in his surprise, then resumed his pace. “After the dress fiasco at your wedding? I doubt Kennedy would agree. Besides, what’s the point? Our social statuses are too different.”

“Then how about taking her flowers and chocolates as a way of apology?”

Caramel barked her approval.

“Good idea.” Austin perked up.

“Can’t take credit. Marina came up with it. She’s the brain and the beauty in our family. I’m just the guy who loves her with his whole heart.” Kai beamed. “By the way, I can usually hear barking a mile away from your yard. Now it’s silent. What happened? You’re not fostering the shelter animals anymore?”

Caramel barked, likely insisting she’d work hard to rectify the lack of noise.

Austin ran up the porch, holding the puppy and food in separate hands, keeping his lunch far away from the curious little wet nose and already sharp baby teeth. “The shelter’s huge adoption project worked out better than we hoped. For the first time, it’s just me and one puppy.”

Her whole little body wriggling now, Caramel barked again, eager to show she wasn’t just “one puppy”—she was “*the* puppy”—and she should be treated as such.

Kai waved at his brother from the first step. “Oh, and take Caramel with you. The puppy is a charmer. Also Marina’s idea, not mine.”

For the rest of the day, excitement tingled under Austin’s skin as he worked at the clinic. He couldn’t wait to see Kennedy again. Then apprehension would sweep it away.

What if she wouldn’t even open the front door to him?

Finally, after choosing his best suit—fine, his *only* suit—and an azure-blue tie and combing his short hair for the fifth time, he scowled at himself in the mirror. “Should I wear a

cowboy hat? Or not? And is this tie okay?" he asked Caramel and himself. Not that he had much choice in ties.

Unlike Kennedy, he'd never gone to any upscale gatherings, only family ones, so his brothers' weddings were the dressiest events he'd attended. Even there, people could show up in Bermuda shorts and barefoot if they wanted.

The puppy tilted her head and gave two short barks, which he took to mean that, as long as he had her with him, he should be fine no matter what he wore. With the energetic ball of cuteness wearing an azure ribbon that matched his tie, she was undoubtedly right.

And after all, this wasn't a date. Just him offering an apology.

"Okay, my wing... my wing-girl, I'll pick you up soon. I don't want you to stay in the hot truck cab while I'm getting flowers and chocolates."

As he drove off, he wished he knew what types of chocolates and flowers Kennedy liked. His hands-free phone in the truck announced Kai calling.

Austin answered, "Hello, Kai."

"Are you on the way to get those chocolates and flowers?"

Austin made a turn, then infused a few teasing notes into his voice. "Are you *that* worried about my happiness?"

Kai chuckled. "Actually, Marina asked me to call you. *She's* that worried about *Kennedy's* happiness. So, just in case you wondered what kind of chocolates and flowers to buy..."

Austin sat straighter in his seat as he made another turn and pulled up to the grocery store. "Yes, please. I'd love to know. And thanks." Of all his brothers, Austin always felt closest to Kai, never mind that Kai was adopted.

"I thought so. Kennedy loves caramel chocolates. They're her favorite."

"Hmm." Austin thought about his puppy's name. What a coincidence. "Now what about the flowers?" He found a spare parking space and parked his truck.

There was a pause. “My beautiful wife doesn’t have information on that. But there’s a painting in Kennedy’s hotel office of her mother holding a hibiscus bouquet.”

Austin nodded as he turned off the engine. “Okay, thanks. Do you think that will be enough?”

“I say fancy chocolates and flowers are nothing to sneeze at. And let’s face it, it’s difficult to do worse than you did at the wedding.”

Austin rolled his eyes. His brother just couldn’t be serious—okay, he was serious about Marina—but he did have a point. “You’re not helping. Okay, fine, you’re helping. A lot. Thank your better half for me.”

Happy laughter reverberated through Austin’s rusty truck. “Yes, I’ll thank my better, smarter, and much more attractive half.”

Austin had lived his life without envy. Maybe because he’d spent most of his time with animals instead of people. But, for the second time in one day, he wanted to have what his favorite brother had.

Soon, he picked up Caramel, and they were on the way to Kennedy’s place. He kept the large box with the fanciest and most expensive caramel chocolates he could find in the local store—okay, the best of the two choices available—far away from Caramel. First, because chocolates were super harmful to dogs. Second, because he couldn’t present Kennedy with candies the puppy had chewed up.

The bouquet of magenta-hued hibiscuses was lying on the passenger seat. He didn’t know hibiscus even had a scent, but the ones the florist sold him gave off a wonderful aroma. “I hope Kennedy likes these,” he told Caramel over the grumbling motor.

Caramel growled in response from the back, probably because she didn’t like being kept away from things she had a duty to explore.

He pulled up outside Kennedy’s place, which, so help him, looked more like a refrigerator than a cozy house. The flat-

roofed place offered two stories cast in the unbroken geometric lines of a rectangle where floor-to-ceiling windows glistened like ice. When it was built, Port Sunshine had gossiped about the bold avant-garde architecture. They still spoke of it and the designer, but Austin just couldn't see it.

Shaking his head, he plucked Caramel from the truck and snapped on her leash, which earned him a soulful reprimand from her puppy-dog eyes. Then, with the peace offerings gripped in his other hand, he started up the walk to the refrigerator—ahem, house.

In the time it took for Kennedy to open the door, he nearly turned around and left. But the thought of giving up on seeing her hurt too much. Plus, the door camera must've recorded his presence.

In a knee-length, sleeveless white dress, she looked simple and chic. But the belt, while likely fashionable, consisted of large metal rings that reminded him of some crude chain used to tie up a poor dog in some movie and gave him the urge to help her break free. Her signature silver bracelets clanked as she reached to push back the long blonde hair that hugged her bare shoulders and swished down her back. The dress looked too expensive to wear at home, but then, she lived a thousand scales higher than he did.

His heart received the jolt it always got in her presence.

With so many great women in town, why did he have to be attracted to someone so far out of his league?

“Hello, Austin.” Her gray eyes warmed as she smiled. But then, she grimaced and moved back.

Uh-oh. She wasn't glad to see him. His heart dropped and rolled over her marble tile as she rearranged her features into a neutral expression. She hesitated but then waved for him to walk inside.

Maybe it was the refrigerator house that made her look so icy and aloof. He was half afraid to enter it. But he and Caramel did while Caramel gave her own greeting. He kept her on the leash because the puppy jerked forward to explore

the new place. But too much glass and metal—metal tables with glass tops and long mirrors with metal frames—made him feel he had indeed stepped inside a refrigerator and was about to be chilled on a glass shelf.

In keeping with those thoughts, everything was black, gray, or white, and only the succulents offering their salad greens seemed to break that up. Even the oil paintings depicting weird spheres and squares and the geometric figures on the rugs remained colorless.

Did people *like* things like this? Give him the ranch house or his kitschy vet clinic with bright pet murals any day.

Time to focus. He cleared his throat.

“I wanted to apologize for ruining your dress. I’m very sorry.” He lifted the flowers and chocolates. “These are for you. Well, these are. The puppy isn’t a gift, though,” he added to avoid any confusion. He admired Kennedy, but he loved Caramel too much already to give her away.

“Thank you. But you don’t need to apologize. The dress wasn’t ruined. I had it dry-cleaned, and it looks fine now. By the way, your pet is adorable.”

Caramel preened, eager to confirm she was, indeed, adorable, though she’d most likely expected the compliment. Kennedy leaned to pet the puppy but didn’t move forward to accept his gifts. On the contrary, she stepped back as if to put distance between them. Maybe in her world people apologized with diamonds.

What did he know?

Her face took on that awkward expression when one wanted to say something unpleasant but didn’t know how to say it. She scrunched her cute nose, and her eyes started watering.

Oh no. “Regardless, I wanted to apologize.” And there were many other things he wanted to say, like asking her out. Breathing became difficult, and he loosened his tie.

Some noise like a cup placed on the table reached him from what must be a dining room. Huh. There were men’s

shoes in the hall. Fancy, shiny ones. Was that the faint scent of cologne?

The brisket sandwich soured in his stomach. She wasn't alone. Of course not. She had a guest. A guy.

He retreated as heat tingled up his neck. His cheeks must match his hibiscuses by now. Of course, a woman like her had suitors. Most likely, lots of them. He should've called first. Or just sent the gifts with an apology note. "You're with someone." Did that sound rude?

She glanced back, unmistakable love softening her features. "Yes."

"I'll be going then." He handed her the chocolates and bouquet.

"About that." She stepped back and sneezed into her elbow. "I happen to..." She sneezed again. "The thing is..." And again.

That looked like an allergic reaction, and he'd brought in the allergen. Caramel crouched back, cocking her head and blinking big puzzled eyes. She'd never been sneezed at yet.

"Are you allergic to dogs?" He placed his peace offering on the antique side table and scooped up Caramel, who looked at him innocently.

"No!" Kennedy sneezed again, contradicting her answer.

"Darling, why don't you invite your guest here?" A deep male voice rumbled from inside the house.

The endearment sliced at Austin. Plus, he'd made things worse between him and Kennedy. Seemed he had a talent for it.

"I..." She sneezed again, this time nearly doubling in half. Was it his imagination, or did the glasses in the dining room tremble?

"I'll see myself out. I'm sorry." Cringing, he rushed to the door, Caramel on the leash sliding on her paws on the marble alongside him. Before the front door, he swept up the puppy and then tumbled down the porch.



What a disaster! He glanced back.

Kennedy stepped onto the porch. Her nose was red and swollen now, and her pale pink lipstick was smudged. Her eyes were puffy, as well, and the only reason no black rivers ran down her cheeks must be because her mascara was waterproof. Too bad his actions weren't *fool*proof. She still looked lovely, but he shouldn't have done this to her.

"Austin, wait!" she yelled.

He placed Caramel, who was still silent from shock, on the asphalt and lifted his arms in an apology. "It's okay. Sorry for this disaster. Caramel and I will be going. Unless you'd like me to bring you medicine from the pharmacy."

"No, it's..." Another sneeze did double her in half. "It's okay."

*It* was many things, but definitely not okay.

He didn't dare to look at her again. "Let's *hightail* it out of here," he muttered to Caramel, whose ribbon was askew now. On a closer look, his tie was askew, so they matched again.

Caramel lifted her tail as she trudged to his truck as if taking his request literally.

He slipped into his trusty vehicle, a lump in his throat. There was no chance of anything between him and Kennedy, anyway. She seemed to be allergic to dogs—at least, he sure hoped she wasn't allergic to *him*—but he couldn't give up Caramel. And he worked with dogs every day. Even if he showered and changed before coming home, some fur particles could be left on his truck seats, for example.

Disappointment ripping through him, he peeled away from Kennedy's so fast he nearly burned rubber. Caramel whined from the back seat.

A voice announced Kai calling on the hands-free phone. "How did it go?"

Austin groaned. "Remember you said fancy chocolates and flowers are nothing to sneeze at?"

"Yes?"

“And that I couldn’t do any worse than I already had at the wedding?”

“I said it would be difficult to do any worse, not that you couldn’t do it.” Kai’s voice turned cautious as if he started getting the idea.

“Well, let me tell you...”



## Chapter Two



KENNEDY SNEEZED FOR what had to be the thousandth time, even after taking a generous dose of her allergy medicine. And that was after her uncle had taken the hibiscus bouquet to his car, and she'd aired out the house.

Why oh why, did her allergies have to include the flowers the man she liked had brought her? She'd literally sneezed him away.

She splashed cold water over her face in her master bathroom, blew her nose again, and dried her face with a towel. She grimaced at her puffy eyes and swollen nose in the mirror.

*Just call me Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer.*

Sighing, she brushed her best feature, her long hair that somehow became tangled. She wasn't a beauty to start with, so having one of the most eligible bachelors in Port Sunshine—yes, she'd done her research—see her like this made unshed tears prickle her eyes.

But hadn't she cried enough today already? Even if allergies were the only thing that made her shed tears these days.

She lifted her chin and marched into the dining room where white orchids emanated a delicate aroma and decorated the marble-topped table together with the crystal goblets and golden-rimmed porcelain plates her family had passed down for generations. And her family had great taste in fine porcelain and crystal.

On the other hand, sometimes during her insomnia after a nightmare, she wanted to hurl one of those expensive plates at the wall.

Now that she was back with a watery smile but a smile nonetheless, her uncle eyed her, his gaze shrewd. "When were

you going to tell me about this young man pursuing you?”

Warmth rose inside her. She walked to open another window to air out any remnants of the hibiscus scent. The spectacular ocean view mocked her turmoil, but the short walk also gave her a pause to come up with a good answer.

Yet the only thing she could come up with was, “He’s *not* pursuing me.”

Austin’s gift was an apology. And after her reaction, he’d never want to see her again. Besides, she wouldn’t be surprised if the flowers and chocolates were her friend, Marina’s initiative to start with. Marina had been giving hints the entire day yesterday, and it must’ve been her idea to sit them together at the wedding. That shouldn’t have given Kennedy a sting of disappointment, and yet it did.

Why? She wasn’t interested in romance. At all.

Any men she’d dated had only been interested in what she could do for them, not in her. Dedicating herself to the vast family business was way safer and far more rewarding.

She opened the box of caramel chocolates and savored the delectable sight. They might ruin her appetite for salmon, but she couldn’t help herself. She popped one chocolate in her mouth and nearly purred in pleasure as it melted, suave and sweet, the combination with gooey caramel perfect. “Help yourself, please.”

Her uncle did as she asked. “Hmm. He knows you well to know your favorite chocolates.”

Marina probably told Austin. But before Kennedy could explain, her uncle waved a hand. “I heard this man was your date at your friend’s wedding, as well.”

She blinked, then covered her confusion with a sip from her water goblet. “How... how did you know?”

He forked salmon and chewed slowly, deliberately, like he did everything. “I know lots of things. And today, I saw him in the hall mirror.” He studied her, his eyes like laser beams. “You don’t like this man?”

“I do!” Oh. She shouldn’t have blurted that out. She gulped some cold water with a slice of lime to cover her blunder. Time to change the topic and fast. “You said you wanted to talk to me about something today.”

“Two things.” His gray eyes darkened, and he let his fork drop beside the steamed rice. “My recent physical wasn’t great.”

Her heart crashed to the marble floor. “How...? What...? You’re not...”

Her eyes watered, and this time, it had nothing to do with allergies. But she kept the tears in. Her fingers trembled, and she steepled them to stop shaking.

Her uncle was her pillar and her rock as long as she could remember, even when her parents were alive. But then she’d spent much more time with her cousin—Uncle’s daughter—than with her own family. And even when she’d been home, her parents hadn’t paid much attention to her, letting nannies take care of her.

Familiar pain shot through her, but it wasn’t because of her parents’ neglect. The pain wasn’t resentment. It was guilt. No, her uncle had never blamed her for his daughter’s disappearance. Kennedy blamed herself enough for both of them.

If only she hadn’t disobeyed the nanny that day... If only she hadn’t run into the water... Her heart froze for a moment like her little feet had that tragic morning.

And now... She couldn’t lose the person who’d been her entire family for so long, her friend, her mentor, her teacher, and yes, her parental figure.

“I still have time. Well, if I change my habits and stay away from good fatty food and cigars.” He poked the shiny fork tines at his baked salmon without much enthusiasm. “But I do want to see you get married during my lifetime. I want to walk you down the aisle.”

She breathed easier and drained the rest of her cold water. It wasn’t an imminent threat. Unless... Her heart went colder

than the liquid she'd drank. Unless he was sugarcoating it. She watched him for signs, but he always had a great poker face.

"I'm not interested in romance. All my previous relationships were a disaster. All those guys were interested in my properties, not in me." The taste in her mouth turned bitter, and she sweetened it with another caramel chocolate.

He frowned as he reached for a few cubes of cut papaya. "Do you think Austin Lawrence is interested only in your properties as well?"

She shook her head, then devoured another chocolate. She'd better slow down. She was prone to gain weight. "No. But one never knows for sure. I was wrong before."

Maybe he wasn't interested in her at all, and all that was her friend meddling.

Her uncle leaned against the back of his chair. His wrinkles were more pronounced now, and his hair and beard were gray. But the biggest sign of aging was the trace of resignation in his eyes. "Maybe I made a mistake by instilling you with so much love and responsibility for the family business. You exceeded my highest expectations. But the cost is that you neglected your personal life."

Huh. He rarely admitted his mistakes. Once he did something, he didn't look back. On the other hand, she'd made mistakes she regretted deeply, and the first and biggest one was when she'd been a child. It had cost her favorite person in the world his only daughter *and* his wife. Auntie couldn't take the pain and left. Familiar dull pain slinked into Kennedy's heart.

Yet he'd not only failed to blame her but had also taken her in when she'd needed it the most. Without him, she wouldn't have survived. She finished her salmon without sensing any taste, then did the same with arugula. She didn't much like salmon, but her uncle could tolerate it, mostly, and shouldn't have his favorite steak even before the physical. And he didn't know it yet, but she was taking him for a walk at the beach later today. Movement was good for him.

She'd even sign them both up for salsa classes, but that would be pushing it. Why did the image of Austin appear when she thought of dancing? Just the memory of dancing in his arms at Marina's wedding sent a wave of some emotion she didn't dare name through her. She longed to experience it again.

But her concentration should be on Uncle right now, not Austin. She moved her steamed rice around the plate. "I loved everything you taught me. And I appreciate it more than you know. Besides, I don't have a personal life to speak of."

"Exactly. And you should." He touched his mouth with a monogrammed cream-hued linen napkin and then placed it on the table. "You work without vacations or days off. Sometimes you sleep in the hotel office. I'm afraid I took advantage of your dedication. I want you to take a vacation. A long one."

Her eyes went huge, and the golden fork she lifted clattered back to its coordinating gold-rimmed porcelain plate. "What... what am I supposed to do with myself? I don't want a vacation. Our hotels and rental properties are my life. You... you can't mean it."

Could she spend more time with Austin, though? Her heart perked up, but not for long. They'd had two disastrous meetings already. Wasn't that enough?

"Oh, I do mean it, darling. You need rest. Go shopping. Travel. Travel to shop. Get pampered at the spa—on the house. Swim in the ocean. Meet friends for lunch. Go horseback riding." He chuckled. "Get a dog. I saw the way you looked at that puppy. Whatever you want. Do all the things you never had time to do because of all the responsibilities *I* put on you."

"I don't care for shopping. I've traveled plenty for work. A puppy is a huge commitment. No. I *want* to work."

His eyes crinkled at the edges as he drained his sparkling cider. "Or maybe you could spend some time with that young man of yours."



“He’s not mine!” She couldn’t believe it. But she should. She knew her uncle. Once he made up his mind, he didn’t change it.

“Maybe he could be.” His lips curved up. “I also saw the way he looked at you. With so much longing.” With the kind of longing he spoke of, he eyed the shelf where she’d always kept his favorite cigars. She’d removed them when the doctors told him to stop smoking.

Wait a moment. Waaaait a moment. “You saw him looking at me with longing?” Her heart fluttered. A part of her—a large part if she cared to admit it—was attracted to the kind veterinarian who always had a smile for everyone around him. Including tarantulas.

He was sunshine, and she was... she was a bit of a cloud.

Her uncle nodded. “In the mirror. Mirrors can be very useful.”

Except when a glamorous mother had expected her daughter to be the mirror image of herself and the frumpy daughter was far from it. Ouch. What kind of thoughts were those? Kennedy swallowed down the clog of resentment. But unlike her parents, her uncle not only accepted her but also remained proud of her and encouraged her.

How could she be upset with him for wanting her to have some rest and do whatever she wanted?

Except meeting with Austin. Her heart shifted. Based on how he affected her, he could break her heart, and she’d had enough heartache to last a lifetime.

Uncle’s eyes narrowed as he forked a bite of his salmon, no doubt wishing it were steak. But the doctors had told him to exclude red meat. “Are you worried about him being from a different social class? I didn’t think I raised you to be a snob.”

She waved off that suspicion while he popped the bite in his mouth. “No, that’s not a concern. I admire Austin for being a veterinarian.”

“*Admire* him. Good.” He stabbed a salad leaf, his eyes narrowing with a look that was *not* admiration as he scowled

at it.

She'd better hurry up and agree on something to distract him from thinking she and Austin should date. Or more. "Okay on the vacation, but only if you take some time off yourself. Because what I want is to spend more time with you." While she had that opportunity. Her throat clogged up. She occupied herself with the steamed rice.

When she looked up, his eyes were misty, but the expression disappeared fast. She wouldn't push her request. He made his own decisions. Then she remembered. "What was the *second* thing you wanted to talk about?"

"I was watching videos of European vacations." He paused as if trying to find words. His odd hesitation sent an alarm through Kennedy. "One of them was at a festival in a little country I hadn't even heard of. But this face in the crowd... a young woman... She looked... familiar." He paused again, his eyes shining with tears he tried to hold in. "Something about her looked... looked like Zoey. The way... the way she'd maybe look had she lived."

Kennedy held her breath. This couldn't be... No, not after all these years. For so long, she'd hoped Zoey could return one day. Sometimes she'd see Zoey's face among the newly arrived hotel guests. Then she'd cry from disappointment in the bathroom because it was only someone who looked like Zoey. Every dream had carried Zoey's face, the torture on repeat from when Kennedy had lost her, until she'd started avoiding sleep altogether. Or she'd been so exhausted she'd fall into a slumber without any dreams.

Then Kennedy had chased after a scared tourist at the beach who'd seemed to resemble Zoey. Kennedy had watched movies and shows and thought the actress had looked so much like Zoey she'd sent a PI to get fingerprints somehow. Once she'd seen a somewhat familiar face in a passing car and had spent weeks searching for the car.

Finally, she had to stop in hopes of staying sane. It had taken her years to accept that she'd never see Zoey. But she'd accepted it. Mostly.

Her uncle's eyes looked somewhere past her. Somewhere where his daughter might still exist. "I was so shocked that I had to take a moment away to recollect myself. When I went back to download the video, it wasn't there. It was deleted. I'm trying to track down the person who uploaded it. I know you're going to say I'm imagining things."

He was wrong—another rare occurrence. She wasn't going to say anything at all. She was speechless.



Usually, Austin didn't stay upset for long and managed to find joy in the multitude of animals he tended. But this time, sadness lingered. How had he messed up both his chances with Kennedy?

His gut tightened, and rocking back in his office chair, he did his best to find the bright side. After all, it was for the better. He'd never fit in her world, anyway.

Based on the way his gut tightened further, that wasn't the bright side.

However, his little patients deserved the best of him, not a mopey doctor. He pulled his shoulders back and looked at his assistant, Saylor. Marina's sister, and therefore his sister-in-law. Austin had hired her shortly after she'd returned to Port Sunshine when the assistant he'd inherited with the clinic had retired. Now Saylor ran everything with care and efficiency, making her the best assistant he could wish for.

Plus, Saylor had a ready smile and a perky attitude. While with the previous assistant, Mrs. Dixon, if he heard a growl, there'd been a good chance she was growling, not a canine patient.

"Have I told you the clinic looks brighter with you here? You breathed new life into this place." He gave Saylor her due. "Pets and humans alike love you."

"Happy to help." She beamed. She always looked at him as if he mattered.

A guy could get used to this fast, but he'd never had a big ego. He only regretted he wasn't someone more important when he saw Kennedy. The thought sent another jolt of sadness, but he routed his thoughts where they should be. "Okay, so far, we've had a Pomeranian with a bruised paw and a Chihuahua scratched by a cat. And then two cats in a row had nothing wrong with them. They didn't need vaccines, either, and it was early for a routine checkup. Don't get me wrong. I love it when animals are healthy. But why bring them here then?"

Saylor chuckled as she flipped her long dark-blonde hair back. She favored bright colors, and today, she wore a magenta blouse. "You really didn't notice?"

"Notice what?" He leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs while he had a chance.

A cow had chased him yesterday, and while he could run fast, cattle could move surprisingly fast if motivated. Olympic-medal hopefuls should start training by being chased by a cow. They'd get amazing results.

"Notice what?" Saylor singsonged, clearly teasing him. "Seriously? The young women owned by those cats flirting with you? Making eyes at you?"

He blinked. "They did?" He just looked at the cats. He was a veterinarian, after all, not a physician.

"Absolutely!" Saylor threw her hands up in the air, making her wide sleeves fall and showing off a seashell bracelet. Her fingernails matched her lipstick and blouse. Good thing it wasn't true about the color red annoying bulls, because otherwise he'd have to avoid taking her near any cattle herds. She used to wear large hoop earrings but stopped after several pets had latched onto them. "Okay, you might've missed it because you pay much more attention to their pets."

"Duh. As I should." He raked his fingers through his hair, the short-cropped strands too curly to be bristly. He didn't understand the attention. Unlike Kai, Austin had never been a player. It might be pathetic, but after none of his relationships had led anywhere—two had ended because the women didn't

like cats and three because they didn't like dogs and demanded *he* stop liking cats or dogs, respectively, and the rest had just fizzled out—he'd had his eyes on one woman only.

Kennedy. A yearning in his heart caused another prayer.

*Lord, would it be too much to ask for another chance with Kennedy? Or is it simpler to ask for a crystal bridge over the ocean?*

“Besides, I'm more comfortable with pets than with people. Except for my family.” He paused to update the Pomeranian's file on his laptop. Then glancing up, he hurried to add, “And you, of course. As my sister-in-law, you became family, anyway.”

Something unreadable flashed in Saylor's eyes, and instead of getting brighter at his compliment, they dimmed. Why? “Of course. I wonder if you're really this oblivious. Or if someone occupies your heart already.”

Kennedy's image flashed in his mind. His heart constricted. He'd love for her to come through that door. But it would be impossible. She didn't even have a pet, and now he understood why. Besides running a large business and therefore being super busy, apparently, she had fur allergies. Yet he prayed again.

*Lord, please give me another chance, if that is Your will.*

Could he go apologize for his, well, apology? Or had he done enough damage already? He suppressed a grimace.

“We have a fifteen-minute lull before the next patient,” Saylor said after checking the schedule on her tablet. “Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee? Or maybe a sandwich?”

“Indeed, you're the best assistant ever.” But he wouldn't take advantage of her kindness. “Thank you, but it's okay. You don't have to do things like that, though I do appreciate your offering. Feel free to make some for yourself though.” A knock on the door made him look up. “The next patient might be early. Oh, maybe it's a walk-in.”

“So much for that sandwich,” Saylor muttered.

He got up and opened the door. Then he blinked, unable to believe his eyes. His imagination must be playing tricks on him. “Kennedy... You...”

Her scent, something expensive, sophisticated, and mysterious, smelled vaguely like flowers, but he couldn't figure out which ones. The only thing he was sure about was that it wreaked havoc on his senses. And that a tiny birthmark where her jawline met her neck drove him crazy.

“Hello, Austin. And... and Saylor.” Kennedy shifted from one foot to the other. “I hope it's not bad timing. No pets were waiting to be seen, and I just wanted to ask you something.”

“For you, it's always perfect timing.” Heat crept up his neck. Was he too forward? “I'm glad you're feeling okay. You are feeling okay, right?”

“Right.”

He waved for her to step inside, and so she did. In a short-sleeved, keyhole-cut canary-yellow summer dress with a golden necklace and a wide-brimmed sunny-yellow hat, she could've been a ray of sunshine pouring into the building. Into his life, actually.

His heart jumped like Caramel usually did the moment he got home. Then he remembered Kennedy's allergies. While no dogs were nearby right now, plenty of puppies had been here before. After handling the Pomeranian and Chihuahua, he might even be wearing some fur particles on his clothes. “Is it okay for you to be here?”

She gulped. Then her silver bracelets clattered as she ran her fingers through that glorious honey-blonde hair he ached to touch. “You're right. I shouldn't be here.”

*Great.* Disappointment ripped through him. Had he—*again*—ruined the last chance God had given him with her? “I didn't mean... I didn't mean to run you off.”

Thankfully, she wasn't sneezing yet. She must've taken a lot of allergy medicine.

She studied the floor or maybe her toenails. They were worth a second glance, painted in that adorable ballerina-

slipper hue polish. Then she said, “Thank you for the gifts.”

Now or never. “Will you have dinner with me? Please?” he said the words so fast he hoped Kennedy understood him.

Saylor gasped.

Kennedy blinked up at him. Of course, she was going to answer no. According to rumor, every time guys asked her out the last two years, she’d graciously declined. “Yes. I’d love to.”

Did he hear that right? He couldn’t believe this. It sounded too good to be true. Did his dream girl say yes to him asking her out, despite his double fiasco with the wedding and allergies?

“I’m so glad you stopped by.” His chest expanded. “It was a great idea. A fantastic idea. The best idea ever. I’m thrilled. Exhilarated.” If he were a dog, his tail would be wagging so much it would be invisible by now. Okay, he should stop now. “You get, well, the idea.”

Her lips curved up. “I do. Thanks. See you soon, say around seven? And is Bay and Basin okay? It’s just a casual date. I mean, a casual *meeting*.”

“Totally okay. More than okay. Amazing. I can’t wait.” He meant it. At least, he didn’t jump up and down like a puppy.

She left.

He closed the door and turned around to Saylor. “What just happened? Did Kennedy Crawford agree to go out with me? Or did I imagine it all?”

Saylor sighed. “I got the answer to my question. You are both oblivious to female attention, *and* you have someone occupying your heart.” Her features clouded, an unusual expression for her. Huh. What upset her?

He toned down his enthusiasm. Kennedy hadn’t dated in over a decade. Possibly, the dinner was going to be some business meeting. Yet his heart felt like it was going to jump out of his chest.

He used the three minutes before the next patient to call Kai. “You’re not going to believe what happened.”





# Chapter Three



KENNEDY'S HEART WAS beating fast as Austin pulled back her chair on the restaurant's patio and she sat. The Bay and Basin was a natural choice. Not only because it belonged to Marina's mother but also because it had excellent food. Well, the two were connected.

Why was Kennedy this nervous? She'd been in high-stakes meetings and stayed cool and collected. She breathed in the salty air from the pier and stared at the sparkling ocean beyond. Then the scents of freshly baked biscuits and fried fish drifted to her.

Austin was one of the friendliest people in Port Sunshine. Which was one thing that had drawn her to him. The second thing was that he was trustworthy, based on her research. And her plan required trustworthiness. That was if she dared go ahead with her plan.

As she stole a glance at him, her heart skipped a beat. The third reason was—yes, the third reason was precisely that—her heart skipped a beat in his presence. So far, she'd seen him in a cowboy hat with a Wrangler shirt and scuffed cowboy boots, in a white lab coat and Crocs, and in a black suit with an azure-blue tie. Tonight, he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with hibiscus flowers—the sight nearly made her sneeze—and khaki pants.

One thing didn't change about him. His open smile and energetic gestures.

“Is it okay for you to be here?” His gaze landed on a corgi two tables away. Once a veterinarian always a veterinarian?

Her eyebrows rose. “Yes, of course.” She didn't go out much—if ever. But that didn't mean she'd shrivel in fresh air among people.

Marina, in a pink waitress uniform and with her hair pinned back in a net, walked to them. Her huge smile looked as if she were—Kennedy peeked at a calico further along the deck near its owner or servant—a cat who'd just enjoyed a gigantic bowl of cream.

Kennedy's friend had started working as a private investigator and sometimes helped out at her mother's restaurant as her caseload was still light. Uh-oh. Hopefully, Marina wouldn't read too much into this dinner.

Kennedy raised her chin. "Hello, Marina."

Marina's grin spread even wider if that was possible. "I'll be your server today." She rattled off the specials, then handed them the cute menus where youthful drawings added a touch of homey charm to the dishes they depicted.

Marina's cousin who was also married to Austin's brother—a small world indeed—had designed the menus and had recently given them a makeover. Now there were more bright, colorful photos of dishes and drawings of a pirate and a parrot in flight decorated the first page of this surf-and-turf restaurant. Rumor had that Kai—Austin's brother and Marina's husband because, yup, a small world—and his pet had been the inspiration for those images.

"What would you like to drink?" Marina asked.

Kennedy opted for water with lime while Austin asked for iced tea.

"I hope you'll enjoy your time at our restaurant. I'll give you a few minutes to decide what you want." Marina winked—winked!

"Thank you very much." Austin didn't seem to have understood Marina's hint.

Relieved her friend walked away, Kennedy opened the menu, its laminated surface smooth under her fingertips. "Please never mind my friend. She has this weird idea.... Well, never mind."

Austin's smile was open and sincere. "I feel blessed to be here. With you. Especially after my faux P-A-W."

“It’s spelled faux P-A-S; it’s only pronounced faux *paw*. But really, no big deal.” Great. With the tips of her ears getting hot and probably pink, she hid behind the menu.

She shouldn’t have corrected him. And maybe he was just trying to make a “paw” joke, given his profession. She might be a whiz in business, but she was clueless when it came to dating. Not that this was a *date*.

Was this nervousness because she didn’t have much experience in dating and whatever she’d had was disastrous? But this wasn’t a date, and she should clarify it, not to give a wrong impression. “As I mentioned, this isn’t a date. I—I need to talk to you about something. Something that might sound ridiculous at first but is important to me.”

There. She’d said it. So she wouldn’t back out of suggesting it later.

His expression fell. “Oh. Right. Of course. I understand.”

He looked disappointed. Was she going to make the biggest mistake of her life? What she was going to suggest didn’t make much sense. So unlike her.

She looked into the cerulean sky as if she’d see the answer written in big letters on a banner carried by a plane during the tourist season. She did see a banner. But it was advertising her hotel.

Marina brought their drinks. “Ready to order?” Then her smile dimmed as if she sensed the change in the atmosphere.

Kennedy handed back the menu without reading it. “I’ll take today’s special, please.”

Austin did the same.

“Great choice.” Marina beamed at them again as she collected the menus. “Charbroiled mahi-mahi, then. It comes with french fries and coleslaw. Would you like tartar sauce?”

“Sure,” Austin and Kennedy said in unison, then looked at each other.

Her heart fluttered as she had difficulty looking away while Marina left with a quiet chuckle. His blue eyes were

always luminous like the ocean sparkling nearby in sunlight, inviting and encouraging, while Kennedy's gray eyes probably looked like the ocean in a tempest, something best avoided.

An incoming text message pinged the phone in her purse. She ignored it but tensed. She'd told the managers to contact her only for emergencies. Since she'd started working, she'd lived and breathed her work. But this was after-hours, and tomorrow was supposed to be her first vacation day.

She ignored the second text, too, but it made her flinch. What could've happened? "Something might've happened at one of the hotels," she muttered. "Maybe a plumbing issue? Or the air-conditioning, which would be a disaster in the summer? Or some VIP guest again claimed they had diamond cufflinks stolen from their room just to find later they'd misplaced them?"

"People claim that?" His eyebrows rose. He clearly wasn't the diamond-cufflink type.

She liked that. She'd dated a few diamond-cuff-link guys, and all they cared about was their cufflinks. No, wrong. Also their flashy cars. "We have safes in most rooms, but people still blame the administration if something of value disappears from their room. Or if they *think* it disappeared." She took a quick sip of her cold water. "I hope it's not a runaway tarantula. We've had many runaway pets over the years, but for some reason, the tarantula caused the most commotion. No offense toward tarantulas."

"On behalf of my tarantula patients, none taken." He saluted her with his glass. Rays of sunshine played in the amber liquid like specks of gold and brought out similar lights in his hair, and a soft smile played on his lips.

Lips she'd like to kiss.

What was she thinking?

Heat rose inside her, and she hurried to glug more of her cold drink. Must be because it was so warm on the patio, right? "Well, the searched-for baby alligator was something, as well. I'll never forget the scream from the fortyish lady who

unwillingly found him. Nobody likes to discover an alligator in their bathtub. Even a baby one.” She leaned forward to add in a lower voice. “It might’ve also had something to do with the fact she’d had an alligator-skin purse. Maybe she thought it was revenge or something.”

“And I thought I was the one with the stories about animals to tell.” He winked. Then his expression sobered up. “Please feel free to answer the phone.”

He took a sip of his iced tea as his gaze drifted to the corgi again, his expression concerned. Was it a patient?

She snatched the phone from her purse. Huh. The texts were from an unknown number. “It’s probably spam,” she muttered. At least, there was no emergency. Previously, she’d rush to the hotel at any time of the day or night and wouldn’t even dry her hair if the call had come in during her shower. But today, she didn’t want to interrupt their *nondate*.

Hmm. The text messages were identical and didn’t make much sense. Or *any* sense, really.

*Let bygones be bygones. Or you’ll regret it.*

Then her eyes narrowed. Could it be about those phone calls she’d made to the creator of the video her uncle had told her about?

Ridiculous. She shook her head. It was some fake number. Phishing. Though in a strange way.

“It’s nothing important.” She slid her phone back into her designer *cloth*—not alligator skin—purse, surprised her fingers trembled. Then she returned all her attention to the man who interested her more than she wanted to admit. “Tell me about yourself, please.” It wasn’t just idle curiosity.

He stretched back in his metal chair and spread his arms. “What would you like to know?”

“Anything you want to share.” And hopefully more than she’d already found out in her research, but of course, she didn’t mention that bit.

The strange texts gave her unease, though. She'd thought about hiring Marina to look into this case. Or not. A lump formed in Kennedy's throat, and she chased it down with cold water. If there was a minuscule chance it would put her friend in danger, she couldn't do it.

As he rubbed the back of his neck, his head cocked, his blue eyes studied her, unnerving her.

What did he see? She hoped her inheritance wasn't important to him, so what was left? A woman with an ordinary, even frumpy appearance that couldn't be changed by an expensive, skilled hairdresser and an equally expensive tailor?

She'd never regretted not getting her mother's stunning looks as much as she regretted it now.

*Stop.*

She pulled her shoulders back. Her uncle didn't raise her to be superficial. And he'd promised her someday she'd meet a man who'd value her sharp mind and dedication over her looks, but so far, she hadn't found such a man.

Or had she? She studied Austin over the rim of her glass.

He cleared his throat. "Most of it you already know. I love my job and am grateful to have it. Well, except for tragic moments when we can't save an animal. I was born and raised near Port Sunshine. I have seven brothers. Two of them are married now." He smiled. "One of them to your friend, Marina. Small world, huh?"

"It sure is." She was grateful Marina had become her friend. She didn't make friends easily. Who did, being an introvert and workaholic? Add to that how lots of people had befriended her to use her, and she'd become a hermit crab, inside her shell for a long time and carrying it with her everywhere she went, ready to retreat in an instant. It wasn't easy to step out now and be vulnerable to rejection.

"My family is close-knit and has a ranch where I grew up. Whatever time I don't spend at the veterinary clinic or animal shelter, I spend there. My mom runs the ranch, and she's

fantastic. My dad..." A shadow passed over his face. "He died from what was ruled suicide."

Hmm. Interesting word choice "was ruled." But she already knew all that.

"I have the golden retriever mix puppy you met. She's so loving and adorable. I often foster animals from the shelter before they get adopted. But now, I only have Caramel, and she's mine." The smile that appeared dimmed into a concern. "I hope it's not a deal-breaker for you."

Why would it be?

Kennedy didn't have a chance to ask because Marina brought a tray with their dishes, so Kennedy waited until her friend left after mouthing, "I'll call you later." Of course, Marina would want to know all the details of this nondate.

Then Kennedy drew the plate with seafood, french fries, and coleslaw closer, positioning it just under the beak of the pelican painted on the table, and asked what mattered a lot for several reasons. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No. Are you?" He didn't touch his food yet, all his concentration on her as if the answer was important to him. His entire body moved toward her.

"No. I've been working too much, I guess. And my previous relationships left a lot to be desired." Then she sighed as she took a bite of her mahi-mahi. She might as well admit it. "And it's not like I'm a raving beauty."

"You are. To me." His attention was still on her.

She cringed. She didn't like flattery, and she'd seen too much of it already. "Oh please."

"I mean it." He sounded sincere. Could he, indeed, see her that way?

She dipped a fry in ketchup and enjoyed its slightly salty taste. People often assumed she liked finer things, and she did appreciate quality. But she often preferred simple things. Laughter between friends. Clear water. A crispy french fry. "Anything in your past you regret?"



“Not asking you out in high school.” He started with his charbroiled fish and coleslaw. Huh. Not a french-fries kind of guy. While that wasn’t a requirement, there was something sad about it.

Then his answer registered. He couldn’t have meant that. Or could he?

*Move on.* She sent more ketchup-soaked fries into her mouth. “Where do you see yourself in five years?” If that sounded like a job interview, it was because this was. For the job of a husband.

His fork with the fish stopped midair. “Let me think.”

She swallowed hard. Yes, she wanted to make her uncle happy after everything he’d done for her. But was a part of her so jaded she even looked at marriage like some kind of business decision?

“You probably think I’m not ambitious enough, but I’m happy right where I am now. I love working with pets and living at the ranch.” Then melancholy touched his eyes. “I’d want to have my own family, though. If I can find a woman who’d be happy with me—and with the menagerie of

animals that often surround me. What about you?”

“I’m used to a quiet life at home. I’d like to help someone with all I’m blessed to have. I don’t want to have more in my life, rather I’d like to do better with what I have. And for my uncle to still be alive and well.”

Her throat clogged up. She’d die for that man in a heartbeat. Getting married to make him—the person who’d been her only family for so long—happy didn’t seem such a big sacrifice. “As for my own family, a lot will depend on...” She couldn’t say the rest, so she busied herself with the biscuits that came with dinner.

“Depend on?”

“You’ll know soon.”

He didn’t push further, and she appreciated it. She sipped her drink, and indeed, the waters seemed clearer now. But

were they clear enough? “What would be your ideal way to spend an evening if you’re not working, volunteering, or with your siblings?” She should spit it out. “An evening with your wife, maybe?”

“Depends on what she’d like. Toasting marshmallows at the campfire. Playing with a puppy. Enjoying a movie and popcorn while snuggling in front of a fireplace.”

“Even if it’s a romantic comedy?” She picked up another fry. She felt surprisingly comfortable with him, light even. All the knots in her body seemed to loosen out, giving way to a pleasant sensation. She hadn’t felt that way with anyone else.

Ever.

He chuckled. “Romantic comedies are great. Especially ones with a dog or a horse in them.” A calico several tables away hissed as if overhearing him. “Or a cat. Or any pets, for that matter, though I’m not sure about tarantulas.”

She laughed, feeling as breezy as the air movement that touched her face. When was the last time she’d felt breezy? Never. That was when.

The ocean in front of them might be spectacular, but what was even more spectacular was what was happening inside her now.

They talked about their values in life, their families, then their favorite movies, shows, books, sports, and even ice-cream flavors. To her surprise, many of them overlapped. Except for music. He was a country fan, while she loved classical, but she could live with that. She barely noticed how the sun kissed the ocean and spilled bright orange juice into it or how her plate had become empty. Including the delectable fries. Should she order more?

Then he pushed his neglected fries to her. “Please help yourself.”

“Thank you. You don’t like them, do you?” She helped herself to a handful, indeed.

He grinned as he lifted the glass. “I *love* them. But I’d love even more for you to have them.”

Strangely enough, at that moment, she decided she'd go forward with the most important question of the evening and quite possibly of her life. "What would you think of marrying me?"

His eyes went huge, and the cup slipped from his hands and hit the deck. At least, it was plastic, so it didn't break. He leaned to pick it up—after staring at her for a few long moments, but somehow as he bent, he swept his plate onto the floor to join the cup's contents.

That activated some sort of instinct in the dog who'd been peacefully sitting under the table three tables away. Apparently, pets understood that food on the tables was off-limits, but if it hit the floor, it was fair game. Now, the dog darted toward them, joyfully barking.

"No!" Austin shouted, but the dog took that as encouragement. The cat hissed in dismay at the dog's bad manners but didn't stake a claim on the spilled food.

The dog's owner ran after her pet but not soon enough. Austin stepped forward as if trying to shield Kennedy from the dog for some reason.

Okay, she wasn't getting an answer to her proposal any time soon.



## Chapter Four



KENNEDY HAD ALWAYS managed to put up a good front in a business setting, but in her personal life, she was cautious around people. Another difference between her and her socialite parents.

So when Marina suggested inviting Skylar to their small outings, Kennedy had been reluctant. But she didn't want to risk her budding friendship with Marina. It had taken her years to find someone who wasn't friends with her just because of all the things Kennedy could do for them.

So far, Skylar had turned out as sweet and fun as Marina had described her to be and had befriended Kennedy with much more eagerness than Kennedy had surrendered her guard.

Now the three of them sat on Kennedy's spacious balcony, overlooking the cobalt mirror of the ocean shining in the afternoon sun. They'd been sipping mango juice and munching on the cheeses and cold cuts from a charcuterie board, as well as strawberries dipped in chocolate, almonds and hazelnuts regrettably *not* coated in chocolate, and grapes.

Skylar talked about her honeymoon and newlywed life, and Kennedy and Marina gave encouraging sounds and nodded. Wistfulness put a bitter taste in Kennedy's mouth, so she popped a chocolate-dressed strawberry in to sweeten the taste. She didn't have the right to be envious. She had so much more than others could even dream of.

So why did she have to remind herself of that? Maybe because she wanted someone to love her the way Dallas loved Skylar or Kai loved Marina. And when she imagined that someone, Austin's image appeared in front of her eyes. Ironic, how one often wanted something unattainable and didn't know how to appreciate the things one had.

The breeze tap-danced on her skin, and she breathed in the salty fresh air, reminding herself to enjoy the company and the breathtaking view.

“That’s awesome.” Kennedy munched on grapes, glad for Skylar’s presence.

Skylar turned out to be a chatterbox, and she easily glued together any pauses the silent types like Kennedy and Marina might have in conversations.

Marina nudged Kennedy when Skylar paused to drink her juice. “Well, what about you? Are you going to tell us how your date with Austin went? All you said so far was that it went *well*. You know we’re not going to let that report be enough.”

Kennedy shrugged. The growing feeling inside her seemed too personal to share, and she couldn’t tell the girls she’d proposed to him without receiving an answer. It didn’t feel like business anymore, though. The more she was getting to know him, the more she liked him. A little more, and she’d be falling for him.

Yet she shook her head. “It wasn’t a date. It was a business meeting. Sort of.”

As she drank some of her mango juice, Marina rolled her eyes. “Yeah right. At least tell us, is there going to be another date? I hope.”

Kennedy’s fingers tapped the glass-topped table before reaching for another grape. How could she say she’d skipped dates and had boldly put an entire proposal on the table? Her heart constricted. Or how could she confess how much she wanted to see him again? The intensity scared her.

“We might meet again, yes.” She wasn’t used to sharing about her personal life.

First, because there hadn’t been anything to share about. Second, because there hadn’t been anyone to share it with. Her uncle had already taken on the role of both of her parents. He didn’t need to take on the role of her girlfriend.

A shadow passed over Marina's face. "Sorry about advising Austin to buy you hibiscuses. I didn't realize you were allergic. I just saw that painting of your mother holding the bouquet, and I..."

"Not your fault at all." Kennedy waved off an apology, managing to keep her tone light. "Hibiscuses were my mother's favorite flowers. She wasn't allergic to them." She just seemed to be allergic to her only child.

Yet Kennedy missed her. Or maybe the imaginary version of her mother that one day would wake up and realize how much she loved her daughter. She'd never gotten that chance.

Time to deflect all this attention. She paired a slice of Gruyère with some grapes, its nutty flavor a perfect complement for the sweets, and leaned toward Marina. "How is the progress on the house renovation going?"

"I learned a bunch of new things. I can now paint ceilings like nobody's business. And I know the physics of plumbing." Marina gestured before draining her glass. "Skylar is helping me with interior decoration. Being a talented artist and all that."

Kennedy refilled Marina's glass from the carafe, the scent of mangoes spreading in the air. Her uncle had advised her to hire servants a long time ago, but she preferred her privacy.

"I'm happy to." Skylar scooped up a few strawberries. Thankfully, she didn't have Kennedy's issue with sharing about herself. "I have a new announcement, and I can't wait to tell you." Her grin spread from ear to ear as she picked up a cube of truffle-flavored Gouda. "It's a miracle I've kept it a secret since yesterday."

Kennedy and Marina exchanged glances. Then Kennedy lifted her own glass, its surface cold and smooth under her fingers. It was a miracle Skylar could hold anything in indeed. Though from what Kennedy had learned, her new friend had kept a huge and destructive secret almost her whole life. Perhaps that's why she no longer held anything back.

"We can't wait to hear it." Marina hid a smile.

“I’m pregnant!” Skylar beamed. “Dallas and I just found out yesterday.”

“Congratulations! This is so exciting!” Marina jumped to her feet and hugged her cousin, then helped herself to a slice of Gruyère, pairing it with hazelnuts.

“Congratulations!” Kennedy hugged Skylar, too, genuinely happy for her.

Marina clapped with enthusiasm unusual for her. “We’ll do a baby shower. What great news.” Then she paused. “Is Dallas excited?”

“He’s thrilled. He said he waited for this for so long.” Sadness darkened her eyes before they brightened again. “I know it’s a lot of work. But I can’t wait to be a mom.”

“You’ll make such a great one,” Marina said.

Skylar blinked. “Well, I can’t say I’ve had a good example—unless my grandmother counts.”

“You’ll make such a great mom.” Marina added more emphasis this time.

The three of them didn’t have much in common, except being attracted to cowboys from the same family and not having great parents. Kennedy kept those links to herself, of course.

Marina and Skylar started discussing things for the baby shower and shopping for tiny clothes. Kennedy joined in after bringing another spread of cheese and a plate with more chocolate strawberries. She helped herself to some strawberries, enjoying the sweet taste, but her mind wandered off.

Now she had an excuse not to tell her friends she’d proposed to Austin. She wouldn’t steal Skylar’s thunder. Something squeezed the blood and hope from Kennedy’s heart. What would he answer? It scared her how she wanted it to be yes.

Two hours later, alone in her bedroom, she opened her laptop to check on work emails, vacation or not. She couldn’t



stop herself from answering a few urgent ones until an email from a sender she didn't recognize attracted her attention.

She avoided opening emails from unknown senders. Still, the first line showed her the words that made her frown.

*I don't have that video anymore. I'm sorry. I deleted it by accident.*

So many feelings fought inside her for the next moment she felt queasy. Relief because there wouldn't be another futile chase only to be disappointed again. Anger and regret because her and her uncle's renewed hope was in vain. Nostalgia because she remembered the wonderful girl who'd be an amazing woman now.

She rubbed her throbbing temples. Well, even if the woman by the name of Mme. Lavigne did have that video, it probably wouldn't have helped them identify the person who resembled Zoey. It was such a large gathering in a tourist town, so most likely, she wasn't a local.

Then a doubt wormed in and refused to leave. Was it gut instinct or wishful thinking that refused to believe Mme. Lavigne deleted it "by accident"? Besides, there were always so many backups and ways to retrieve, weren't there?

It was dark outside by now, but Kennedy picked up the car keys and went for another senseless drive nowhere.



In his backyard the next day, Austin turned away from another splash in a little plastic bathtub. "Caramel, stop this!"

Caramel barked, clearly pleased with herself.

After bathing many puppies and full-grown pets, he should be able to do this without getting soaked. Or to be stricter. He breathed in the scent of freshly cut grass and foliage.

Kai laughed as he walked up with his parrot, Quiet, on his shoulder. "If I didn't know any better, I'd wonder if it was you *or* the puppy who was taking a bath."

"Bath! Bath!" Quiet screeched.

Austin rubbed shampoo designed for puppies into Caramel's golden fur. "Joke like that, and I'll water you down from a hose. You know, to make it even."

Quiet glided to a nearby bush. Once safe there, he announced, "Even! Even!" Then he tilted his brilliant green-topped head, thought for a moment, and added for good measure, "Even!"

Using the distraction, Caramel splashed around again in the tub the color of sunrise, this time sending soapy water into Austin's eyes.

"Ouch!" Austin rubbed at his stinging eyes.

"What's ouch is that I'm only now hearing about you and Kennedy dating." Kai made a clicking sound and knelt below Quiet, and his pet hopped onto his shoulder again.

Austin sighed as he washed the shampoo from the puppy, who was wiggling in earnest. At least, Caramel hadn't tried to jump out of the tub as she'd done before. "I've been fending off calls from the family the entire day." Just as expected, a family friend had seen him and Kennedy in a restaurant "looking cozy," and news spread fast. "And for the record, I can't believe it, either."

"Why didn't you tell me you were dating?" Kai sat on a wooden bench painted caramel, to match the small ranch house. Now the word *caramel* brought association not only with the puppy but also with Kennedy's favorite treat, and Austin had a sudden desire for some caramel chocolate.

"Dating! Dating!" Quiet hopped onto the bench and started walking back and forth as if measuring it. "Dating?"

"Because we aren't. I only dreamed of dating her." Austin took a deep breath to ground himself, but seriously, how could he be sure what he was experiencing now wasn't a dream? It felt too surreal to be true. Especially the part where she'd asked him to marry her. *That* couldn't have happened, could it?

Caramel sent more water in his direction, and the wet T-shirt clung to him. Okay, so maybe this wasn't a dream. Just

the part where Kennedy had proposed.

“I don’t understand it, then.” Kai got up and handed him a towel.

Austin spread his arms, then took the towel. “Me, either.”

*Welcome to the club, bro.*

“Need some help?” Kai looked as puzzled as Austin felt.

“I’m good. No need for both of us to be soaked.” As the puppy barked and shook water off her back, Austin shook a finger at her. “I didn’t mean you. You needed to be soaked to have a bath.”

“I meant help to figure it all out, but that, too. Tell me what happened.”

Could he, really? Austin had a strong feeling Kennedy had wanted to keep the proposal private. But he needed the advice. Big time.

So he told his brother everything as he towel dried Caramel. By the time he finished the tale, they were inside the house with two glasses of fresh, cold lemonade. Well, the puppy was inside with a bowl of fresh water and another one of kibble. Though she did eye the lemonade from a distance, too.

The air-conditioning kicked in, giving them a nice breeze. Caramel was enjoying her kibble while Austin fed Quiet his favorite nuts from his hand. The parrot bobbed his head, beckoning more as he seemed to approve of the treat. Austin might forget his brothers’ favorite snacks, but he always kept snacks for their pets.

His heart was beating faster as he talked about Kennedy. He’d be a goner if they got married and started living together.

Kai drank half of the glass, then clattered it down on the counter. “Now I understand everything even less.”

“Imagine how I feel.” Austin winced when Quiet picked up the treat a bit too eagerly from his palm. The bird had a sharp beak.

“Why would Kennedy want to marry you?” Kai raked his fingers through his hair. Quiet, done with the treats, hopped back to his regular spot on Kai’s shoulder.

“Hey!” Austin feigned offense. Then he remembered Saylor’s words as he gulped a few sips of his tangy refreshing drink. “Some people happen to think I’m a catch.”

Kai gave him a pointed look.

“Okay.” Austin held up both hands and shrugged. “It’s about her uncle wanting to see her married before something happens to him. Of course, I’d sign a prenup and all. And she offered to make a sizable donation to the animal shelter. Not that the latter should factor into my decision.”

“You’re considering it.” Kai studied Austin over the rim of his lemonade glass.

“Maybe it’s selfish of me. But if your dream girl asked you to marry her, would you say no?”

“No, I wouldn’t. And considering how much I messed up the proposal, it would’ve gone much better if my dream girl did the asking.” So much love coated Kai’s voice.

“I see Kennedy sad, and I want to make her happy. But how can I if she doesn’t love me and might never love me?” Austin pushed more lemonade around the lump in his throat. “Is it wrong to take advantage of her devotion to her uncle?”

“What if you *can* make her happy? I waited nearly my entire life to make the right move. But you don’t have to. Why don’t you take this once-in-a-lifetime chance with the woman you’ve admired for years?”

His throat parched, Austin drained his glass. But he was still thirsty—thirsty for a life with Kennedy. “I believe in the institution of marriage. I always thought, if I got married, it would be for life.”

“People had arranged marriages for centuries. And many of them worked out just fine.” Kai stroked Quiet’s emerald-green head before the feathers blended to blue on his nape and back.

“Fine! Fine!” the parrot reacted.

“See? That’s already two votes.” Kai grinned. “And Mom would vote yes, as well, as would the rest of our brothers. Marina only has great things to say about Kennedy, and you know I trust my wife’s opinion.”

Austin could easily imagine waiting for Kennedy at the end of the aisle. What he couldn’t imagine was his ability to stop himself from falling in love with her. Desperate yearning unraveled inside him. And there were still too many obstacles. “She appears to be allergic to dogs, and I’m not going to abandon my profession. Or Caramel here.”

Caramel lifted her head and whined as if upset that could even be a possibility. He petted her to reassure her, then washed his hands. “Would you like to go half on the brisket sandwich? Thanks for bringing another one over, by the way.”

“Nah. You go ahead. I had a great dinner. Apparently, Marina shared about her cooking struggles with Kennedy, and Kennedy suggested Marina and I cook together. Worked like a charm. You really should bring that woman into the family.”

Austin could imagine cooking with Kennedy and having fun with it or watching a romantic comedy. Just being around her sent a pleasant wave through him. But he also sensed an invisible barrier between them, like she held back. And there shouldn’t be invisible barriers in marriage.

He munched on the brisket sandwich with pickles and onions as he needed to gear up for going to the animal shelter.

Kai poured himself another glass of lemonade. “Let me look into Kennedy’s allergies. Your puppy wasn’t the only possible allergen there. It could be the flowers, for example.”

Could he hope that was true? Austin breathed easier. “By ‘look into’, you mean talk to your wife?”

“Yup. She’s my PI. And look at the bright side. After these two fiascos, things can only improve with Kennedy.”

Wincing, Austin nearly dropped the sandwich. “Didn’t I hear something similar from you before?”



# Chapter Five



THE NEXT DAY, KENNEDY stepped back from the flamingo-hued wall at Dallas and Skylar's house and surveyed her work. Though the future parents didn't know the gender yet, they opted for pink for now and would repaint later if it turned out to be a boy. The couple had said they'd be happy for either one.

Usually, when any renovations needed to be done, Kennedy hired people. But she found something relaxing in the fresh strokes of paint as she did them herself, and the rich, joyful color made her smile.

Okay, fine, her main reason for smiling was the person near her painting the wall close to the ceiling. They wore identical caps, goggles, and gloves since Austin had given her his extras when she didn't have any.

Not the attire she'd prefer, considering it was difficult to look great in goggles and the cap hid her best feature—her hair. In the world where she'd grown up, appearances were important—often more than what was underneath them. But even more than usual, she wanted to appeal to Austin. She suppressed a grimace. If she didn't want to wear any paint—and she didn't—she had to wear this.

Skylar, Dallas, and Marina had gone shopping for baby things, or rather, Marina had whisked them away, providing the opportunity for this surprise renovation. Austin had decided to paint the nursery since Skylar had chosen a color earlier. Then Kennedy joined in when two of his brothers had to drop out due to a ranch emergency. His kindness was one of many things she liked about him. But so far, both of them had avoided the pink elephant in the room—the answer to her marriage proposal.

“You didn't have to do this.” He spoke from beside the ladder. “But I appreciate it.” He'd volunteered to do the

“cutting in” as he called painting close to the ceiling since she wasn’t particularly fond of heights, even small ones.

“I enjoy it.” Even if it put wistful notes in her heart as she imagined little feet running in this room one day soon. “This nursery is going to be adorable.”

“It sure will be.” He stirred the paint with a wooden stick, then poured some from the pail into a tray for her and carried the pail up the ladder for himself. “Thank you so much for helping me.”

“My pleasure.” She meant it. Just being in his company sent pleasant waves through her.

Now that she’d unexpectedly found herself with a lot of time on her hands, she considered volunteering at the animal shelter with him. So far, she’d chickened out because she was scared to be bitten. She couldn’t expect the other animals to be like Caramel’s mother who was dozing in a sunny spot on the hardwood living room floor.

Kennedy’s phone rang in her pocket. She snapped off a rubber glove and fished out her phone.

Skylar.

“How is it going?” Skylar chirruped. Then she continued without waiting for an answer. “I can’t wait to show you everything we bought. Everything is super-duper cute!” She giggled and talked about the crib, toys, car seat, and all the darling teeny-weeny outfits with equally darling inscriptions on them. “Okay, I’ll let you go. See you soon. I have a gift for you. And Dallas and I can’t wait for the little one to get here!” Skylar disconnected.

Oh, to be a newlywed and so much in love and waiting for the first new addition to the family. Maybe Kennedy could live vicariously through her friend. Her heart constricted as she moved the roller back and forth, the paint reminding her of decadent strawberry ice cream and making her crave something sweet. She was happy for Skylar. She really was.

Austin sent her a curious glance from the ladder. “How about breaking for cookies as soon as we finish this wall?”



Her empty stomach perked up. “Sure.” She suppressed longing as she dipped her roller into the paint and moved it back and forth again. She might become a newlywed soon, but they weren’t in love. It was different from Dallas and Skylar, who were head over heels for each other and now for the baby.

Kennedy stole a glance at Austin. Broad-shouldered and muscular, he made a now pink-streaked charcoal-gray T-shirt and a matching cap look good. And even the goggles didn’t make him look ridiculous like they did her. Her heart skipped a beat, and her entire body shifted in his direction before she stopped it.

He caught her gaze, smiled, and saluted her with a paintbrush. “Great job!”

She ached for another kind of compliment, different kinds of words a couple considering marriage was supposed to tell each other. That he couldn’t wait to spend the rest of his life with her. Or how much he loved her. Or yes, cliché, but how she made him the happiest man alive.

But he couldn’t say those words simply because they weren’t true. But then, she’d never received the unconditional love she’d dreamed of. Yes, some of her employees liked her, and some people might even admire her. But nobody’s heart had ever beaten for her.

And not this man’s, either, despite how much she was drawn to him.

Heat rose inside her, and she busied herself with putting another bright stroke onto the wall. When she looked up, he was still looking at her. Then he returned his attention to the paint.

Her heart fluttered, telling her she passionately wanted the real thing—what Skylar had with Dallas and Marina had with Kai.

Well, Kennedy had always been practical. She lifted her chin and gave another part of the wall a fresh coat, careful not to leave any drips. She’d had to be practical to prove her uncle’s expectations, to make it in the ruthless business world.

So she'd always pushed away any thoughts of having children. That was the least she could do, considering he'd lost his only child because of her and then had raised her.

But that important question had to be decided before marriage.

"Do you want children?" She switched to a paintbrush to "cut in" near the taped-off molding on the floor. She should've asked that in the initial meeting at the restaurant. The answer mattered, but again, she sounded as if she were interviewing for a job. She winced, and her hand stopped before she resumed her work.

Wasn't that what she'd done, though? She'd essentially offered him the job as her husband. Hopefully, he didn't think she was trying to *buy* him.

"I do," he said, obviously speaking from the heart. "Not as many as Mom had—though I love my brothers. Oh, and I'd love to have a few girls, plus two boys. What about you?"

"I never thought much about it until now." But that was an important point in getting married, and she had to be sure. "My mom... She never seemed to like being around me or being seen with me, for that matter." She paused. Austin was the first person she'd ever told this. "See, she was stunning and loved attention. And I... I was an awkward, chubby child. Sometimes, I think she was ashamed of me because I wasn't as pretty as she was."

He stopped painting. "What? Are you kidding me? First, of all, you're gorgeous. Second, a mother's love is unconditional. Not because the baby is pretty."

She? Gorgeous? She almost suggested he should buy glasses, but that would be rude. "I guess I didn't want to repeat the cycle. I didn't want another child to go through what I did."

Zoey's mother, whom Kennedy called Auntie, was different. Auntie had adored her daughter and spent a lot of time with her and consequently with Kennedy, and Kennedy had spent many nights wishing for parents like her cousin's

parents. She swallowed hard. She'd gotten half of her wish at a high price.

Something nudged at her memory from that day. Zoey's aquamarine-blue dress. It was important. But why? Then intuition told her the answer might be too painful to bear.

They also used to play with dolls together, and they'd been sure they would raise their children together, too. Things were so simple at that time.

A muscle moved in his jaw. "It was extremely unfair to you. But you can break that cycle. You're not your mother. You're you. And so far, everything I've been learning about you is amazing."

As she looked at him, she realized there was another reason she'd never thought of having children. She hadn't met a man she'd want to have them with. But now she had.

Her rib cage constricted, and she turned away to hide any sadness that might've appeared in her eyes. Austin hadn't given his answer yet, making her question her decision for the thousandth time, so there might not be any children in the future, anyway. But she didn't want to interview any other man for the job because, for her, this was it.

Her uncle had taught her early on that, in business negotiations, only people who could walk away held any kind of power. Her entire being wanted so much for Austin's answer to be yes that she felt powerless here. A feeling she'd dreaded since she'd been a neglected, lonely little girl.

Should she withdraw her business offer—because that was what it was—to save herself some humiliation? Or do her best not to fall for him, no matter what?

"It's cookie time!" Austin announced with childlike enthusiasm. Maybe it was because he spent so much time with puppies and kittens. "Mom says cookies make lots of things better. But then she makes the best cookies in the world. And she sent some with me here today."

As he balanced his pail on the ladder's paint tray and clapped, urging her to finish her last strokes, she liked that

enthusiasm and the fact he didn't hide it. She didn't remember when she last felt childlike enthusiasm. Even as a little girl. And if her memory failed her, her childhood photos were proof.

"Sounds great." She put down her brush, pulled off her gloves and cap, and shook out her hair. While she wasn't a raving beauty like her mother, she had inherited *one* of Mom's gorgeous features. The lustrous honey-blond hair now hanging down the length of her back. And a part of her—a large part—was eager to look good for Austin.

Skylar's dog chose that moment to run into the room. Maybe reacting to the word *cookie*. Before Kennedy could stop her, the golden retriever rushed to Austin and bumped into the ladder.

"Oh no!" Kennedy dashed to steady the ladder's legs because she didn't want him to fall and hurt himself.

"Kennedy, no! Step away!" His shout made her look up.

Then sticky pink paint flooded her head and face before the assault registered enough for her to jump back. She blinked, gasping for breath. She wasn't just wearing the paint. She was wearing the pail on her head, as well.

"I'm so sorry!" He practically rolled from the ladder and removed the pail.

A furious heat shot through her, and her gunky hands fisted. She was no expert on paint, but surely, it wouldn't be easy to get it out of her hair.

"I'll be right back." He returned with paper towels.

Tears prickled behind her eyes. She didn't consider herself vain, or she'd have done plastic surgery a long time ago. But she did love her hair. Paint drops splattered her shoulders, but she didn't worry about her T-shirt. The dog whined, crawled back, and covered her head with her paws.

"I can't believe I did it again," Austin muttered as he tried to wipe her hair. He took off his cap and goggles, giving her a better view of his handsome face. The guilt in his blue eyes struck her, but not enough to remove her anger.

“Did you drop a paint bucket on someone else before?” At this point, she wouldn’t be surprised. She should tell him she’d wash her hair and then go to the hairdresser. But something about having him close stopped her.

“No, I meant I ruined our time together again. You’ll think every meeting with me is a disaster.” He frowned as he snapped off his rubber gloves.

Somehow, his fresh aftershave reached her through the curtain of anger and the odor of paint. And the times he touched her neck while trying to remove the paint from her hair sent pleasant ripples over her skin.

The dog whined as if apologizing for all the damage she’d done. She looked so innocent that Kennedy didn’t have the heart to chastise her. At least, no paint ended up on her fur.

“Austin, Kennedy, we’re back!” Skylar’s cheerful voice sailed through the hall. “And we brought some food, too!”

Seconds later, Skylar and Marina sauntered inside, accompanied by a mouthwatering barbecue aroma. Then both women stopped in their tracks.

“Surprise!” Austin and Kennedy said in unison.

“It is. Um, when you volunteered to paint, I didn’t think you meant your hair,” Marina blurted.

Kennedy had been in embarrassing situations before, and Austin already looked like he wanted to fall through the carpeted floor, now covered in a protective plastic drop cloth. So she raised her chin. “Why not? Pink looks good on me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Austin said. “Just shoot me, really.”

He looked so miserable her anger dissipated. She plastered on a smile. “Look on the bright side. We didn’t paint the dog.”

The golden retriever with her lustrous fur intact barked as if to confirm it.

“And I appreciate that,” Skylar said with a sincerity Kennedy could believe. “Um, you need something more efficient than paper towels for this.”

“Yeah, like a paint stripper. But I’m not ready to lose my scalp yet.” Kennedy regretted her words as Austin’s face fell even more. “It’s okay. Do you mind if I use your bathroom?” Time was crucial, and she’d already used too much recovering from the shock. And fine, enjoying Austin’s touch.

Skylar nodded. “Of course. Feel free to use any shampoo you find there. Fresh towels, too.”

“I’ll help.” Austin followed her.

In her research about him, nobody had said he was accident-prone, but it proved to be the case so far. But who cared about a few accidents compared with her uncle’s happiness?

How was Austin going to help, though? “I’ll wash your hair,” he said as if sensing her question.

“O—okay.” Her insides warmed. The idea sounded surprisingly appealing.

She scrubbed her face with soap and water, then opened a bottle with peach-scented shampoo. “Let’s see if this works.”

“I so hope and pray it will.” He draped a towel over her shoulders. His gaze connected to hers longer than it should have. Could she hope he was as attracted to her as she was to him?

Okay, she had paint drying in her hair. It was no time to get lost in his blue eyes. She leaned over, and then warm water trickled over her scalp.

“Is this too hot?” he asked.

The feeling inside her was getting too hot. “The water is fine.”

The peachy scent joined the one of his aftershave. His fingers gliding over her skin sent wonderful waves through her, leaving delicious tingles in their wake. His touch was totally innocent, but those waves made it feel nearly... nearly forbidden.

“I noticed you didn’t sneeze near the dog. Are your allergies getting better?”

Her head jerked up, knocking him on the chin. “I don’t have allergies to dogs.”

His fingers moved over her scalp, creating lovely sensations and making it difficult to concentrate. “I meant, to fur. You sneezed when I brought the puppy.”

Her nose itched just from the memory. “Oh. I sneezed because you brought hibiscuses. I’m allergic to them.”

His fingers on her head stopped moving, but thankfully, resumed soon. “So sorry. I thought they were your favorite flowers.”

“Orchids are. I like hibiscuses, but from very, very far away.”

When he rinsed her hair, she regretted it was over already. He towel dried her hair, his massaging fingers gentle in their rubbing, and then, a bit shaky, she picked up a hair dryer.

Minutes later, she stared at herself in the mirror, doing her best to squelch her disappointment. “I believe they make extremely efficient paint these days. Well, most of it is off, right?”

“But not all. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I have a good hairdresser.” Then she remembered. “Oh, my assistant took my car to get its oil changed after dropping me off here. Strange he’s not back yet. There might’ve been some things that needed to get fixed.”

“I’ll give you a lift. I mean, if you’re okay with going in a rusty truck.”

“Why not?” He must think she was high maintenance. Mentioning her assistant hadn’t been smart.

About an hour later, the paint was out of her hair, partly because Kennedy had shoulder-length hair now, a significant chunk of it gone. She breathed in the minty scent of some expensive shampoo and told herself it could’ve been much worse.

She swallowed as she appeared in front of Austin. “What do you think?”

“You look gorgeous. But then, you always do.” He opened the front door for her.

She stepped outside, bracing for heat after the air-conditioned salon. “Yeah right.” She gave an unladylike snort as they walked to his truck. “You must be taking lessons from Kai.”

Kai was a known player in Port Sunshine. Kennedy didn’t think he’d ever settle down, and yet he did.

While Austin drove her to her house, her phone rang. She fished it out, expecting it to be Marina or Skylar calling about her hair resurrection. But her uncle’s name showed on the screen, and her gut twisted. Ever since that physical, she’d expected the other shoe to drop.

“Kennedy, I have bad news.” His grave tone made her heart sink.

“Oh no!” And minutes ago, she’d been worried about her hair. Why couldn’t she get *any* air into her lungs? “Are you all right?” she choked out.

*Please be okay. Please be okay. Please be okay.*

From the corner of her eye, she saw Austin look at her with worry. Then he reached for her nearest hand and squeezed her fingers. The gesture felt nice and unusual to her. She’d hired the best people she could find. But right now, the only person who’d always been in her corner was on the other end of the line. Tears burned the backs of her eyes again. She couldn’t lose him. She couldn’t!

She’d found him the best doctors and a nutritionist with the highest acclaim, as well as a fitness trainer. But he wasn’t keen to follow advice.

*Please be okay. Please be okay. Please be okay.*

“Yes, I am.” Her uncle spoke fast as if understanding her need for reassurance, letting her get air into her lungs again. “But your assistant is in the hospital.”

“What?” Something clutched her stomach the same way she was clutching her purse right now. The young man was a



picture of perfect health. But one could never know. “What happened? Did Mason have an accident? I’ll pay for all his medical expenses, of course. And I’ll be on the way to the hospital.”

“I’ve already paid and arranged for a private home nurse when he’s discharged. Sent fruits and flowers and notified his family. He has two broken ribs and many bruises, but his doctors hope for a full recovery. They say it’s a miracle, even if he was driving at a low speed when the accident happened.” Her uncle’s words made it easier to breathe. “But here’s where it gets worse for you.”

Cold traveled over her spine, and she leaned forward as if that would get her home sooner. Her fingers tightened over her smooth, buttery-soft purse. “It gets worse—*for me?*”

What on earth?

“He had an accident because the brakes failed.”

Her eyes widened, and she gasped at the sucker punch that slammed her gut. This was *her* fault? “I don’t understand. It’s a relatively new car. And I had it checked recently. The brakes were fine.”

There was a pause. “I have people looking into it. But it appears someone messed with your brakes. On purpose.”



## Chapter Six



AUSTIN COULDN'T WRAP his mind around this development, and it still chilled him the next evening.

“Why would anyone want to harm you?” he asked as he checked two new arrivals in the animal shelter for diseases and, well, parasites. Thankfully, both dogs seemed in good shape and healthy, though heartbroken over being abandoned. They didn't try to bite him and didn't pee on him, which he appreciated.

*Lord, please keep Kennedy safe. And thank You for saving her assistant and please give him a full recovery soon.*

Usually, his concentration was 100 percent on the animals, especially ones who suffered from human cruelty. He turned it back to them and petted them. The sad little furry ball mix of schnauzer and Yorkie just turned his head at him, then put his head on his paws, and closed his eyes as if unable to look at *any* humans. The beagle ignored him altogether. But they weren't aggressive, a sad trait in some animals who weren't just abandoned but also abused. Grinding his teeth, he suppressed anger at people who could do such things.

Neither dog had a chip, so the former owners couldn't be traced. The dogs would get chipped at the shelter, of course. He'd post on social media and in the local newspaper, as well as ask his mom to spread the word, hoping the owners would be found. But if not...

*Lord, please help these pets be adopted soon and into loving homes.*

Yet he couldn't help stealing glances at Kennedy, who'd surprised him by volunteering at the shelter. He sent up a prayer of gratitude that it turned out she wasn't allergic to fur. That gave him more hope than he should be feeling. Now she was feeding yesterday's arrivals, two white-and-brown pink-

nosed stray kittens from the same litter, who'd already been thoroughly checked, chipped, and processed.

She shrugged, the gesture too nonchalant for someone who could've been seriously hurt, while the thought sent a shudder through him. "Different reasons. I have business competitors. There are rumors of someone opening a new resort here. They would love to elbow me out of the picture. I fired my former assistant who was trying to steal from me, and she vowed revenge. I was considering acquiring another hotel on the coast about an hour from here, and there are interested buyers there. And..." Her voice trailed off, and she didn't say anything else.

What was after that "and"?

"I don't understand why *anyone* would wish someone else harm," he muttered. There was a bit of a ruckus while he made sure both new arrivals had the necessary vaccines. "Sorry, buddies, but there's no way around it."

"Are you going to ask me about it?" She loved on the kittens after they finished eating, and the tender image underscored their conversation about a bloodcurdling event.

He'd been attracted to her when she'd been a reclusive heiress he'd admired from afar. Now that he was getting to know her better, that attraction was growing into something more. If before she'd been like a sophisticated, beautiful but cold statue he looked up to, now she was a breathing, hurting human being who'd stepped off her pedestal.

Before he'd only seen her in chic clothes of mostly white and silver colors and designer shoes, her hair styled as if she were a movie star, and there had always been something mysterious about her.

Now she was in blue jeans, a white T-shirt with one of her hotel logos, and sneakers, hugging two adorable kittens, and so much more approachable. It was as if moonlight became a woman. She looked like a girl next door and, right by his side in an animal shelter of all places, seemed within reach.

His heart shifted. Yet so much distance remained between them.

Her honey-blonde hair, now swept away from her lovely face in a short ponytail, gave her a playful look that tugged at him. At the same time, it gave him a stab of guilt. She'd lost a chunk of her gorgeous hair due to his clumsiness.

“Ask what?” He needed to bathe the new dogs, but he couldn't look away from her. So he just stroked the schnauzer-Yorkie's head, hoping the poor dog's faith in humanity could be restored eventually. He sent up a prayer for both dogs. Yes, he'd often prayed for pets.

Then his heart skipped a beat. He'd been dragging his feet about the marriage proposal, which was unfair to her. He didn't mean to make her wait. The issue was he already wanted to be married to her so much that doing so felt selfish.

“I mean ask who's going to inherit everything if something happens to me.” An absent smile appeared on her face as she picked up the kittens. She talked about it with such indifference as if it were an item on the menu. In fact, he talked about menu items with more enthusiasm.

Okay, he was saved by the bell. Or rather, a distraction. He knew such things were important, but the possibility of something happening to her made everything clench inside.

“Um, would you mind helping me give these dogs a bath?” He latched onto something he liked doing, something that brought him joy.

Well, mostly.

Today, it didn't work out quite as intended.

“Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.” He cringed afterward. A new sledgehammer pounded his chest as he stared at her while she dried her ponytail with a towel. He averted his gaze from her T-shirt where the beagle had splashed some water as well, but thankfully not as much water. “I should've known it would create such a mess.”

“It's okay. Both dogs are looking good now, though the sad look in their eyes breaks my heart.”

“Mine, too.” He carried the schnauzer-Yorkie to the kennel while she did the same with the beagle, then filled their kibble and water bowls.

Both dogs refused to eat, and his heart sank. He glanced at the wall clock. It was getting late, but he couldn’t leave the poor critters who might think they were abandoned again. It seemed neither could she.

She took photos of the dogs and kittens with her phone. “I’ll post these in the hotel lobbies.” Then she sat near the beagle mix.

As much as he wanted to be near her, he sat on the hard floor near the schnauzer-Yorkie and leaned against the wall and stroked the fluff, the fur now soft under his fingertips. “It’s going to be all right, buddy. We’ll find you a good home.”

How would Caramel react if Austin fostered new arrivals? Then he remembered he’d never asked the question she’d seemed to want to answer. Or was it rude to ask?

Man, working with animals was simpler than trying to figure out people. “Um, who’s going to inherit everything?”

“My uncle and a few charities. I’ll leave smaller sums to a few loyal employees, including my current assistant, Mason. Of course, none of them would try to cause me an accident.”

The dog moved closer and put his head on Austin’s lap, and Austin claimed the small victory. But unfamiliar distrust stirred. Kennedy trusted her uncle, blinded by love. Austin didn’t have the same trust for a man he didn’t know.

“Do *you* have a will?” she asked, moving her fingers along the beagle’s coat. The dog didn’t react but didn’t move away, either.

The floor felt cold, hard, and unforgiving, so it might be the same for her. He got up and brought her a blanket.

Then he sat on the floor again and scratched behind the dog’s ears. “I haven’t given it much thought, so I didn’t create one. My brothers will get everything. Not that there’s a lot to inherit.” Which reminded him again about the differences between them. “Well, I’d love to leave something for the

shelter. But I'm sure my brothers will take care of it regardless."

His rib cage constricted. He had a large close-knit family while she was an only child with just an uncle. "My family would take you into their fold in a heartbeat. If you're open to it. I know it's not the same as your own family. But I just wanted to let you know."

"What if we're... Never mind. Well..." Her trailed-off word hung in the air like a sheet drying on the clothesline.

He sensed she wanted to share something. He petted the dog once more, then let his hand rest on his side.

When she didn't, he filled in the pause. First, he already knew she wasn't the talkative type, and second, his stomach was still clenched over the near miss. "What did the police say about the accident? If someone messed with the brakes near your house, there should be footage from the camera."

She grimaced. "Looks like Mason took my car to his girlfriend's after the oil change. He apologized to me and said he wanted to show off the car and impress her. She doesn't have cameras at her house and lives on the outskirts of town with no close neighbors. The police found fingerprints on some of my car parts, but they belong to the local mechanic."

"It is possible your assistant was the target, not you?"

"The police are looking into it, but I doubt it." She sighed. "My uncle is looking into this, as well, and is very concerned. He wants to hire a bodyguard, but I'm refusing."

"Maybe it's not a bad idea." It wasn't. Still, everything in him protested the thought. He liked this time alone with her too much.

She shook her head, and a strand escaped her ponytail, giving him the ridiculous urge to tuck it behind her ear. "I prefer my privacy. It's important to me."

He hugged the schnauzer-Yorkie, needing the support the pet provided as much as the dog needed his. The dog didn't return the affection like Caramel would, but then it wasn't a playful naïve puppy but an adult who'd been hurt deeply.

Austin sensed the same hurt in Kennedy. After all, there was a reason she'd been reclusive for years and a reason for the sadness in her gray eyes.

Okay, he'd be more vigilant on her behalf. That said, he wasn't a trained bodyguard but a veterinarian, and his stomach clenched again.

Finally, she said, "I used to have a cousin. Zoey." She paused again and didn't move for a while. Didn't even twitch. Only the clock ticking and the kittens tussling interrupted the silence.

He heard about her little cousin's disappearance many years ago. Normally, he'd chime in. But he forced himself to stay quiet, afraid to spook her, to stop her from continuing.

Once again, she seemed like an ice statue, beautiful and fragile, with the risk of breaking if he pushed too far. He had no clue how to behave with someone like that. In his family, jokes and teasing were exchanged easily, and everything was at face value. Well, except for his father's actions and words, but best not to think about that.

The beagle lifted his head, sniffed the air, and then barked as if in warning. The schnauzer-Yorkie near Austin joined in the duet, and Austin tensed. "I'll go check. There could be someone outside."

He got up from the floor and walked to exit the kennel, and the schnauzer-Yorkie whined and trudged after him. He patted the dog's back, the fur much softer after the bath. "I'll be right back."

The dog whined louder as if to say he'd heard *that* before.

"Don't go. It's okay." Kennedy's voice was cautious, and Austin nearly went to pat her back, too.

Instead, he pulled his shoulders back. "I'll check the cameras."

After a break-in, his family and several others donated to get the shelter a decent security system. Before, the intruders had broken in not to get the abandoned pets but to get dangerous medicines.



Inner alarm ringing in his ears, he checked the laptop screen that gave a better view than the phone. It was dark outside, but nobody seemed to be lingering in the shadows. The pressure on his lungs eased up as he returned to the kennel. “It looks okay.”

The beagle in the neighboring kennel met him with a bark, but the schnauzer-Yorkie wouldn't look in Austin's direction, clearly upset he'd left even for a minute.

“Sorry, buddy. I needed to make sure we're all safe.” He sat on the floor again and placed his hand on the dog. Earning this one's trust would take a while.

How long would it take to earn Kennedy's trust? Whatever she was willing to share about her life, he was honored by it.

“I used to have a cousin,” she said again. “Zoey was awesome. So very pretty and vivacious. Sometimes I thought my parents wished they had her instead of me.”

“That can't be true,” he hurried to correct her.

“Anyway, everyone loved her....”

“Wait a moment,” he blurted out after the story. “So she might be alive?”

He must've hugged the schnauzer-Yorkie too tight because the dog barked a protest. Austin relaxed his grip.

“I don't know. My uncle could be mistaken. It could just be someone who looked like her. She was a little girl when she disappeared. She'd be my age now. For years, I'd see people I thought might be her, only to find out I was wrong. Again and again and again.” Kennedy didn't mention it, but Zoey would be another person to inherit everything. Of course, that would be if both Kennedy and her uncle died.

“On the slim chance she's alive, why didn't she contact you? Why didn't she come home?” His mind whirled. He'd thought little could top what had happened with Skylar's parents and Kai's brother, but this one was a story for the books.

“If she was kidnapped, she might not know who she is.” Kennedy’s whispered words hung between them.

An hour later, he walked her to the car in the dim lantern light, staying close, his gaze darting around. Every cell in him on high alert, he wasn’t sure what he was looking for, just that he had to keep her safe.

Halfway through the parking lot, her phone rang.

She took it out of her purse and sent him an apologetic gaze. “It’s my uncle. Might be something urgent. And…” Her voice broke a little. “His health isn’t what it used to be.”

He sent up a prayer for the only family she had. “Of course, feel free to answer.” Though he wished she was in the relative safety of her car when she answered. Surely, her car was bulletproof, right?

With the way Kennedy’s gray eyes went huge, whatever she heard wasn’t good news. His gut tightened.

“Is she alive? Is she okay?” Deep concern rang in her voice. “Okay. I’ll be careful. We’ll talk in the morning. I’ll be fine.”

“What happened?” He couldn’t help asking after she’d disconnected and they were covering the remaining distance to the car, him shielding her.

She walked slower now as if overwhelmed, and as much as he loved her company, he wished she didn’t slow down because that made her an easier target.

“One of our employees, Emma, was hit on the head from behind in my hotel. She was in a room I use sometimes when I work late there. She lost consciousness, but when she recovered, she called the police, then called my uncle, who’s helping take care of things while I’m on vacation. He took her to the hospital after she gave the police her statement.” Kennedy clicked the fob to open her car. “I’m going there now to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’ll follow you.” He opened the car door for her. “Was it a robbery? Was anything stolen?”

“Nothing is missing.” Kennedy’s face crumpled as she slipped inside her sleek silver sports car with its repaired brakes and newly installed camera. “It’s all my fault!”

“How can it be your fault? It’s unfortunate that things keep happening to the people around you, but—”

She rolled down the window. “This woman and I have the same build. We have the same color long hair.” She cleared her throat. “Ahem, well, like the long hair I used to have. And she was wearing a designer dress I gave her. Plus, metal bracelets that looked like my silver ones from afar.” Kennedy gulped. “She was lying face up when she regained consciousness. It looks like the intruder realized his mistake when he saw her on the floor and left.”

“Mistake meaning... the intruder meant to hit you.” A shiver traveled down his spine, a shiver having nothing to do with the night air. “Wait, but there should be cameras in the hotel, right?”

“We got a guy in a ski mask crouching from the fire exit.”

His decision on her marriage proposal became very easy. If her life was in danger, she needed someone to protect her or at the least to be a human shield. He couldn’t let something happen to her, and the best way to be around her twenty-four seven had been handed to him in a kibble bowl.

“Kennedy Crawford, will you marry me?”



# Chapter Seven



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU want a small wedding?” Kennedy’s uncle and Austin’s mother asked in unison, looked at each other, then glared at Kennedy and Austin.

In the hotel conference room her uncle suggested they use for this family meeting, Kennedy resisted the urge to squirm against her luxurious chocolate-brown leather chair. She was used to her plans meshing with Uncle’s even before either voiced them, so contradicting the man she’d always looked up to sent an unpleasant jolt through her.

Austin took her hand and moved closer, causing a totally different jolt to zip through her. “Just what we said. We want a small wedding.”

This was the first time a man other than her uncle or a hired bodyguard tried to protect her, and her heart swelled. Well, not the first time. When they’d walked from the animal shelter to her car the day before yesterday, Austin had hung close as if shielding her. Then he’d followed her home and walked her to the door.

But she’d never meant to put him in danger. She’d nearly rescinded her offer yesterday.

She pushed past her natural shyness like she’d had to do so many times during board meetings and squared her shoulders. Her uncle had raised her to achieve her goals, even if she now had to use his lessons against him. “That’s nonnegotiable. I know all those business associates are important to you and you have an image to maintain. But the guest list is close family only.” She paused to hide the familiar pain. “Which in my case means only my uncle. Plus, two of my employees who are like family to me. We’d like the reception to be in this hotel restaurant.”

Mrs. Lawrence jumped to her feet so fast her chair toppled onto the shiny oak floor. “What?” She jammed her hands on

her hips. “A reception in our backyard isn’t good enough for you?”

Uh-oh. Kennedy swallowed hard. Angering her future mother-in-law wasn’t a good start to marriage.

“Mom! Please try to understand.” Loving but firm notes strengthened Austin’s voice. He got up and lifted his mother’s chair, then moved it closer to her. “We have our reasons for this.”

Mrs. Lawrence remained standing. And glaring. She clearly didn’t raise so many boys by being a pushover.

Marina lifted her chin and moved closer to Kennedy, forming a united front. “We’ll make it work. And I agree with the small wedding.”

Kai would’ve been in the meeting, but he had an emergency with a pipeline to the pasture.

Grateful for her support, Kennedy sent her friend a glance. Then she drew a deep breath of air tinted sweetly from the orchid centerpiece. Austin had agreed to tell his family about the possibility of her life being in danger when it was the right time.

It appeared the time was now. And if his mother decided not to accept her into the family with a possible target on her back, that was a risk Kennedy had to take. Would Mrs. Lawrence even allow her sons to attend the wedding or decide to be around Kennedy herself?

A lump formed in her throat. Austin squeezed her hand and nodded, making things easier.

“A couple of incidents involving people close to me indicate my life *might* be in danger. The incidents were reported to the police, and they are investigating.” She gave the short version of what had happened. “I hope I’m wrong, but I don’t want to leave anything to chance. I love your backyard, Mrs. Lawrence. I do. But it’s an open space and, therefore, too dangerous.”

Mrs. Lawrence gasped and sank onto the chair. “Oh no!”

“I’m sorry, Mom. That’s also our reason for a small wedding, besides the fact that we both want it to be an intimate one.” Austin didn’t leave room for argument.

The lump in Kennedy’s throat grew. “Mrs. Lawrence, I’ll understand if, after this, you won’t want to be present at the wedding. Or if you ask your sons not to attend.” She swallowed hard. “Including Austin.”

He shook his head. “I’m all in.”

Her heart warmed, but she couldn’t cause issues with his family.

His mother shot back to her feet. “Are you kidding me?”

Uh-oh. Kennedy tensed. Here it came.

Mrs. Lawrence rushed to Kennedy, sort of pulled her out of her chair, and hugged her in earnest. “If Austin abandoned you now, he wouldn’t be a son of mine. We’ll take care of you. If anyone wants to get to you, they’ll have to make it past me.”

Grateful tears heated Kennedy’s eyes, but she stemmed their flow. Like always. “Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me.”

The pressure on her chest eased, though breathing became difficult for a different reason. Mrs. Lawrence gave hugs like she meant them. But then, Kennedy had the impression her future mother-in-law—wow!—did everything like she meant it.

Austin joined in the hug, making Kennedy’s heart beat faster, and whispered, “Thank you so much, Mom.”

Kennedy’s uncle remained sitting, giving her a sting of regret, but then he’d never been one for public displays of affection. His eyes narrowed when everyone reseated themselves at the table. “Let’s work on logistics. We have security cameras in the venue already, and we’ll up the personnel monitoring them.”

“One couple surprisingly canceled their reception here, or we’d have difficulty with the venue on such short notice,” Kennedy said. “Our hotel’s usually booked for months ahead,

and so are the other venues in Port Sunshine. Besides, other venues probably wouldn't work, anyway, considering the need for heightened security."

She and her uncle exchanged glances. She suspected he'd made that couple an offer they couldn't refuse, and they'd agreed to move the date. He might've even offered to pay for the entire wedding. He never waited for things to fall into his lap. He made them happen.

He sipped the water in his crystal glass, and its platinum trim gleamed even in the recessed lighting. Always calm. "We'll make sure everyone in the wedding is thoroughly vetted."

Arms crossed over her chest, Mrs. Lawrence whirled to him. She didn't look *calm* at all. "Are you hinting that someone in *my* family might not be trusted?"

"Not at all." He raised both hands as if in surrender. "I meant the personnel catering the reception, mostly."

Time to defuse the situation, though it was kind of fun to see someone standing up to her uncle. Kennedy hadn't seen it happen before. She opened her bottled water and took a few sips. Since her assistant's accident, she didn't drink anything she didn't open herself. "I'm hiring a security company. They'll provide personnel for the wedding, working undercover as waitstaff. The team lead is highly recommended. Plus her many other credentials, she has a black belt in karate and is a sharpshooter." The tough image somewhat contrasted with the photo of a fragile woman with dimpled cheeks, but long ago, Kennedy had learned appearances and reality were often two different things. That appearance even worked in Rachel Arvidson's favor because people wouldn't expect her to be a threat.

Uncle's gaze flicked over Kennedy. "Are you sure about this?"

"Positive." She didn't want more worries to affect his health if she could help it. It was bad enough that, while some people had a year to prepare for a wedding, Kennedy had decided to have it in a week and a half. But if someone could



pull it off, her uncle could. When he spoke, people listened—and worked overtime if needed.

Well, Mrs. Lawrence looked like a force of nature, too.

“Did you choose your wedding party?” Mrs. Lawrence asked.

“Yes.” Kennedy nodded at her friend. “Marina here will be the matron of honor. Skylar will be my bridesmaid. Kai and Dallas will be Austin’s best man and groomsman. And they all know about, um, the current situation.” She took another sip of her water, then grimaced. It wasn’t right to risk putting the young couples in a possibly dangerous situation, was it? It was bad enough she might’ve caused her employees’ injuries.

Both Mason and Emma were doing much better. Emma was discharged already, and Kennedy gave her extended sick leave to recover from the mental blow.

Or was it all coincidence? Was Kennedy worried for nothing and making people close to her worry, as well?

As they discussed other wedding logistics—from the menu to the bouquet to the band—her gaze landed on the oil painting of a young girl in a cream-hued dress dancing on the edge of a fountain, of all places.

Their family curator usually bought art for their houses from established artists to secure bragging rights and investment potential. However, the rules for the hotel interiors were lax due to tighter budgets and stricter insurance policies. Kennedy had bought many of Skylar’s paintings, this one included. Those weren’t pity buys or a favor to a new friend. Talented Skylar possessed the ability to convey the carefree bliss Kennedy had searched for and rarely found in real life. She was coming close to it since that dinner with Austin, though.

Or maybe Kennedy had chosen this painting because the girl had the same mischievous look in her eyes Zoey once had. She suppressed a sharp pain in her chest with a familiar effort. It was probably as difficult to balance the ache her desire to keep Zoey alive in her memory caused as to balance herself on

a fountain's edge without falling in. They'd been like sisters, in appearance and in souls.

The joy in the girl's eyes matched the newfound joy in Skylar's, and Kennedy loved the uplifting sensation emanating from the canvas. She glanced at Austin, and the fountain's sparkling clear water seemed to match his personality. So far, he appeared just as transparent and just as sparkling.

She hid a smile as her chest expanded when their eyes met and a slow grin spread over his handsome face. Her heart fluttered, and she couldn't look away. Marriage of convenience or not, an invisible bond linked them already.

He reminded her of a different fountain she'd had to get for a couple of weddings at the hotel. A chocolate fountain to dip strawberries into. He was just as sweet.

Her gaze shifted to the picture behind him, a gigantic, floor-to-ceiling oil portrait of her mother in a stunning off-shoulder crimson evening gown. Dazzling in a diamond necklace and earrings, she held a bouquet of magenta hibiscuses. How ironic that her mother's favorite flowers were the ones Kennedy was allergic to. Her mother was gorgeous to start with, but she'd demanded the artist make her nose even more delicate and her lips plumper. The artist's brushstrokes had been the original filter before those used on social media now.

Sadness and nostalgia unraveled inside Kennedy. Absent mother or not, Kennedy missed her—or maybe the idea of having a mother—and that created her own filter, especially on a day of planning a wedding.

Would her mother help her prepare for the wedding? Or would Kennedy once again disappoint her with an intimate gathering instead of a huge party with important people? Her mother loved parties. Her parents' wedding was the talk of the town for a long time. Kennedy would never know how her mother would've reacted, and she wanted to.

As if feeling the void, Mrs. Lawrence got up and hugged Kennedy again. Unlike Kennedy's family, Austin's seemed to be big on hugs and affection. "Honey, I know I'm not your

mother—and I'd never try to be. But whatever you need, please know you can come to me.”

A lump formed in Kennedy's throat again, and grateful tears sprang to her eyes. But having been taught that big girls shouldn't cry, she held them in. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.” And it did. Far more than anyone could know.

“Don't mention it. When you marry one of my sons, you get the rest of the family, too.”

“That can be a bit scary,” Austin muttered.

The door opened, and two dashing young men who moved silently without drawing attention to themselves rolled in carts that emanated delicious aromas. Her uncle had asked for everyone's preferences two days ago and offered options, and they'd agreed on lamb chops with Greek salad and rice. His personal chef used to work in one of the upscale New York restaurants but far preferred their more relaxed atmosphere and ocean community. Maybe because Christos was of Greek descent and had grown up on the Mediterranean.

Now, Kennedy's nose followed the mouthwatering scents of the spices he'd brought from his home country. Plates with Mediterranean motifs, platinum utensils, crystal glasses, and teal-hued linen napkins appeared in front of everyone. The guys, dressed in impeccably crisp white shirts and ironed black slacks, poured drinks.

“Anyone need anything else?” her uncle asked.

“We're good,” Austin and Kennedy said in unison, then glanced at each other.

Everyone else chorused, “No thanks.”

At Uncle's gesture, the young men disappeared as if they never existed. The first rule for the staff was to provide any needed assistance while being as close to invisible as possible.

“Well, doesn't this look awesome?” Mrs. Lawrence couldn't be invisible if she tried, and that was one of many things Kennedy loved about her. “Anyone mind if I say grace?”

“Of course not,” Kennedy said fast. Her parents were Christians, and so was her uncle. So she’d sort of slipped into faith the same way she’d slipped into her role with the family business. But they were more the look-how-much-we-donated kind than the intimate-relationship-with-God kind that the Lawrences were.

She bowed her head but didn’t say anything. She was used to which utensils one used during a meal being far more important than grace being said. Could that change?

Afterward, she tried the yummy lamb, and the robust herbs burst with a fantastic flavor. But then she didn’t expect anything else.

“Is this some kind of soup?” Mrs. Lawrence took a sip from a small bowl.

Kennedy’s eyes widened while her uncle cleared his throat. “It’s scented water to wash your hands.”

Austin gulped and seemed to stifle a yelp. Uh-oh.

Mrs. Lawrence didn’t even blush. “Oh. I wondered why it didn’t have any flavor. I was going to give your cook a good soup recipe.”

Kennedy and Uncle exchanged glances again, and amusement danced in his. They both could imagine how well it would go if Mrs. Lawrence advised Christos how to cook.

Austin’s mom didn’t dry her hands on the napkin placed for that purpose but just waved them in the air, so droplets splashed Uncle’s face. Then she eyed the crystal water goblet, with the as-yet-unfilled glasses beside it. “Is this the one to drink? Or am I supposed to wash my face with it or something?”

“It’s to drink, Mom.”

Mrs. Lawrence scrunched her nose at the three forks. “Which one of these forks am I supposed to use with the lamb and which one with the salad? Frankly, I don’t understand why one needs so many utensils.”

Austin paled and showed her.

Mrs. Lawrence picked up the dinner fork. “Waste of silver if you ask me. Which takes forever to polish, by the way.”

“It’s platinum.” Kennedy covered her mouth as soon as she blurted out the words. Did she have to say *that*? Her throat went dry, and she drank her sparkling water.

“You gotta be kidding me.” Mrs. Lawrence threw her arms up in the air.

Kennedy’s uncle shrugged as he forked his salad. “Why doesn’t one just eat with their hands? After cooking over a fire?”

“I agree. Food eaten with one’s hand tastes the best. As does food cooked over an open fire.” Mrs. Lawrence cut off some lamb and forked it with such force it jumped from her plate. Somehow, it projected into the air and hit Uncle in the eye.

Austin and Kennedy gasped at the same time. Marina’s lips moved as if she were trying to contain laughter, and then she half snorted, half hiccupped.

Uncle just wiped his eye with a napkin. “Well, I’ve seen many things in my life. But never before have I seen a lamb fly.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything. My apologies.” Undisturbed, Mrs. Lawrence jabbed more lamb, but this time with more success. “But really, far better than seeing a lamb *fly*, you should try my lamb *fries*.”

A bemused smile touched Uncle’s lips, an expression Kennedy had rarely seen. “Please don’t apologize. I believe this makes the most entertaining lunch I’ve ever attended.”

Kennedy breathed easier, and everyone resumed their lunch.

*I love you, Uncle.*

“That’s because you haven’t been at our meals yet,” Mrs. Lawrence said modestly. “Especially when the entire family gathers. Including the parrot and dogs.” She paused. “But excluding the cattle and lambs.”

Marina chuckled and tried to cover it with a hurried sip.

“I’m glad you clarified,” Uncle said.

Okay, Kennedy could understand where Austin got some of his goofiness. She hid a smile behind her crystal goblet and sent him an encouraging glance. Then she winced. She was trying to merge two worlds that wouldn’t be easy to merge. Maybe it wasn’t fair to him. Then Mrs. Lawrence coughed over her salad.

Austin jumped and patted her on the back. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Yes. What is in this thing?” She hurried to drink her water. “In the salad, I mean.”

Uncle started naming ingredients.

When he made it to artichoke, Mrs. Lawrence interrupted him, “The *choke* part is right.”

Kennedy couldn’t help herself. She snorted. Her uncle was right. It was one of the most entertaining meals she’d ever been to, as well, and she couldn’t wait to join more dinners with the Lawrence family. They must have a blast. Dinners with her parents had been a quiet affair where nobody had seemed to talk or pay attention to one another. Kennedy had felt invisible and more like a decoration than a child who was allowed to move and dared to remind anyone about her existence.

“Any progress in the investigation?” Her uncle’s voice suggested he still didn’t like her unwillingness to let him participate.

But she wasn’t a little girl. She couldn’t still ask him to jump in to solve her issues. His stepping in to help with the hotels during her vacation was more than enough.

She set down the goblet with sparkling water and straightened in her seat. This was one of Marina’s first cases as a private investigator, and Kennedy’s stomach clenched. Was she putting too much pressure on her friend and now matron of honor? “Marina has done great work on this.”

Marina squared her shoulders, not looking intimidated. Phew. But then, verbal sparring used to be part of her job. “The police haven’t determined yet who cut the brakes. But here’s what I found so far. Kennedy’s assistant, Mason, has a girlfriend whose somewhat violent ex-boyfriend threatened him—that is, Mason—before. They even fought because the ex blamed Mason for the breakup.”

“And not his own violent tendencies?” Austin exhaled fast. He even placed his platinum—Uncle didn’t think silver was classy enough—fork back. “Wow.”

Her heart warmed. But that was another difference between them. They saw people differently. He saw them as kind human beings and pet lovers because that was mostly who he’d dealt with. She saw them as something that could potentially mean her harm if she allowed them too close.

“So…” Uncle’s shoulders relaxed. “There’s a possibility he cut the brakes as a means of retaliation?”

The pressure on Kennedy’s diaphragm eased up before she chastised herself over her relief that she might not be the one targeted. She forked vegetables from the Greek salad. Including artichoke. She’d offer Mason whatever help he needed. The lanky young man was efficient and hardworking while remaining humble. He’d be a manager one day, partly because she’d be the one to promote him.

Marina nodded. “It might not be connected to our Kennedy. The police questioned the guy, but of course, he denied everything.”

“Of course, he did,” Kennedy echoed, then sipped some sparkling water while rearranging this development in her head. “What does the girlfriend say?”

Could Kennedy stop looking over her shoulder? Was hiring the security company going too far? No, better safe than sorry. There hadn’t been enough precautions before Zoey disappeared, and that had been the biggest regret of Kennedy’s life. Always would be.

The image of Zoey in a pretty blue dress and matching ribbons flashed in Kennedy's mind, and she pushed it away. But why did she feel it was important what Zoey had been wearing that tragic day?

"She filed a restraining order against him. She said he used to stalk her." Marina brought her crystal goblet to her lips pursed to show what she thought of that behavior. "I've seen how those kinds of things can escalate." She'd practiced as a lawyer before she moved back to her hometown and married her childhood friend, Kai. Okay, maybe one of the reasons she'd returned to Port Sunshine *was* to marry her childhood friend, who'd had his heart set on her for a long time.

The taste of the lamb and herbs dimmed as Kennedy thought of ways to help Mason's girlfriend.

Marina continued, "I talked to her coworkers, and they told me the guy harassed her at work. One more detail. He works as a mechanic. So he'd know how to damage brakes."

"But wouldn't it make more sense to wait until the car was brought to him and mess with the brakes than to do it at his ex-girlfriend's house and risk being seen?" Austin asked.

Her uncle cleared his throat again. "First, in such a scenario, that would pin the blame directly on him. Second, Mason doesn't take her car to a local station. Our personal mechanic has equipment at his home."

"Oh," Austin said.

Huh. She'd taken so many things for granted others found surprising.

Austin had such an aura of simplicity and sincerity, and she found it more appealing than the fence of manners and exclusivity she'd been hiding behind. But then, she found many things about him appealing. Meanwhile, he probably found this lunch as suffocating as the collar of the starched shirt he'd tugged at several times already. Yet he was here for her.

She touched his hand to show her appreciation, then looked at her uncle. "Lunch is wonderful, and I want to give



you my heartfelt thanks for organizing it. Next time, how about we order pizza?" She softened her voice, hoping she wouldn't offend him.

"Sounds great to me." Austin smiled. "What do you all think about pepperoni?"

"Peppers and onions and extra cheese." Marina chimed in.

When everyone else agreed, her uncle finally did, too.

Then Kennedy turned to Marina. "Sorry I interrupted. Please go on."

Marina put down her fork, and her gaze focused. "I asked Mason and his girlfriend if they heard something outside, and they said no. Sadly, they don't have cameras. Or a dog who'd alert them. And as we already know, she lives on the outskirts of town, so no close neighbors."

"Except for squirrels and rabbits, and those don't talk," Austin added. "They don't even seek my medical help."

Kennedy chuckled. He seemed more relaxed now after his mother's fork fiasco. Kennedy lifted her glass and saluted him like he'd done to her in the seafood restaurant. Clear water could be so much better than some artificial soft drinks she used to like.

The marriage was pretend, but the guy was the real deal. Her heart shifted as if it wanted the marriage to be the real deal, as well. But they hadn't even kissed yet, hadn't dated. They were doing everything backward. Or she was.

Well, they did volunteer at the animal shelter together now. And she was getting more and more attached to the beagle. Every evening, she found it more difficult to leave the little chocolate-splashed critter behind. She'd thought a lot about adopting him, and her heart shifted again. But as a couple, they'd already have a dog—Caramel—and then they'd be traveling internationally for their honeymoon. So how could she...

She *wanted* to adopt a dog. She couldn't watch those sad eyes one more day and deny him a home. The schnauzer mix

had gotten adopted yesterday, and so had the cute kittens. That had made the beagle sadder.

Her busy life hadn't allowed a pet before, or so she'd told herself. A dog was a huge responsibility, but so was marriage. She wanted to care for that particular dog. And not that the two could be interchangeable, but as she looked at Austin and her heart fluttered, she already cared about this particular man. She didn't just choose a marriage of convenience but a marriage to *this* man.

Yet something inside her forced her to push back. Was she afraid to be abandoned again if she loved with her whole being? Or was it just the way she was?

"Is there a chance the incident with Emma could've been a burglary attempt?" Austin asked with hope in his voice after he raised his fork like a child would raise a hand to ask a question. Then he coughed a little. "Not that I'd want the hotel to be burglarized."

She shared Austin's hope as she enjoyed the lamb again. Too bad, there weren't more things they shared.

"A painting in that room has value but not overly so." Her uncle shrugged.

"I'm also looking at another angle. It could be Emma was targeted, but something spooked the intruder." Marina munched on a forkful of rice. "No violent exes in her past, and no conflicts with her coworkers or neighbors. Her family lives far away, and she said there were no conflicts there, either. Nothing suspicious I could dig up so far."

Then the conversation turned again to the discussions of wedding flowers and table settings and guest seating. But Kennedy's thoughts had stayed with the beagle. She spun to Austin. "Would you be okay if we adopted the beagle and call him Smiley?" Her shoulders lifted, apologizing for what might seem an odd choice of name for the sad dog. "Not that we've seen him smile much yet. But I think we could show him how to be happy again."

Maybe she could learn to be happy again, too.

Austin's eyes widened as he rose to his feet and leaned toward her. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes." She got up from her chair.

He lifted her and whirled around, causing her pulse to skyrocket. "I'd be thrilled. I would have called him Cocoa, to go with Caramel, but your choice of name is perfect. I'd love to see him smile again, and I can't wait to adopt him." Then he whispered in her ear. "And I can't wait to marry you."

Her heart started singing, but natural and hard-earned cautiousness won. "I hope you're not saying that just because of the dog."

He laughed. "No, of course not."

She got lost in his baby blues, and her head started spinning. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she leaned closer, desperately wanting to kiss him. Those blues darkened, and her heart raced.

Until her mind registered their audience, and she shifted back. His eyes dimmed, and he put her down. Heat rose inside her, and her cheeks must be the color of her mother's dress in the portrait.

He could make her forget everything else so easily, and she needed to stay alert. She took a few sips to compose herself and channeled her thoughts in the right direction. "I'm glad to say Emma didn't have a concussion or any other health consequences. She's fully recovered. Though I still feel bad it happened. Was the intruder found yet?"

"The police don't have any leads." Her uncle touched his lips with the linen napkin. At least, these were the hotel ones and weren't monogrammed like the ones in the house. "And I'm appalled the recordings didn't even help. We should've had better security."

Kennedy's gut clenched as she looked at Austin.

She was bitterness to his sweetness. And now she could cause him harm by her mere proximity. Yes, she was smitten, but his well-being mattered more than her feelings. More than the opportunity for her uncle to walk her down the aisle.

Should she stand up and call off the entire thing before it was too late?



# Chapter Eight



AS AUSTIN STOOD IN front of the altar waiting for the music to start a week and a half later, so many emotions whirled inside him, mixing, separating, rising to the surface, dissipating, and reappearing. Worry, joy, disbelief, elation, and worry again, and some emotions he couldn't identify yet.

"Is this really happening?" He didn't realize he'd said it aloud until Kai, standing at his side, nodded.

"It'd better be. I wouldn't want to be dressed up like this for nothing." Kai tugged at the chocolate-brown tie that matched his eyes. He was the only one in the family with brown eyes, instead of blue. But except for their brother who'd become an executive, they all preferred cowboy attire to tuxedos.

Austin sent him a *look*, though he knew Kai wouldn't put his minor inconvenience over Austin's broken heart.

"Okay, not a good time to joke. Or to speak, for that matter. Besides, I like dressing up like a pirate for shipboard reenactments, so I can stand a tux for your wedding. Of course, it's real. Kennedy should be walking down that aisle any moment. Uh-oh," Kai mumbled as he patted his pocket. "I think I forgot the rings."

Austin's insides went cold.

"Nope, all here." His brother grinned.

Austin could breathe again. He didn't have a good track record around Kennedy. Apparently, it seemed contagious.

Marina had caught a stomach bug that had been successfully passed to her husband and the rest of the family. Caramel had discovered the same fondness for leather shoes her sister Buttercup used to have. Austin had to buy a new pair of expensive ones for the wedding—then he had to watch them like a hawk. Thankfully, the shoe-chewing feast hadn't

happened right before the wedding. The florist had difficulty delivering the needed number of cream-colored orchids. Then the lead singer of the band they'd booked had broken a leg, and the band had to cancel.

Austin's mom and Kennedy's uncle argued repeatedly about the wedding and pretty much everything they talked about. Yet they talked to each other *a lot*, and Mom started wearing makeup again and making regular visits to a hairdresser.

Kennedy had persevered through it all and didn't even blink when her trusted hairdresser had gone on vacation at the most inopportune time.

Finally, the music started playing, and a smiling Skylar walked down the aisle. Kennedy had chosen to have only a matron of honor and one bridesmaid and didn't ask for any specific dresses or even a certain color theme. Skylar was wearing three seashell bracelets, a seashell necklace she'd made herself, and a long sleeveless golden-hued dress and matching kitten-heel sandals.

Marina appeared after that, in a similar dress but instead of kitten-heel sandals, she wore low-heel loafers. Both women had their hair flowing over their shoulders, but Marina gripped a posy of white and canary-yellow orchids tied up with flowing golden and white ribbons. Similar flowers and bows decorated the church pews.

The faint, sophisticated scent of orchids also drifted from his lapel, and matching boutonnières, as Kennedy called them, graced his groomsmen's lapels. Now Austin knew orchids were her favorite flowers—not the hibiscuses she was allergic to!— he'd corrected his initial mistake by gifting her orchid bouquets several times.

Joy and concern warred inside him as his gaze swept over the church he'd been going to since he'd been a little boy. For years, he could only dream that one day he'd be standing near the altar, waiting for the most amazing woman in the world to marry him. But this was a marriage of convenience, something he'd never dreamed of and never thought he'd consider.

While the dear, familiar faces in the pews comforted him, three unfamiliar ones unnerved him. Those people were part of the security company Kennedy hired. They had a job to do here.

No new incidents had happened since they'd started wedding preparations, and both Mason and Emma had recovered and were among the guests. Some of Austin's worries had eased up. But not all of them.

When Kennedy started walking down the aisle, his heart expanded, and everything else faded. It all felt surreal. Unlike his brother who often played a pirate, Austin never pretended to be someone he wasn't. But since he'd proposed to her—well, after she'd proposed to him—he'd felt like he was cast as the lead character in some spectacular movie.

Yet the more he'd gotten to know her, the more he'd felt she was the one God meant for him. To him, this was the real deal. A real marriage. But she'd never asked him for his feelings. She'd asked him for his signatures on a contract with so many pages it looked like a book. He wanted to marry her, *not* the heiress.

Then he winced. Was he one of those people who stereotyped her and made her become a recluse? He was so much more than a veterinarian, and she was so much more than an heiress.

A gentle smile lifted her pink lips. She carried a bouquet similar to Marina's, but larger. A long white silk dress nearly reached her high-heeled shoes, all elegant and classy. No lace or beads or any decorations on the dress whatsoever. But it suited Kennedy and fit as smoothly as if he'd poured paint over her again, as did her elbow-length opera gloves. The entire image, the entire person was just that. Perfection.

The only other thing he could wish for was for her to love him, but would that be asking too much?

As they approached the altar, her uncle beamed like the proud father he'd been to her. Then, near the altar, she stumbled, and her arms flailed as she released her uncle's arm, probably so as not to take him down with her.



People in the pews gasped.

Her uncle tried to catch her, but she shifted away. Maybe to stop her fall, she let the bouquet go, which flew to the side and smacked Saylor's face before Rachel Arvidson reached to snatch the flowers.

As Austin leaped to catch his falling bride, several people muttered, "I thought the bride threw the bouquet *after* the wedding."

*Lord, please don't let me and Kennedy roll down the aisle.*

He'd never thought he'd be saying *that* kind of prayer. Surely, Kennedy would be terrified to become a public spectacle. Holding her in his arms, he was surprised and grateful to find they were both still standing. So was her uncle. So was Rachel who'd rushed to Kennedy. Flanked by that three-sided wall, Kennedy remained unharmed and on her feet.

*Thank You, Lord.*

Kennedy looked up at him, her smile widening. "You caught me. Thank you for not letting me fall."

"Frankly, the best I hoped for was to cushion the fall." His heart shifted. "Rachel and your uncle deserve more credit than I do."

Her uncle pinned Austin with a stare. "In giving you the biggest treasure and the biggest joy of my life, I intended to trust you with her safety." Based on his tone, the guy didn't sound too persuaded.

Austin didn't blame him. It was like choosing a golden retriever to guard the house instead of a German shepherd. "Yes, sir. I'll do my best." His heart constricted, something cold wringing the blood from it. What if his best wasn't enough?

Rachel handed Kennedy the orchid bouquet, but not before sneezing in her elbow. Oh no. Was Rachel allergic to flowers, as well, in her case to orchids? She slipped back into the pew while Austin let his beautiful bride approach the altar first, doing his best to be a gentleman. Seconds later, he realized his

mistake. Not being a gentleman but not looking where he walked.

The terrifying sound of the fabric ripping reached his ears as Saylor screamed, “You stepped on her train!”

People in the pews gasped again.

He leaped back as if a wounded Doberman pinscher was about to attack him. Everything in him went cold, and he hoped and prayed Kennedy still had her entire dress on. In a church wedding!

Yes, that was another prayer he’d never thought he’d say. He was scared even to look as he hurried to shield her from view.

Eyes wide, Kennedy glanced back at her dress. Then her expression relaxed. “Uncle, you were right. I’m glad I went with your advice to have a long train.”

While the man preened in his pew as if not getting her sarcasm, not a muscle moved on her lovely face. Then stoically, she ripped off the part of the train Austin had torn. She balled it up wearing her white opera gloves, then tossed it aside. If he admired her before, that increased tenfold now.

Then she turned to their guests. “We thank you all for coming today to share our special day. Our apologies for this delay. We’re ready to get married now.” After eliciting a few chuckles, she continued, “Austin and I won’t be holding candles for safety measures. And we ask that Kai and Marina, who *will* hold candles, step a bit away from us. Just a precaution not to set my hair on fire. Though I understand it would make for an interesting wedding video.”

Now laughter rumbled through the pews as did some chuckles. But the blood drained from his face just from his imagining setting on fire what was left of her lustrous hair after that paint fiasco.

When she stood near him, he knew this was the defining moment of his life.

This was *it*.

For a moment, he closed his eyes because he didn't want her to see the intensity of feeling they surely revealed. Then his gut clenched as a part of him feared that, once he opened his eyes, she'd disappear like the mirage she seemed to be sometimes. As if all this were a dream and he'd wake up and realize it was all gone. Because, really, what were the chances of a small-town veterinarian marrying an heiress?

But no, the moment he opened his eyes, she was still there. Still his bride, about to become his wife.

She tugged on her pearl necklace that matched the pearl earrings he knew had been passed down through the generations in her family. Her mother had worn the same necklace and earrings when marrying Kennedy's father. Austin's legacy was of a different kind, and once again, he'd stepped into a world that was worlds apart from his own.

Or rather stumbled into it.

His voice trembled as he spoke his vows. This was happening. This was really happening. This was actually happening.

Looking at the woman who, in mere seconds, would become his wife created too many emotions. So he moved his gaze again to the family members he loved so much, including the one who was going to become his family member.

As expected, Kennedy's uncle smiled at her as if seeing his own dreams come true. Enormous gratitude filled Austin toward the man who'd raised her as his child, the man who'd been the reason she'd proposed this marriage of convenience, giving Austin a chance he'd never imagined possible. The man he was and ever would be thankful to beyond measure.

Kennedy's uncle wiped away what seemed to be a happy tear.

Then a shadow passed over her uncle's face. Maybe it was because Austin's senses were heightened, or maybe he imagined it all. But for a brief moment before it was gone, he seemed to glimpse one emotion he hadn't expected to see in the man's eyes.

Guilt.



*What have I done? Have I ruined Austin's life?*

Those kinds of questions started invading Kennedy's mind, ice water dousing her delirious, delicious happiness. At the reception, she sipped her drink as she looked at her now husband, and her mind refused to wrap around that fact. In a room filled with people, buzzing voices, and clattering utensils, she could only see Austin, could hear only his voice.

Well, it would help if his words registered.

What was he telling her? Something about ruining her dress. She waved it off, which attracted her attention to the ring sparkling on her finger. She'd never been one for shiny baubles, but this ring represented something enormous. Just like her pearl necklace, the ring was a family heirloom, but it symbolized much more. "I already had a different dress planned to change into for the reception. I had a backup dress for the ceremony, as well, though I'm glad I didn't have to use it."

Kennedy and her uncle had gotten into an argument about the dresses. Uncle had wanted to gift her expensive ones, by a famous designer. She'd insisted on paying for the dresses herself—buying a reasonably priced one from a store and renting the other two. Eventually, she'd put a stop to the argument fast saying she'd wear a potato sack if needed.

Was that ungrateful on her part? Her gaze slipped to her uncle, and he smiled at her. But she knew him enough to notice something was off. She'd expected him to be happier. Her heart sank a little. Had he received some bad news from the doctors? Or was he sad now to let her go?

While she'd hoped things would run smoothly, a part of her feared something drastic would happen, even if everyone around her seemed safe so far.

"You had a backup dress?" Austin's eyebrows rose.

“It’s always good to have a backup plan. Sometimes several.” Her gaze moved over the room, making sure everyone was happy and having a good time.

Her uncle and Austin’s mother seemed to be arguing about something, but that was becoming the norm. As long as she didn’t stab him with a fork—this time silver, not platinum—Kennedy didn’t worry about it.

Her uncle did consent to a steak meal and a minimal silverware setting—just one knife, fork, and spoon at each place, especially considering that the vast majority of the guests were going to be Austin’s family. Even if he might’ve muttered, “We’re going to be eating like barbarians.”

White and ivory hues, with a few golden accents, swathed everything. She opted for white orchid centerpieces, and a sea of the delicate flowers inundated the room, emanating a wonderful aroma. Baskets of them separated the stage from the rest of the room. A bright fluorescent sign “Austin and Kennedy” shone from the stage, hanging over elegant golden drapes.

Dancing to a slow song, Kai with Marina and Dallas with Skylar seemed to have eyes only for each other as if they were the newlyweds here. Kennedy was glad for them. They’d done marriage the right way. Saylor danced with Darius, and for the first time, they seemed to switch personalities. Darius was smiling while Saylor looked like a storm cloud.

The rest of Austin’s brothers were engaged in some kind of conversation. Well, except for his sibling who’d become an executive. Tex had stayed glued to his phone since the moment he’d arrived. Several of Kennedy’s employees with their plus-ones conversed at their table, including Emma and Mason with his girlfriend, because they were like family to Kennedy.

The local band played another famous country song—not that she knew most of those songs. The group was new and unknown, but they’d been amazing and agreed to step in at the last moment when the previous band canceled.

“Thank you for letting me choose the music,” Austin said.

“Of course. You already let me have my choice of so many things.” She gestured to the flowers and food. “Besides, I suspect if I brought a classical orchestra here, some people might’ve fallen asleep.”

He chuckled. “And thank you for persuading your uncle.”

“Oh, all I had to do was remind him how he snored at a Beethoven concert.” She smiled. “And frankly, I’m starting to like country music.”

“Have I told you I’m the happiest man alive right now?” He beamed at her. “Not because you’re starting to like country music, but because you’re my wife.”

The word *why* nearly slipped from her tongue, but she stopped the question. But seriously, why was he so happy she was his wife? He didn’t love her. Didn’t care for the doors her wealth might open for him.

Or was he more materialistic than she’d realized?

Then the band started playing his favorite song, and her heart skipped a beat. She’d already danced the father-daughter dance with her uncle. This one was going to be her first dance with her husband.

Tenderness filled his eyes as he got up and extended his hand. “Ready?”

Surprisingly, she was. Her heart beating faster, she rose to her feet and placed her hand in his. “I am.”

The entire dance space cleared, and the dry-ice effect created a mysterious fog. Which was fitting because her mind was foggy right now. Her future, too.

A pleasant wave swept through her as he held her, and they moved in sync to the music while all eyes were focused on them, some supportive, some—like Saylor’s—not so much. And from time to time, Kennedy felt a weird itch as if she were being watched. But then, of course, she was watched. They were the center of attention now.

Then her concentration once again focused on the only person in the room or even in the universe. Her husband. If she

didn't know better, she'd think their hearts were beating in sync, too. But she did know better, and her heart thrummed with longing.

When the dance ended, she didn't want to move away, didn't want to break the physical connection, which was ridiculous because they were going to spend a lot of time together. She'd never lived her life based on emotions, so why was her entire being now clinging to him? He seemed just as reluctant to see her go as he held onto her as if she were his lifeline.

Shaky after their dance, she busied herself by talking to the wedding planner to ensure they had more than enough food and drinks and the guests were happy. These days, a lot of things ended up on social media. And if people saw her wedding was a disaster, they wouldn't want to book the venue. Besides, reputation mattered and affected business.

Then the time for the bouquet toss arrived, and Kennedy hid a smile when Austin's mom decided to join the lineup. Kennedy knew her uncle well, but even she couldn't decipher whether worry or hope sheened his gray eyes. She only knew that his gaze stayed on Mrs. Lawrence as she walked.

Kennedy clutched the orchids. "Ready? One, two, three!" She threw the bouquet behind her.

Then the voice she didn't expect to hear said, "I didn't try to catch it. Honest."

Kennedy whirled around.

Rachel, the lead of the security team, dressed as a waitress in a white shirt and a black knee-length skirt, stared at the flowers in her hands. "I don't even date."

Kennedy spread her arms in a silent apology. She couldn't do the bouquet toss twice, could she?

Rachel wasn't even in the lineup. But apparently, Kennedy tossed the flowers so far that they'd passed Saylor, Mrs. Lawrence, Emma, Mason's girlfriend, and landed by Rachel. A puzzled expression pinched Rachel's eyes together. Then the

crinkle between them smoothed away, and she looked well put together again.

“Congratulations, honey.” Mrs. Lawrence patted the young woman on the back. “As for me, if I wanted to get married, I wouldn’t need to catch a bridal bouquet for it first.” She marched back to her seat.

Yup, now the expression in Uncle’s eyes was definitely worry as he pulled out Mrs. Lawrence’s chair for her.

The music resumed, and the waiters deftly brought new dishes and drinks and removed empty plates. Everything went smoothly.

Until Emma rushed into the room and bumped into one of the waiters. His tray and the glasses on it went into the air. The waiter-bodyguard managed to catch the tray and several glasses. But not all.

Her expression still neutral, Rachel strode to the guy. “Everyone, we’ll take care of this immediately. But please stay in your places until then because the floor is going to be slippery.”

“Sorry, Ms. Crawford, I mean, Mrs. Lawrence.” Emma sent Kennedy an apologetic glance. “I was hurrying to tell you that, while I was outside, a car drove by and slowed down near the hotel. I think I glimpsed guns inside. They drove off, but I wanted to let you know in case it mattered.”

“Thank you. You did the right thing letting me know.”

Pretending to need information about the menu, Kennedy gestured for Rachel to follow her and, in a whisper, relayed what she’d learned.

Rachel nodded. “I’ll check that, too.”

Austin, who’d stepped out to take an emergency call from a veterinary client, walked back into the room while looking at Kennedy.

Uh-oh. While she wanted him to have eyes only for her, there was that spillage on the tile. And he didn’t see it.

“Austin, be careful, please!” she shouted.



“Why?”

His foot slipped on the wet floor. His arms flailed like a windmill. He'd managed to stop his fall but somehow glided forward.

Right into the table with the wedding cake. “Noooo!” He did his best to catch the tall, elegant construction. And he did catch it. Just not *all* of it. He caught one layer while another smashed into his face, then slapped onto his suit before splattering over the floor.

For the third time that day, everyone gasped, but this time, Kennedy did as well. She leaped forward and rushed to him, but it was too late.

*Okay, okay.* She took several deep breaths of air still carrying a perfectly-charred-steak scent sweetened with orchids and vanilla.

Austin's eyes went huge as he eyed the five-tiered cake decorated with orchids now decorating the floor and his tuxedo. His shoulders inched up, and his neck reddened as he cringed. “That answers my question.”

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

This wasn't a disaster. Desserts were replaceable. Even five-layered ones. The main thing, Austin didn't fall and wasn't hurt. But she asked to be sure, “Are you okay?”

“I am.” He wiped vanilla cream from his cheek and tried it. “Everyone, I can attest that this cake is delicious.”

She'd been through way worse things than this. But why did Saylor have to be recording the entire scene? Chin high, Kennedy didn't let her facial expression change. And the videographer she'd hired kept recording, too. The photographer snapped their photos, though he didn't get the spectacular falling-down part.

Oh well. She pulled her shoulders back. She'd done plenty of damage control in the hospitality business, and the damage here was insignificant. She had to make the best of it. She always did. But for the first time since becoming independent from her uncle, she didn't have to do it alone.

Her smile in place, she scooped some frosting from Austin's face with her finger, enjoying touching his face. "Mmm, this is really good." She turned to the guests. "I wonder if this counts as feeding each other the wedding cake?"

"Yes, but *we* didn't get to try it!" Saylor called out.

Austin turned a hopeful gaze on her. "Do you, um, have a backup wedding cake?"

Kennedy didn't even blink. "I'm surprised you even ask, though it only has three layers."

He chuckled, relief evident on his cake-smearred but dear face. "You're amazing."

"No, just prepared." If she didn't need the backup cake, she'd planned to donate it.

She dabbed his face with a napkin, causing his eyes to widen when her fingers touched his skin trailing the napkin. She leaned to him, breathing the fresh scent of his aftershave and yummy vanilla cake, and her pulse skyrocketed from his proximity. With her lips so close to his, it took all her willpower not to kiss him. The kiss would be so sweet—literally.

The emotion in his blue eyes deepened, giving her hope he had the thoughts and desires she did. She wanted to tell him so many things.

Instead, she just whispered into his ear, "I guess that's what it means to have your cake and eat it, too."



## Chapter Nine



“I STILL STRUGGLE TO believe I’m married. I thought everything would feel different. And it... it doesn’t. Well, not different enough,” Kennedy told Marina two days later as her friend helped pack for the honeymoon.

The trip to the small European country also served the important purpose of searching for Zoey. Kennedy would’ve gone sooner if not for worrying about her uncle. But now he’d assured her he was doing much better and had given his blessing for the trip.

Skylar had offered to help pack, as well. But she had a dinner date with her husband, and Kennedy didn’t want to interrupt it. And fine, Kennedy still preferred to have a two-person group than a larger one.

Kennedy had opened a window in her spacious bedroom to let in the salt-scented breeze and the ocean’s murmurs. She probably shouldn’t have risked it, but the window was far enough from the ground. Plus, the cameras were recording and Rachel was monitoring them. If anyone tried to get through that window or anything suspicious happened, Rachel would notify Kennedy. Besides, Caramel or Smiley *might* bark if they sensed an intruder.

Nervous, Kennedy tucked a mustard-yellow summer dress into her suitcase, then took it out. She often traveled for work, but this was the first time in a long time she’d packed to travel for personal reasons. Besides vacations with her uncle, Auntie, and Zoey as a child and her uncle during her teens, Kennedy didn’t even remember when she’d traveled for personal reasons. Whenever her parents had traveled to Europe or some Caribbean resorts, they’d always left her with a nanny.

Plus, the honeymoon trip required different kinds of outfits than professional outings, and she wanted to choose ones that appealed to Austin.

Just thinking of him quickened her pulse. A normal reaction for a newlywed. Only she wasn't a normal newlywed who had the luxury of knowing her new husband adored her. But a marriage was a marriage, and she needed to make it work.

Caramel and newly-adopted Smiley stretched on the thick silver carpet close to the window. They'd tired themselves out playing first with each other, then with Kennedy's clothes. Happily, the dogs got along as well as chocolate and caramel flavors, just as she'd expected.

She removed another dress from her walk-in closet, a shorter and flirtier one, and nestled it in the suitcase. Then she took it out. Caramel lifted a paw as if voting to put the dress in the suitcase again.

Of course, Kennedy could have someone else do this job for her. Her uncle's household staff took care of bringing his things to a new location, and though they weren't packed until after he left, somehow they had always arrived before he did. Same with her parents. But she couldn't imagine someone touching her things. It felt... sort of ick.

"Well, the three of us got married in such a short span of time, and our husbands are brothers. What were the chances of that?" Marina folded both dresses back into the suitcase. "They are lovely. Wear them."

"If I take everything you like, I won't be able to close this suitcase." Yet Kennedy left the dresses there and added a long white skirt.

"You will close it because I'll sit on it if I need to." Marina smirked. "But you wouldn't be able to take everything I like because Kai wouldn't fit there."

Kennedy rolled her eyes as she picked up silver-toned open-toed sandals. Marina had started joking way more after she'd married Kai. Must be picking it up from her husband. "Seriously?"

"Yup. Is it bad to wish Saylor could find a good man to marry, as well? And we all could be friends. Skylar said she'd

love to resurrect the Hibiscus Sisterhood. Of course, she has much better memories about that friendship circle than I do.”

“No kidding.” Kennedy placed the brand-new sandals in the suitcase. “She didn’t have to practically raise her siblings like you did. Sorry, you had to go through that, by the way.”

Marina looked away. “Everyone had their difficulties. Including Skylar.” Then she hesitated. “But I’m getting closer to my siblings now—well, especially Saylor. Would you mind if I invite her on our group outings?”

“Saylor might be the one who minds.” Oops, Kennedy hadn’t intended to sound so dry.

Marina waved it off. “She’s super sociable. And a lot of fun to be around. She’s awesome, and I’m not just saying so because she’s my sister.”

Kennedy folded a silver-toned silk scarf, resisting the urge to ball it up and throw it in the suitcase. “Saylor and I, um, might have a conflict of interest. Haven’t you noticed how much your sister likes my husband?” She deliberately emphasized “*your* sister” and “*my* husband,” but she sounded too harsh. So she hurried to add, “Not that... not that I blame her.”

Marina was smart, but somehow, she’d missed that clue. “Oh. Oops. I didn’t notice that. But Saylor’s interests changed fast in high school, and that might be the case again. She was like a female Kai. Or Kai was a male Saylor. But I won’t push the issue.”

Hmm. Maybe that was true, but the sad thing was Austin and Saylor *did* have similar personalities. They’d make a great couple if Kennedy hadn’t stepped in. “Thanks.” Kennedy released her relief in a tentative sigh.

The next moment, Marina gathered her into a hug, which surprised Kennedy. If Marina was anything like Kennedy—and Marina was—she usually kept her feelings to herself. Maybe Kai, who wore his heart on the sleeve of his pirate shirt, was rubbing off on her, not just his affinity for jokes. “Are you happy? Are you truly, deliriously happy?”

Kennedy took a moment to hug her friend back. Displays of affection were discouraged in her family. “I’m the happiest I’ve been in my life,” she said, carefully choosing words.

Her friend drew back. “Why do you sound so shocked? That’s the way a newlywed is supposed to feel!”

“Because it’s a marriage of convenience. So I’m a newlywed... of convenience, I guess. I’m not married the same way you and Kai are married.” Usually, her feelings didn’t puzzle her, but that was before she’d proposed to Austin. “And... I have this... this premonition. Like waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Marina frowned as she studied Kennedy. “But the incidents stopped, didn’t they?”

“Yes, but it’s going to be difficult to maintain the same level of security on a transatlantic trip, then in a foreign country. But we’ll talk about it later. For now, please follow me.” She walked into the library, removed a book, then pressed the button. The entire bookcase moved, giving them access to a safe.

Marina placed her hands on her hips. “What, no secret room? I’m disappointed.”

“Sorry!” Kennedy moved her face close to the door to get her iris scanned. “Besides Austin and my uncle, you’re the only one who knows about this safe.” She glanced at Caramel and Smiley who followed her into the library and were now tumbling over each other on the carpet. “Well, Caramel and Smiley know about it, too.”

“I’m honored”—Marina smirked again—“to be trusted as much as your pets.”

After the door opened, Kennedy pulled out a jewelry box. Her heart shifted just like that bookcase, the sight of the expensive box encrusted with diamonds giving her a bittersweet taste. While she appreciated the beautiful—and expensive—items, this jewelry box represented something her mother seemed to love more than she loved Kennedy. Her mom could spend hours trying on different jewelry sets in

front of a mirror while Kennedy had looked on, hiding in a corner, invisible as always, knowing already that she'd never be as valuable or dear to her mother as the contents of that box.

Her rib cage tightening, Kennedy unhooked a thick, long platinum chain and handed it to Marina. "Do you like it? If so, it's yours."

"I do like it, but I can't accept it." Marina shook her head, sending her golden hair flying.

"Please do. I bought that chain. It's not a family heirloom." Kennedy reached for an item that was. She would be fine with giving it away, as well. "My mother left me lots of the latter. Besides inheriting many pieces from her mother, Mom loved shopping, especially for jewelry. Clothes, too. She flew to Paris specifically for that. But sometimes those bags remained unopened for months and even forever. Once, I asked Dad why Mom loved shopping so much. He said because she could."

"That's very generous, but—"

"Would you like something else instead?" Kennedy eyed a sparkling diamond bracelet. She'd seldom purchased jewelry, another thing she did opposite of her mother.

Other children had fought over toys. Kennedy had given hers away, hoping the children would play with her then. She'd stopped when she'd realized that once her toys ran out, so did the other children's affection for her. She'd gotten more toys, of course. But she'd learned to play alone.

Was she falling into old patterns again? One couldn't buy friendship, and really, Marina was her friend already.

"I'm sorry I can't accept this." Marina handed back the platinum chain.

Kennedy shrugged. "I'll sell it and donate the proceeds to the local women's shelter."

"Good idea." Marina smiled with relief.



A part of Kennedy was pleased. Then she pulled out an antique golden chain with a pendant. She rarely looked at it. “This belonged to my mother. It has Dad’s portrait. She never took it off. Which was sort of strange because, while they played a couple in love in public, I seldom saw her affectionate to him at home.” She opened the pendant and looked at the man she sadly knew so little.

His hair was chestnut brown, darker than Kennedy’s, and he wore a neatly trimmed beard. He liked playing golf and billiards, smoking fine cigars, and spending time in the company of men who liked golf, billiards, and fine cigars. He loved his gorgeous wife who in turn seemed cold to him, except in public. Maybe the reason he’d agreed to all those lavish parties was to create the illusion of a happy couple even for himself.

But had he ever loved—or even noticed—his daughter? When she’d tried to hug his legs or climb onto his lap, he’d always seemed irritated. She’d felt as if she were a fly, something small, insignificant, and annoying. She’d stopped trying.

For a long time, she’d suppressed those memories, as well as the memories of her parents fighting. There’d been a crack in that marriage, and yet they’d stayed together.

In a suit and a tie, he looked elegant in the photo, but his gaze was as absent as when he’d looked at Kennedy. Her heart heavy, she slipped her fingernail over his oval portrait—and it peeled off.

Then her heart stuttered at the hidden portrait behind it. It was of a different man. Austin’s father.

It took several moments to be able to breathe again as different pieces of a puzzle rearranged themselves in her head. Then she showed Marina the hidden portrait. “I didn’t want to believe it when you told me you heard the sounds of my mother’s bracelets and smelled her perfume at Mr. Lawrence’s place, though he claimed to be alone that day.” She swallowed hard. “But, I did believe you. And thank you for getting me to take the DNA test.”

“You’re welcome. I wouldn’t want you and his sons to be related.” Marina coughed a little. “I’m glad it proved you weren’t.”

Kennedy closed the pendant and put it back. “Now it’s not just scents and sounds.”

“Sorry, Kennedy.”

“Many times, I overheard my father tell my mother that he couldn’t bear to lose her, that he’d never let her go. That he knew he loved her much more than she loved him. And now with the story of how the brakes in my car were cut...”

Marina’s eyes narrowed. “Do you want me to look into your parents’ accident?”

Hmm. She might uncover things Kennedy wouldn’t want to know. “Let me think about it.” Kennedy placed her mother’s silver bracelets inside and closed the box.

“Okay, let me know what you decide. Um, just a quick question. You inherited everything, right?”

“When I turned twenty-one. Until then, my uncle was my guardian, so he was managing the estate in the interim.” Kennedy closed the safe’s door more forcefully than she should have. Ouch, the hard metal jarred her arm. She pressed the button, and the bookcase moved back. “But he had no connection to their accident, of course.”

“Of course,” Marina echoed, but she didn’t sound entirely convinced.

The conversation in the library Kennedy had overheard three days before the accident floated into her mind. She’d been curled up behind some bookshelves at the time. And when she heard voices, she’d figured it was best not to reveal herself because she only seemed to irritate her parents when she showed up.

“Why do you keep spending everything on lavish parties and expensive whiskey?” Uncle’s voice had been angry, a rare occurrence. He usually got his point across without raising his voice.

“Because the love of my life likes it.” Her father had growled. But then, he’d had a temper and yelled at the household staff when drunk. Was he drunk then? “Just because your wife left you doesn’t mean I need to lose mine! I don’t want to be a hermit like you.”

She had winced then.

But Uncle’s voice had become even. “That’s a low blow, and you know it. It all needs to change. A couple more years, and you’ll run the family business into the ground. There’ll be nothing for Kennedy to inherit.”

“It’s all about Kennedy again, isn’t it?” Her father had snarled. “You’d better back off. She’ll never become a stand-in daughter for you.”

No! She slammed the door to those memories with as much force as she’d closed the safe door. Her uncle was her rock. She couldn’t doubt him.

She gestured for her friend to follow her into the kitchen, and, seeming to decide the invitation was extended to them as well, Caramel and Smiley ran after her. When Kennedy got a treat from a cabinet, both dogs jumped, trying to get it. She chuckled. “Be patient. Each one of you will get a treat.”

Her spirits lifted somewhat. It was impossible to stay sad around their antics.

After feeding the dogs, she washed her hands with jasmine-scented liquid soap, then picked up crystal bowls filled with colorful fruit salad from the stainless-steel fridge. She’d combined stainless-steel appliances and milky-white marble counters with copper accents. The mosaic backsplash with a metallic tint offset cream-colored cabinets. Unlike the house she’d grown up in with hand-carved cherrywood furniture and hand woven Persian carpets, she wanted hers to be light and breezy.

Before marrying Austin, she hadn’t spent much time in the kitchen, though, because cooking for one didn’t make sense and she didn’t have time for it, anyway. Now she truly

appreciated the design, the skylight windows, and the row of cookbooks she'd never opened.

“If you have even a smidgen of concern, can you postpone the honeymoon?” Marina’s eyebrows furrowed as she walked alongside Kennedy into the spacious dining room. The expensive antique hutch and buffet with heirloom plates starkly contrasted the modern furniture, but Kennedy needed to bring at least something from her parents’ home. Well, besides sadness.

She sent a wistful glance toward the terrace, but they’d be an easy target there. “It’s not just a honeymoon, which I know is unfair to Austin. I want to speak face-to-face with the person who posted the festival video. Remember? In it, my uncle saw someone who might resemble my missing cousin. Maybe I can talk to local businesses and show them the age-progression drawings Mason used a computer program to create. And then Skylar made a drawing, as well. I owe it to my uncle to do the on-the-ground research.” She paused. “And to my cousin, too. Austin says he understands.”

Marina’s expression softened, and she touched Kennedy’s hand. “Of course, Austin understands. And in case you didn’t notice, he’d go to the other side of the earth for you. Well, he’s about to.”

Kennedy’s heart stirred. Could she hope Austin would develop feelings for her indeed? And that she wouldn’t push him away in the process? Several men she’d gone out with had told her she’d been too distant. She didn’t doubt they could be right.

Kennedy and Marina sat at the cream-colored oval table. She’d bought it two days ago to replace the one with sharp corners. “In case you wondered, the taster already tried the fruit salad and is still alive. So it’s safe to eat.”

Marina coughed a little. “I never thought about that. But thank you for letting me know.” Yet she paused before trying the fruit salad. “You say that like it’s not a big deal.”

“According to my uncle, when you’re affluent, you have what other people want, and some could stop at nothing to

take it. I told him people could just ask me for what they want, and if I had it, I'd give it to them." Kennedy chuckled, though the mirthless sound cut at her tight throat. "He said the world doesn't work that way."

"Wow." Marina tapped her fingers over the table's surface. "I only saw the good parts of your life."

Well, give it to Kennedy to bring doom and gloom into a happy day. "Of which there are many." She spooned up a cube of melon and peach. They were fresh and juicy, but things had tasted better before she'd had to check them for poison. "I'm exhilarated to be married to Austin. But I'm aware he didn't marry me out of love." And that hurt more than it should have.

"From where I am, he looks happy and joyful." Marina chewed her salad carefully and slowly. Maybe the reassurance wasn't so reassuring.

Kennedy's fingers tightened around her spoon. If only she could believe she was the reason for his happiness, but she knew better. "That's his nature. I'm afraid I'll bring danger into his life.... Look what happened to people who simply work for me."

Marina shook her head, sending her hair flying. "It's not your fault! And most likely, you had nothing to do with it. You might not be the one targeted, considering the information about the possible assailants I've uncovered. Besides, Austin chose to stand by your side despite the threats, and I wouldn't expect anything less from him."

Grateful tears prickled behind Kennedy's eyes. "You made the decision to stand by me, no matter what, as well. Austin's entire family did, too. You have no idea how much that means to me."

"Oh please." Marina seemed to relax and give the salad its due. "You would've done the same for me."

"It's just... I sometimes feel that by marrying Austin I got a great prize unfairly without doing the work first. Or that I tried on a dress meant for someone else and got to keep it because I could pay a higher price."

Would Saylor have made him a better wife? Probably. She had the sunny disposition Kennedy lacked, and while working with him, Saylor would've won his affection eventually. Which gave her a motive to wish Kennedy harm, but she didn't want to think of that. She'd snatched the man of Saylor's dreams from under her nose. How wrong was that?

Then Kennedy nearly choked on a mango chunk. "Hold on. I didn't mean to imply I *bought* Austin."

"You bought me?" Austin's voice drifted down the hall.



# Chapter Ten



HEAT CREPT UP KENNEDY'S neck, and she jumped from her seat. Of course, Austin had a key now and knew how to disable the alarm, but shouldn't she have heard him walking in? She should be more on guard. "Um, I said I didn't mean to imply that I bought you. Because I didn't. Because you're priceless."

Great. She was babbling.

"Hello, Austin." Marina rose from her chair.

He smiled at his sister-in-law. "Hi, Marina."

Then pure joy swept Kennedy up at seeing him. "I'm so glad you're home."

His lips stretched from ear to ear. "There's no other place I'd rather be."

But for how long? Early on, she'd learned people's affections didn't last. That was, if she had their affections in the first place.

Squealing, Smiley and Caramel shot out to meet him. The puppy braked to stop, slipped on the marble floor instead, and slid way further, then looked up with a puzzled expression. She was still getting used to the smooth marble floors and large rooms. Kennedy had learned to close the closet door to preserve her designer shoe collection, but her leather belt now had a few extra holes from the puppy's teeth.

He laughed and lifted the beagle. "Hello, buddy. I'm happy to see you, too."

Caramel barked in protest at being left out, then half ran, half slid toward him, and he scooped her up. "I'm happy to see you, as well, Caramel."

The dogs licked his face from both sides, their tails moving faster than fan blades. The beagle didn't have sad eyes



anymore. Instead, he looked like he was smiling, truly justifying his hopeful name now. That—plus Austin’s appearance—put a smile on Kennedy’s face.

Then her smile slipped, and her heart constricted. He paid more attention to the dogs than to her. Ouch, the harsh reality hurt. She swallowed hard and looked away.

What did she expect? And really, how could she be jealous of the dogs, one of which had been abandoned to boot? More guilt piled up. She should be grateful the puppy was happy and the beagle was adjusting so well. And she *was* grateful. She just craved affection she’d never gotten back.

“I’d better skedaddle.” Marina walked past them into the hall.

“You don’t have to leave just because I showed up.” He placed the pets back onto the floor.

Marina’s mouth curved up. “My love is waiting for me at home now. And I miss him.”

Austin lifted his arms. “Then it’s totally understandable.”

With a smile and a wave, Marina walked out the front door, leaving only a faint scent of cherry lip gloss.

“I missed you all day!” He scooped Kennedy up, and for a few minutes, everything was right with the world. “If you worry about animal fluids, I took a shower and changed at the clinic.”

Delight left her bubbly, and she leaned into him. “I didn’t think of that, but thank you for letting me know.”

He cupped her face, and his blue eyes searched hers, causing her pulse to quicken. His thumb moved over her jawline, sending delicious tingles over her skin. Would this be the time he’d kiss her?

A real kiss?

Of course, he’d kissed her at the wedding. But that had been a chaste kiss and more from rules than affection. And she’d longed for affection. But she couldn’t ask for it. He’d already fulfilled his promises and beyond.

“Kennedy, I—” Austin started, but Caramel cannonballed into him, then jumped, and hung on his leg.

Not to be left behind, the beagle clutched Austin’s other leg, carrying a ball in his teeth. Austin shifted back and looked at the dogs.

She adored those pets, so she didn’t let disappointment consume her. Instead, she gestured at the dogs. “Why don’t you take them to the yard and play fetch while I set the table?”

He studied her, then let her go. “You don’t want me to help you?”

She managed a nonchalant shrug. She’d chosen a marriage based on convenience and not on love, and she had to live with it. “I’ve been setting the table for years. It’s not that difficult to add another set.”

“Right. I didn’t mean to encroach on your independence.” He picked up Caramel, who squealed in delight. Smiley pranced around his legs.

That wasn’t what she meant at all, but he’d already left. She was used to the quiet place, but now the silence felt overwhelming. Was she messing up already?

Kennedy swept her glance over the area outside for anything suspicious. She’d played it safe and stayed inside earlier, but considering the information Marina had relayed to her today, surely it should be safe enough to eat out in the open again. Right?

A residual worry lingered, but Kennedy pushed it away and took dinner to the terrace to listen to the whisper of the waves and see the spectacular hues playing over the ocean. To bask in the familiar when so many unfamiliar feelings assaulted her. Was she falling in love with Austin?

She placed the plates on the table, enjoying the breeze and taking a lungful of fresh salty air. It felt good to be out here.

Laughter and barking reached her from the yard. Although heartwarming, it also felt like those times other children had been playing and laughing, but she’d been excluded.

Unlike then, it was her fault now. The dogs had accepted her, to her utter joy. And Austin would've been thrilled if she joined them. Her gut clenched. What was wrong with her? If she couldn't change her ways, she was going to lose them all.

"It smells awesome." He walked onto the terrace and kissed her cheek, sending a wave of delight through her. "Thank you so much for making it."

"I found I enjoy cooking. I just never had the need or time before. Or much desire." She skipped the fact that her mother used to say people like them didn't cook or clean. When little Kennedy had tried to mix a pie with the cook as a gift to her mother, Mom had scolded Kennedy and yelled at the cook.

Austin and Kennedy sat down, and he said grace.

It felt like a regular meal in a normal family. While she and her uncle were a family, it had always felt like something was missing. Had she found the missing piece in her life? And if so, had she discovered it only to never have it fully?

She'd never been much of a conversationalist, but Austin didn't have that issue. He talked about his fun experiences with the animals today, and she couldn't help laughing. After a few minutes, her earlier tension dissipated like a morning mist. Then the food tasted better, the sky looked brighter, and the longing grew stronger.

"I don't have fun pet stories today." Besides packing, she'd spent some time answering work emails and calls, despite her vacation. She couldn't help herself.

He feigned disappointment as he helped himself to another dinner roll. "No alligator in a bathtub?"

"Nope. Happily, no emergencies, either. We did have a husband asking to place his wife's favorite flowers in the room. We were glad to oblige, but..." She allowed a dramatic pause while taking a sip of her freshly squeezed orange juice.

He chewed on his filet mignon. "Let me guess. She was allergic to them. No? Hmm. It wasn't his wife's favorite flowers?"

Kennedy sighed. “Right. The wife decided the flowers were for someone else, so the scene wasn’t pretty. He defended himself by saying he mixed her favorites up with his ex’s favorite flowers. And apparently, he was in hot water already, so the bouquet was the apology. Let’s say, she used the bouquet for a different purpose and hit him with it.”

“I’ll never forget your favorite flowers. And not just because I don’t want to get hit with a bouquet.”

She rolled her eyes, though secretly pleased. After the initial hibiscus fiasco, he did remember to gift her orchids. “I’d never do the latter.” She took another sip of the sweet tangy drink. “I’m sorry you have to miss work at the clinic while on the trip.”

“I haven’t had a vacation in years. And one of my college buddies agreed to cover for me. Your idea to offer him a suite at the hotel and a voucher for the hotel restaurant worked. He said it was a win-win. Though Saylor seemed sad to see me gone for a week.”

How could he be this clueless?

“That’s because she likes you,” Kennedy blurted out.

He blinked and dropped his fork onto the plate. Its clatter underlined his gasp. “You mean more-than-like *likes* me?”

“Yup.” Better change the topic fast. She munched on the dinner roll that melted on her tongue. And her heart was melting in Austin’s presence. “Everything is ready for the trip tomorrow. And Marina brought some good news today. Mason’s girlfriend’s ex left Port Sunshine, thankfully without visiting her first. Also, several towns to the north, the police caught a burglar who targets hotel rooms, and has a history of assault. Of course, he might not be the one who struck Emma on the head. But I can hope I might not be targeted. Rachel looked through the outside camera recordings for the car Emma mentioned. She did identify a vehicle with what might be armed men inside, but they didn’t seem connected to me.”

“I’m glad.” He took her hands in his, making her heart flutter again. “I want you to be safe.”

Her intuition told her she might not be 100 percent safe yet. Her heart surely wasn't safe in his presence. The connection thickened between them, and she could look into his eyes forever.

Yet she withdrew her hands. "Thank you. I want you to be safe, too. I dragged you into this."

"You didn't. I made the decision and I stand by it." His gaze didn't waver from her.

Excited and unnerved, she hid her response by forking up another bite of the filet mignon, then searched for a distraction. Well, it was more than a distraction. It was something important to her. "I appreciate you agreeing to go to Latoria for our honeymoon. I did some research, and Marina helped me. It's a small country with nearly a thousand years of history that attracts many tourists. Believe it or not, it's a monarchy. The festival where the person who looked like my cousin was spotted is an annual Renaissance festival. Oh, I rented us a room in a castle. I hope that's okay."

His fork stopped midair. "One can do that?"

She blinked. "Of course. Well, the castle was changed into what you might call an upscale bed-and-breakfast. It only has four rooms available to tourists, and I rented all of them to give us privacy."

His eyes widened. "So you, um, rented an entire castle?"

That probably sounded strange to him. Did she take her privilege for granted sometimes? She didn't think she spent frivolously like her mother, but maybe renting an entire castle wasn't something one should do. She could've helped a lot of abandoned animals with that amount.

She poked into her steamed rice. "It's too late to cancel now. And I know it would've been much easier and cheaper to rent a house or get hotel rooms. But staying in a castle appealed to me. Something about the mysterious atmosphere... If you're worried about accommodations in a place built centuries ago, it had modern renovations and, according to Rachel, an excellent security system installed.

And because it doesn't have any properties around, it gives privacy." And privacy was important to Kennedy.

"Um, I didn't worry about that, but thanks." He grinned as he picked up his orange juice glass. "I've gotten used to electricity and modern-day plumbing. Though I admit a medieval-style candlelit dinner might be rather romantic."

She munched on her buttery biscuit. "Well, if you don't mind a few rats running around, as well."

Caramel and Smiley barked in unison, anticipation widening their doggy grins.

"Don't worry, buddies. It was a joke." Austin turned to Kennedy. "It was a joke, right?"

Yeah, maybe her sense of humor wasn't great. But she did enjoy the rapport they shared. He was so easy and fun to be around, and she needed that so much. But was she what *he* needed? "Yes. And the place is pet-friendly. The manager already said she can pet sit while we visit places that don't allow dogs. The castle also has a large fenced-in yard, which is important because we're taking Caramel and Smiley."

The dogs barked again, but this time as if to say, "That's right."

"What time do we need to leave for Charleston?" He drained his glass, then refilled it from the crystal carafe.

She looked up from her filet mignon. "Why do we need to go there?"

He cocked his head, his brow crinkling up. Then he forked up the salad, dripped in virgin olive oil dressing where Christos had added a special ingredient. "Well, to get to the airport?"

"Oh. We're flying out of a private hangar." She pushed away her empty plate. She was so used to eating out from food containers—except with her uncle, of course—that using heirloom plates added a charm to dinner. But then, she'd rarely eaten without working at the same time. Sometimes, she'd even sleep and shower at the hotel. Working into the night had helped her avoid nightmares. "My uncle offered us the use of

his private jet. It's much more convenient. Especially when one's traveling with two dogs. And it will save us time."

Would Austin think she was showing off her wealth? Usually, she didn't ask for the jet due to environmental concerns. But taking the jet in this case was a matter of convenience, safety, and time. And time was something they could never get more of. That was what her uncle always said.

"I can only imagine." Austin's tone was drier than usual, making her wince, but then his familiar smile reappeared on his handsome face. "I'm starting to feel like a male version of Cinderella."

She froze, then placed her half-full glass down fast. She could dislike his comment or go with it. She chose the second. She winked. "Does that make me a Princess Charming?"

"Hmm, considering that you're gorgeous like a princess and you're beyond charming..." His voice turned soft.

The compliment hit her wrong, but that was her fault for asking. Her fingers tightened around her smooth cold glass. "I'm far from gorgeous. And frankly not that charming. And for the record, I'd give up all my privilege if it could bring Zoey back."

A band tightened around her heart and pulled. The chances of finding Zoey in Lazoria were slim to none, but she still had to try. But were her chances of keeping Austin even slimmer?





# Chapter Eleven



AUSTIN COULD TRULY see how far apart their worlds were. An ocean as big as they were flying over divided them. Kennedy had tried to open the door into a new world for him, but he wasn't sure he was ready to enter it.

Yet, somehow, they were together for the time being. The sight of clouds beneath them gave him a feeling of awe, but so did the woman in the cloud-white puffy-soft leather seat near him. During the takeoff, he'd nearly squealed like a child in a candy store while the houses rapidly became smaller. How people managed to create this thing that flew high in the air was a mystery to him.

Kennedy was an even bigger mystery. She pulled back sometimes, and he couldn't understand why. He was married to her, and yet he couldn't decipher her. He was the foam on the surface, but she was like the proverbial ocean with so many different layers, and he was already out of breath from delving them.

She was his wife, and as he studied her lovely face while she slept now, he was eager to give her anything she wanted. But he couldn't figure out *what* she wanted. She might not know herself. Besides, what could one give someone who already seemed to have everything?

Though they'd both grown up in Port Sunshine, their lives seldom intersected. While of course, everyone knew she was well-off, she didn't have a lavish lifestyle unlike her parents, so he'd never grasped how much she'd really had. Besides, according to rumor, by the time of the car accident when her uncle had taken over as her guardian, he'd had to rebuild most of the family business. And later, Kennedy with her brilliant mind breathed new life into it.

He stretched the impossibly soft blanket over her. After some loud protests, Caramel and Smiley had fallen asleep in

their crates. Besides the pilot, only one other person accompanied them on this flight. But after serving beverages, Rachel, who doubled as security and a flight attendant, was so quiet she could've been part of the interior. Maybe that was her intention.

Okay, he knew one thing Kennedy wanted, that was important to her—finding her missing cousin and childhood friend, Zoey. The chances of Zoey being alive were small, and if she were, the chances of finding her were even smaller. But they had to try.

Kennedy opened her eyes, and her plump oh-so-kissable lips moved up. “Are you doing all right?”

How was it he hadn't kissed her yet? Well, except at their wedding or a few pecks on the cheek. He meant, really, really kissed her yet. His heart somersaulted just from the thought.

But he didn't want her to feel obligated to let him kiss her because they were married. He sensed her need for personal space was much larger than his was, and he respected that. People these days kissed on the first date. He only kissed a girl when he had feelings for her and knew they were mutual. The first part wasn't a problem. The second was.

He smiled as he touched the smooth white-leather seats. “It's amazing. I've never been on a flight this luxurious. Well, I've never been on a flight at all.”

“There are much more luxurious jets than this.” She frowned. “Okay, I hope I didn't sound like I'm complaining. It's just my uncle and auntie took me on trips together with their daughter several times a year when I was little. It was natural to me. I didn't think other people lived differently.” Her eyes darkened. “My parents never seemed to mind my absence.”

“Their loss.” He took her hand and squeezed her fingers to show his support.

She looked out the window. “I still feel guilty that I didn't miss them as much as I should've then. But it's more of a sting than a sharp stab now. I preferred fun trips with my uncle's

family to roaming a large, nearly empty house on my own or with a nanny.”

“That must’ve been a lonely childhood,” he blurted out. The difference between them rubbed him the wrong way minutes ago, but now sorrow for her being so unloved stirred in him.

“It was.” Then Kennedy looked at him again. “Would you like some caviar?” She was changing the subject.

He let her. “I have no clue. I’ve never tried it.”

Rachel appeared as suddenly as a deer in the fog on the road, holding a silver tray. Or was it platinum? He had no clue about that, either. He just knew Rachel didn’t need to double as a flight attendant and yet she did.

“Thank you,” Kennedy said, and he echoed.

The caviar tasted salty and felt slimy. Well, at least it wasn’t snails like he heard rich people favored. The reason was lost on him.

After a few moments, he suppressed a grimace. “This is considered a delicacy? No offense, but it tastes kind of *fishy*.” At Kennedy’s teasing glance, he realized what he’d just said. “Okay, I know where caviar comes from.” He’d much prefer a juicy steak and roasted potatoes like Mom made. He flushed the caviar down with water.

“We have other food, but Uncle always liked to have caviar on the flights.” Her fingers tightened around the delicate stem of a crystal glass. “I don’t want you and your family to think he’s a snob, though.” Her lips tipped up. “Especially your mother. He donates huge amounts to charities and gives generous bonuses to his employees. And he took me to volunteer at the soup kitchen many times while I was growing up. Year-round, not just on Thanksgiving.”

“I don’t think a snob would raise a wonderful person like you.” He meant every word. With her upbringing, she could’ve spent her days shopping and/or being pampered in luxurious resorts. She wouldn’t have to move a finger. Instead, she’d worked hard all her life.

Tears sheened her eyes. Not the reaction he'd expected, and his heart constricted as she whispered, "I don't know if I'm wonderful, but I'm trying to be better. And I should've told you already.... Please don't feel I trapped you in the golden cage of this marriage. No one has locked the door and thrown the key into the ocean. You can leave at any time."

He flinched. Even the suggestion pierced him.

Was she projecting? Was she the one who had second thoughts and considered leaving?



Austin was wrong before about Kennedy opening the door into a new world for him. He looked around a narrow cobblestone street over seven hundred years old—the stones were still okay, though. The door apparently led not just to one but many worlds. And some not so *new*, though new to him.

"How do cars manage to go through here? There's no way."

Kennedy chuckled. "They don't. This area is pedestrian only."

A warm wave swept him up, but it was far more than embarrassment. He enjoyed walking ancient streets that smelled of coffee and pastries from nearby cafés. He didn't mind narrow streets in the least. They allowed him to be close to Kennedy, to breathe her mysterious perfume, and to hold her hand, and it felt like a small victory. He'd navigated two unknown countries now: Lazorla and marriage. He'd never been abroad, but then, he'd never been married before, either. "Right. Let me think what else I got wrong today."

"It's okay. I made plenty of wrong assumptions in my first out-of-country trip, too." She was gracious, as always.

"How old were you then?"

"Five." She waved to a cozy café where rows of gardenias gave off a strong aroma under the windows and forest-green canopy. Wrought iron chairs and round glass tables beckoned

from the shade. “Would you like to stop by for an éclair and a cup of coffee?”

They’d already had a gigantic dinner on the plane that was way better—and more filling—than caviar. But then they’d spent part of the day walking the streets where the video’s poster was located, stopping by souvenir shops, and showing drawings of Zoey. Later, they’d played in a nearby park with Caramel and Smiley. Some refreshments while looking into Kennedy’s beautiful gray eyes sounded wonderful.

He squeezed her hand before letting it go. “Sure. I’d love to stop for a few minutes. Or we can take it with us if you want.”

She laughed as she walked into the café. “I don’t think anyone stops at a café for just *a few minutes*. I haven’t been to Latoria, but I’ve visited other European countries. And a meal here can last for hours. And I’ve not seen anyone walking and eating here.”

Huh. He pulled out a wrought iron chair with a comfy forest-green cushion for her. “Even with a cup of coffee?”

“Even with a cup of coffee.” She sat.

Her sweetheart-cut, ankle-length, silver-toned dress hugged her in a way that made his heart race—the way he wanted to hug her. Earlier, they’d passed a monument to some young woman, a princess from centuries ago. Kennedy looked like that woman had come alive.

And he couldn’t look away.

A waiter brought their menus. To Austin’s relief, the short middle-aged man in a white shirt and avocado-green pants with a white towel around his rotund waist spoke English, albeit with a heavy accent. Minutes later, Austin knew the guy had twin rambunctious boys and a mischievous shih tzu at home, and they exchanged pet stories. Kennedy stayed quiet.

Then Austin felt comfortable enough to show the guy the drawing of Zoey. “This is the cousin of my friend here. Have you ever seen this woman?”

No recognition flashed in the waiter's eyes, and he shook his head. "I see the rrrresemblance. But I've neverrrr seen this perrrrson. Sorrrrry." His *Rs* were roaring rather than rolling.

Kennedy's face fell, and disappointment ripped through Austin. "Thank you. We appreciate it anyway."

Then Austin and Kennedy placed their order, and the man left with a nod.

"Is it weird that I'm missing Caramel and Smiley already? I mean, I'm thankful the hotel curator loves dogs and offered to dog sit, but still..." Kennedy paused. "It must be difficult to let the animals you foster go."

"It's heart-wrenching to let someone we love go. But we must do what's best for them." He looked away because he didn't want her to suspect what he was thinking.

She'd never professed to love him. Marriage seemed to be another contract to her, one to make her uncle happy. A lump formed in Austin's throat, ruining the wonderful mood. If later she wanted to get out of that contract, he'd have to let her go.

No matter how heart-wrenching it would be.

No matter how much he wanted her to stay.

Partly for distraction, his gaze roamed over people who indeed seemed to be in no hurry to move as they enjoyed the café food and each other's company. The scents of coffee, vanilla, jasmine, gardenia, and many others mixed in the air. The buzz of conversations included words he didn't recognize, and some of their bags and T-shirts sported words in foreign languages, adding to the mystery. Outfits ranged from said T-shirts to elegant dresses and from extravagant bright hats to faded caps. Against the backdrop of the café's green accents, some female patrons looked like bright flowers. For example, a woman with a wide-brimmed magenta hat matching her dress reminded him of a hibiscus, but thankfully, that wasn't the kind to make Kennedy sneeze.

What were the stories of these people? Of this country? What was his own story going to be? And would Kennedy always share that story with him, like he wanted her to?

Of course, he loved their coastal town and the ranch. But maybe it was time to expand his horizons and learn and try new things. Okay, except maybe caviar.

The waiter brought their order, and while Kennedy thanked him, Austin stared at the tiny ceramic thing. Once the waiter left, Austin lifted the miniature cup that emanated an amazing aroma. He leaned forward and whispered to Kennedy. “What is this?”

“Um, a cup of coffee?” She bit into her éclair.

“Yeah. They can’t be serious. That’s like three sips in here. That’s it.” He counted as he drank it. It was sweet, flavorful, and strong. “Okay, four sips. But I wasn’t that far off.” He caught himself. Was he being rude?

An amused smile lifted her lips. “I don’t think they have coffee-pot-sized mugs here, but we certainly can order more.”

He gestured to the waiter for more coffee, then glanced at the imprint of a shield and some animal on the canopy. “What is that?”

“The town’s coat of arms.”

“Is it also seven hundred years old?” Weird and amazing how historical everything was here. Good thing the castle’s plumbing was modern.

“No. Just six hundred and fifty.” Her fingers tapped on the glass surface and apprehension flashed in her eyes. She stopped eating, and her coffee remained untouched.

She must be nervous about meeting with the video’s creator, Mme. Lavigne, who’d agreed to talk to them this evening, the meeting still an hour away. Kennedy might also be upset that, so far, no one recognized Zoey.

He wanted to see her smile instead of being nervous, even if it was at his ignorance. “Okay, let’s see if I can remember all the things I’ve learned are different here. The week starts on Monday, not Sunday. Well, I already knew that when writing the date they start from the day instead of the month, then the year. When people buy something, taxes are already included.” He looked around at the other tables. “I guess they don’t put

ice in their drinks here.” The glasses were much smaller than back home, as well. If he stayed here too long, he’d have to learn to conserve water somehow. Like a camel.

Kennedy nodded, looking more relaxed as she returned to her éclair. “That’s right. And if I asked for water with ice, the waiter would’ve been surprised.”

Did people have different temperature tolerance here? “Not that I’m complaining, but the castle doesn’t have air-conditioning because it’s a historic building, right?”

She shook her head, giving him a beautiful view of her blonde hair flying. “To my knowledge, most buildings here don’t have AC.”

His jaw slackened. How did people survive the summer?

“I know. I know.” She sipped her coffee. “It was a total disaster when the AC stopped working in several rooms at my hotel during the summer. I was afraid people would start climbing inside their refrigerators.”

He used to work outside in the heat for hours. But then he knew he could always come inside to cool off if needed.

“On the bright side, I haven’t stumbled and knocked anyone out yet. But then, the day is still young.” He sat back, pleased his words made her chuckle. Smiles and laughter were abundant in his family and among their stock and his patients—yes, he stood by the unscientific statement that some animals could smile. But such joy seemed rare in her work-focused world.

Their conversation mixed with the lively chatter around them. But then something made his stomach uneasy. Or someone? A lone person at the café patio’s far end had stopped in soon after they had and nursed a glass with amber liquid. With the man’s cap drawn low and large sunglasses, Austin couldn’t see the face. Usually, he wouldn’t pay attention. But after those things had happened to people around Kennedy, he’d forced himself to be more on guard.

His gaze moved to Rachel. She appeared engrossed in her phone, but she must be paying close attention to everything



around her. She discreetly glanced at the person in the cap before refocusing on her phone. Austin relaxed a bit. Rachel was aware of her surroundings.

“Do you think that person in the cap might’ve followed us?” Kennedy whispered. Apparently, so was Kennedy.

“I don’t know.” He wanted to be the one to protect Kennedy. But he knew when to admit he was out of his depth. “I trust Rachel to figure it out.”

Kennedy’s hand moved to her phone on the table, but she didn’t touch it. Instead, she brought the tiny cup to her lips. Plump, kissable lips covered in pink lip gloss that smelled faintly of vanilla... Heat crept up his neck, and it wasn’t from the ridiculously small amount of coffee he’d drunk. Yes, he’d much rather drink her lips. His pulse skyrocketed just from the thought.

He didn’t want to push her, and so far, despite them being married, he sensed an invisible wall between them. He couldn’t complain. He knew she was a recluse before he’d married her.

Being around her and not being able to touch her, to kiss her was a sweet torture. Would she ever let him inside her mysterious soul? Now he could understand Kai, who’d hidden his feelings for Marina while they’d just been friends. Austin’s hand moved toward Kennedy’s, but he stopped himself halfway.

Better find a neutral topic. “Do you miss your job?”

She probably itched to check her work emails. The waiter brought two more cups of coffee, and Austin drained his immediately.

“I do. But I’ve learned a valuable lesson.” Her gaze met and held his, igniting a fire in his blood. “The company won’t collapse without me. The hotels are still standing.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” he asked carefully as he devoured his airy, sweet éclair.

He sensed her need to be needed, though without letting anyone into her personal space that was a delicate balance. He

had no clue how to walk that tightrope. Everyone in his family spoke their minds, but he could read cats' minds easier than Kennedy's.

Then, that could be part of the attraction.

A light breeze threw strands of honey-blonde hair into her face, and before he could stop himself, he reached out and tucked it behind her ear. Her eyes widened, but she didn't move away. His fingers lingered on her skin, the soft contact sending a jolt straight to his heart. He traced her cheek's delicate outline, lingering on the tiny birthmark, his heart beating faster. But then she shifted back.

Disappointment cut through him, and he edged back, as well. He couldn't be mistaken about the attraction in her eyes. But he had to be patient with her, which was difficult for a man falling in love.

*Lord, please give me patience.*

"Yes, that's a good thing." But she didn't sound persuaded. She finished her éclair absentmindedly. "I have good managers and an excellent executive assistant. That's why I hired them. But maybe I was micromanaging them?"

"That's understandable. You want your family business to do well." He beckoned the waiter over and requested a large glass of tea, though he suspected his and the café's definition of large wasn't the same.

Kennedy shook her head when he asked if she wanted anything else. She waited until the waiter left before speaking again.

"Not just that. I want to make my uncle proud." She slumped against the back of her chair.

"That's admirable." Everyone in Port Sunshine knew she'd greatly expanded her parents' business and helped her uncle expand his. She was a brilliant businesswoman, and Austin was still in awe that such a woman was his wife.

The waiter arrived with his drink. Yep, the local definition of large was much smaller than his own. Austin thanked the waiter, and the guy disappeared into the café.

“Well, I partly wanted to make my uncle proud because I owed him—you see, I sort of stole his daughter’s place,” she whispered.

He winced, his gut wrenching, and he nearly jumped to hug her. But would she accept that contact? He settled for reaching out for her hand, and even then, he hoped he wasn’t breaking some invisible boundary.

Yet he couldn’t just sit there and let her suffer. “You know that’s not true. It’s not your fault she went missing.” Now he better understood her drive behind trying to find Zoey. More than the love he’d thought propelled that urge. Misplaced feelings of guilt also goaded her.

Her gray eyes darkened like a proverbial ocean in tempest. “You don’t know everything. It was my fault. It was all my fault. And, well, if she hadn’t disappeared, she could’ve done things better than I did. First, I lived in the shadow of my gorgeous socialite mother. Then in the shadow of my adorable, sweet cousin.” She pulled back her shoulders. “I don’t want to live in the shadows anymore.”



## Chapter Twelve



“PLEASE EACH MOVE TO the opposite sides of the door. Just as a precaution.”

When Rachel gestured as they climbed the stairs to a porch that evening for the meeting with the video’s creator, Kennedy suppressed a grimace. Yet she obliged, and so did Austin. Rachel was just doing her job. Kennedy studied the place. Mme. Lavigne’s house wasn’t what Kennedy was used to or expected.

Flower beds with bright pansies surrounded the cute Tyrolean-style dwelling, its chocolate-brown beams and cutwork trim accentuating the white facing. One of the cheerful canary-yellow curtains behind an arched window moved, so someone was home. Above the massive oak front door, also arched, the brown awning looked like an eyebrow raised in surprise. The miniature house could serve as a gingerbread-house inspiration—or a fairy-tale setting.

But as Kennedy knocked and stared at the incredible man by her side, she remained lost in their conversation at the café. Their gazes met and held, and she didn’t want to look away.

In her life, he was an ocean breeze, refreshing and tender, but also a prelude to the winds of change. Instead of cowering and avoiding that change, could she welcome it?

As bright and cheerful as the flowers surrounding the house, he was so different from the tidy hedge of men she’d been surrounded by. Unlike them—and yes, herself—Austin never seemed to care about keeping up an image, saying the right thing, doing admirable gestures, or striving for a higher income. He was fine with being goofy and even awkward while he changed the world one pet at a time, including unwanted ones.

Her lips kicked up just from seeing the smile on his handsome face. She had to shove her hands into the pockets of

her summer dress to keep from reaching out and touching the reddish stubble on his face or running her hands through his hair with those tints of autumn maple leaves.

There was more to it than his eternal optimism or authenticity. Though she'd soaked them in because, in her life, both came in even smaller portions than the coffee at the local café.

She wasn't just discovering a new town or a man who was still new to her, despite their marital status. She was discovering *herself*, and for the first time in her life, she was excited to get to know that someone. He looked at her as if she were the most amazing and kindest human being in the world, and as she stared into those admiring blue eyes, it would be so easy to believe she was such a person.

Her heart stirred as she shifted closer to him. Then she remembered Rachel's words and moved back. He filled her with joy and often laughter, and she liked the hope-filled, relaxed person she was with him way more than the uptight, sad, and lonely one she'd been before him.

But a hard-earned caution dampened all that joy. After all, that breeze could become a storm. If she allowed herself to hope too much, to love too much, she could lose the object of her affection. Because it had always happened that way.

Wasn't that why she was here? She winced as the door opened.

Huh. The video's creator wasn't what Kennedy expected, causing her a slight sting of guilt for stereotyping.

"Hello. You must be Kennedy and Austin Crawford." A petite lady with long white hair, wrinkled, liver-spotted hands, and an engaging smile waved at them.

Unlike Kennedy's family tradition, Mme. Lavigne didn't wear any diamonds or pearls. Instead, she sported heart-shaped earrings carved from oak and a matching bracelet. Her daffodil-hued cardigan paired with a long oatmeal skirt didn't look expensive. Yet Kennedy's heart warmed as if the woman was the grandma she'd never gotten a chance to meet.

“Yes. Great to meet you, Mme. Lavigne. And this is our friend, Rachel. Thank you very much for agreeing to see me.” Kennedy returned the smile. She kept it in place even as something—apprehension?—tightened the crow’s-feet surrounding the hostess’s faded light-blue eyes.

Whatever it was, it disappeared fast, and Mme. Lavigne waved them inside. “Nice to meet you all. Come on in.”

Rachel stepped inside first, probably to neutralize any unexpected threat. While Kennedy grew to admire Rachel, Kennedy would never be able to do the kind of job Rachel did. Mme. Lavigne shuffled after them in bubblegum-pink slippers.

Inside, textured wallpaper with rows of wheat-colored braids beckoned inspection, and Kennedy didn’t resist the urge to touch the walls. The hardwood floors had suffered many grooves and a few scratches, so they might’ve been the originals. And that made the room even cozier as it beckoned one to imagine the years of happy living that had occurred within.

Mme. Lavigne led them to a cozy living room where souvenirs filled the built-in shelves and gestured to the sofa with its pattern of tiny forget-me-not-style blue flowers. “Would you like some tea or coffee?”

Austin and Kennedy sat there while Rachel opted for the armchair. But when Mme. Lavigne offered refreshments, Rachel spoke fast. “I’m good, but thank you.”

Which reminded Kennedy she didn’t know whether they could trust this person. “Same here,” Kennedy said with a tinge of regret. “Though I appreciate the offer.”

Austin also politely declined.

“Sorry, I deleted the video. I didn’t think it was going to be important.” The hostess sighed, her gaze apologetic.

“Totally understandable. But is it possible it was backed up on a cloud somewhere?”

Mme. Lavigne’s grip around her cardigan tightened. “No, I didn’t back it up. Like I said, I didn’t think it was important.”

Rachel leaned forward. “If you took the video with your phone, would you mind if we looked at it? I wouldn’t go into personal files, I promise.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t see the point. Besides, I wouldn’t like strangers searching through my phone. Would you?”

“No, I guess I wouldn’t.” Kennedy softened her voice and deflected, sensing tension. She needed to proceed with caution. “What prompted you to create the video? Are you a fan of the festival?”

“When my niece and her children were visiting from France, I took them to the festival.”

Austin perked up. “Could your niece have a copy of the video?”

“No.” The answer came fast. Too fast?

Either way, even if the niece had a copy, she’d probably deleted it, as well. But it wouldn’t hurt to double-check. Kennedy shifted forward, opening her hands in supplication. “May I have a contact phone number for your niece, please?”

The woman’s pale lips pursed. “I don’t see why. I doubt she can help you, anyway.” She dipped her head and picked at a loose thread on her cardigan.

Many years ago, Uncle had taught Kennedy that, while people learned to control their facial expressions, they sometimes forgot about their hand gestures. Those could give them away. Based on Mme. Lavigne’s hands, she was nervous. Why? Just because strangers were in her house?

Well, they could get the contact info some other way. “It was nice of you to invite your niece and her children.”

Mme. Lavigne’s twitchy fingers stilled when Kennedy didn’t push the issue. “It’s not a big deal. Her boys are a riot, but I enjoy spending time with the family.”

“Do you visit them often?” Austin gave her his signature grin that could melt hearts without him noticing it. “I grew up with a bunch of brothers. We were a riot, as well.”



Mme. Lavigne turned to him. “I do. There’s also a restaurant in the town near theirs where I like to go for lunch.”

Austin blinked. “You drive to France for lunch?”

“It’s only an hour and fifteen minutes away. Sometimes for breakfast.” Mme. Lavigne shrugged her bony shoulders. “They have nice croissants.”

Kennedy hid a smile. Back in their country, they could drive for hours—even a day—and still be in the same state. Here, one could be in a different country in slightly over an hour. Maybe less in some places?

It would be great to travel through Europe with Austin and take their time without any special agenda. Browse museums with timeless treasures, admire ancient architecture, visit splendid gardens where people in love had met many centuries before them, leave a coin in a fountain so they’d come back... And yes, eat delicious croissants in a cozy French café, breathe in coffee aroma and fragrant flowers, and intertwine their hands.

A real honeymoon. A real love.

Longing stirred her, but that longing was only an hour drive from desperation. The more she wanted something, the more the chances were she’d lose it. When she’d acquired new properties, her uncle had taught her that the important thing was being able to walk away. And she already couldn’t imagine walking away from Austin.

But she wasn’t here to dream of the things she couldn’t have. And she’d already lost someone irreplaceable. So she turned her phone to Mme. Lavigne to display the drawings with Zoey’s portrait. “Does this woman look familiar to you?”

Recognition flashed in the lady’s eyes, but she shook her head. “No. Never seen her before.”

Kennedy exchanged glances with Austin. He’d noticed it, too. Kennedy infused her voice with warmth she stopped feeling. “Once again, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us.” She placed her business card on the antique table. “Please

call me if you remember anything else. Or if you see this woman.”

“Of course.” Mme. Lavigne got up, relief slackening the wrinkles on her weathered face. Their time was up.

As they walked away from the cottage, Rachel said, “Someone told her to delete the video. Then to call her niece and tell her to do the same.”

“Yup. And that gives me hope we’re on the right track.” Kennedy paused and slowed her pace. “Or am I chasing a mirage?”

“Whatever it is, we need answers.” Austin wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Her insides warmed, and she leaned into him while they strolled the cobblestone street. She liked the sound of “we,” the feeling of proximity, and the supportive gesture.

“We still have a bunch of businesses in town we can visit to show the portrait.” She stopped, looked up the town map on her phone, then cross-referenced the list she’d made. “We can stop by a few and cover the rest tomorrow.”

“We should ask them if they or their friends or visitors have any videos or photos from the festival. Especially of the crowd.”

“I’ll find the niece’s information, and we can call her or even go there the day after tomorrow. If that works for you,” Rachel said.

“Sure,” Austin and Kennedy replied in unison.

They stopped at souvenir shops, a hairdresser, and then another café where they got takeout dinner. They asked the employees and owners, but so far, nobody had seen the woman in the portrait—or so they said. More than a few had festival images on their phone, but none showed anyone like Zoey.

Austin chatted to everyone and made them chuckle while Kennedy bought souvenirs and food and left generous tips. Rachel offered her card and received promises to send the festival videos or photos. Most people here were used to the

festival, but their acquaintances, friends, and relatives from out of town—sometimes out of the country—visited for it and more than likely had taken a bunch of pictures.

Disappointment stabbed Kennedy, but she held her head high. The bags Austin carried emanated an enticing aroma, but her hunger evaporated.

“Hopefully, we’ll have more success tomorrow.” His fingers tightened on her shoulder.

“Hopefully,” she echoed.

Once the three of them reentered the castle, Caramel and Smiley met them with loud barking.

Kennedy’s heart warmed as she leaned to pet the dogs. “It feels great when someone is happy to see you.”

Austin feigned offense as he rubbed each dog’s back. “*I’m* always happy to see you.”

And that was the most amazing thing in her life. But then, that was the kind of person he was. He was happy to see people and animals, and they were happy to see him—well, unless the visit contained an unpleasant procedure. Case in point, Caramel and Smiley abandoned her and were hanging on him now. He lifted both dogs, and they licked his face.

Her gaze lingered on him, getting caught in the undercurrents of his eyes, an unknown feeling growing inside her. Or maybe she knew what the feeling was but was too scared to name it yet.

Then her gaze snapped to the hotel curator who asked if they needed anything. Kennedy thanked the woman for all her help.

The castle boasted a combination of modern and historical that appealed to both the desire for convenience and the curiosity about times past. Electric light fixtures, discreetly shaped like candelabra and sconces, now fitted niches in the stonemasonry. In the great room, majestic two-story tapestries of ladies in ball gowns and men in uniform or vivid battle scenes hid the wiring on the wall. Metal shields with coats of arms and big-screen TVs reflected each other while arrow loop

windows in the towers now had glass to keep in the heat during the winter.

Earlier, they'd explored the ramparts and parapet walk, both replete with battlements to repel assailants, as they linked the towers anchoring the defensive outer wall's four corners and the lesser turrets along the way, though most were closed to the public. Maybe this part should be closed to the public, as well.

Kennedy grimaced from a pang of remorse and muttered, "I feel guilty intruding on a history that should be preserved untouched."

"Don't," the curator assured. "Income from the public, among other things, funds this place's renovation and upkeep. You're not intruding, but helping us preserve this piece of history."

Yet Kennedy realized her privileged life even more. Once back in the US, she was going to give her people bonuses.

As Smiley took his leash in his mouth and ran to the door, she remembered they needed to walk the pets. "Does the castle have a garden?" Well, they had promised a fenced-in yard, hadn't they?

"As every self-respecting castle should." The curator raised her chin, apparently offended by the question.

"Why, yes, indeed." Smiling, Austin scooped up the puppy.

Rachel wordlessly followed them to a courtyard garden beside the main building the brochure called the castle keep.

The fenced-in garden had traditional pink roses and some representatives of local flora Kennedy didn't recognize, though their sweet fragrance blended nicely with the more aromatic rose scent. Rachel hung near the roses, so immovable a butterfly landed on her shoulder.

The leashes weren't needed here. Caramel barked her demand to be put on the ground, and Austin followed her orders. Then the dogs started chasing each other, which put a smile on Kennedy's face.

Then just being near Austin put a smile on Kennedy's face.

Austin snatched a flower and handed it to her. She breathed in the aroma. She'd literally never stopped and smelled the roses until now. There was a whole wide world out there she hadn't paid attention to in a while. While roses weren't her favorite flowers, they still fascinated her. The man near her fascinated her.

He took her hands in his, sending a pleasant wave through her. "Sorry we didn't get closer to finding Zoey today."

The painful reminder made Kennedy wince, but she squeezed his hands to show her resilience. "It's just one day. There's still hope."

And that was it. She started hoping again. To find Zoey. To see her uncle get better. And deep down, to make this marriage work.

Austin held her gaze, making her heartbeat erratic, unnerving her and exciting her at the same time. "Yes. There's hope."

In a matter of days, she'd gotten attached to him so much it rang alarms louder than the dogs barked. She was yielding so much power to him already as if power were some protons going from her hands to his, and she jerked hers back, breaking the connection.

As his eyes dimmed, she gestured to the white wrought iron table with matching chairs surrounding it. "Let's sit."

He pulled out a chair for her, then sat once she did. For a few moments, everything was quiet. She'd never been a chatterbox, and she guarded her space with as much ferocity as people in medieval times guarded this castle. Her heart constricted. Would he get bored with her soon? Stop knocking on a door she'd always kept locked?

The breeze caressed her skin, but not as gently as Austin had. Leaves on faraway trees whispered something, maybe gossiped about how silly this woman was to keep pushing away a great guy.

He never seemed to have a problem starting a conversation. And to her relief, the apprehension disappeared from his eyes nearly immediately. “If it’s okay to ask, what happened to your uncle’s ex-wife? I mean, I know they got divorced and she left, but not the details.”

She traced the table’s filigree surface, skidding from one knobby wrought iron band to another. The neutral question didn’t concern her directly, so he must be giving her space. Did he ask because his mother was spending more and more time in Uncle’s company? And after all, Austin had a right to know about the man who was in essence, if not officially, his father-in-law.

She must’ve let the pause stretch too long because Austin added, “You don’t have to answer if the memory is unpleasant. I, um, I’m asking because Mom talks about your uncle a lot. And her face lights up when she does.” He looked away. “Probably like mine does when I look at you.”

Her face heated at the last sentence, but painful memories rushed over her like a cold shower. This was another loss she’d pushed away and never allowed herself to grieve.

She touched a thorn on the rose, examining the pain, then started with a prelude instead of the main symphony. “She was a much more protective mom than mine was. I mean, Zoey had a nanny, but her mother still spent a lot of time with her. And with me, because I hung out at their place a lot. I called her Auntie.”

“You loved her like a mom.” Soft and compassionate, his voice almost undid her, and his blue eyes nearly made her believe healing was possible.

But if he wanted this story, she had to remain detached as much as possible. “Mine didn’t seem to want to spend time with me.” A lump grew in her throat, its edges as prickly as thorns. “As Auntie seemed to enjoy spending time with us girls, I took to her like a flower turns to the sun. I was too little to protect my heart at the time.” The last words she added in a much lower voice.

Based on his darkened eyes, he heard her. “It must’ve been difficult when she left.”

“At first, I couldn’t understand how she could do that. At almost the same time, I lost two of the few people who cared about me. My friend disappeared, all because of me. Heartbroken, Auntie and Uncle offered rewards and hired private investigators to augment what the police and FBI were doing, but still, they couldn’t find their daughter. Uncle became a shadow of his former self, and to distract himself, he worked so much that he barely came home. Auntie was crying often, until she broke down and said she couldn’t stay where everything reminded her of her daughter.”

Kennedy had to stop. She let out a shaky breath, then pushed through more of the past. “Instead of uniting them, grief drove them apart, creating an ocean between them. I also think Uncle blamed himself for what happened. He had an early breakfast with an important client that day where the presence of a glamorous, elegant wife was advantageous, but the presence of children would be a nuisance. He asked her to go with him, though she wanted us all to go to the beach. He said the nanny could take the girls to the beach. I have a feeling he never forgave himself for that and neither did she.”

“But it’s not his fault Zoey was kidnapped.” His hand moved toward hers, but he seemed to stop himself as if remembering her previous reaction.

Regret tightened around her rib cage. “We often blame ourselves for illogical things.”

“That sounds familiar.” His caring gaze was opening a door she didn’t deserve to touch. Not the door in, but the door out.

Forgiving herself was another thing too painful to examine, a sword like those on the castle’s walls. Even after such a long time, it had never dulled or rusted. It could probably split her silk scarf—or her aching heart—in two.

She wasn’t sure she was ready. The cool of the picking-up wind and cloudy sky gave her an excuse to stand. “Let’s head

inside. It might rain soon. And we need to give the dogs a bath.”

“Okay.” He helped her herd the pets inside the castle.

“Good night.” Rachel disappeared into her room, and Kennedy suspected they wouldn’t see her again this evening. Rachel was quiet like a shadow, easily disappearing into a crowd, her footfalls silent, so Kennedy sometimes forgot the bodyguard was even there. But that was probably the point.

Rachel had a squeaky-clean background and stellar references, but Kennedy wondered about her story.

Once Austin and Kennedy had bathed the dogs, unpacked in their respective rooms, and accomplished a few other things, Kennedy felt drawn to the living room fireplace, another modern addition that still reflected something from the past. She found Austin already there, sitting on the couch, staring at the fire, nursing a glass of chocolate milk. She froze.

Normally, she loved all things chocolate, but milk wasn’t one of them.

He lifted his gaze, his expression more thoughtful than usual. Was he having regrets, asking himself what he’d gotten into? The rich girl with oceanfront properties people envied had turned out to be an emotional mess.

“Would you like me to make you some chocolate milk?” He placed his half-full glass on a coffee table.

She weakened. “N–no.”

He got up from the sofa fast. “Why did you pale? Did I say something wrong?”

She scuffled a few steps back. “The morning we were about to go to the beach, Auntie made me and Zoey chocolate milk. I spilled mine on my dress. I... well, after my cousin disappeared, I’ve been unable to drink chocolate milk ever since.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to create a painful reminder.” He left for the kitchen with his glass and returned without it.



By then, she was snuggled on the sofa, peering at the dance of fire tongues in the fireplace, the hypnotic image somewhat calming.

“May I join you?” His voice was tentative.

The lump in her throat grew bigger, preventing her from speaking, so she just patted the space. He sat, keeping some distance between them. Yes, this was her marriage. They were so close, yet a distance stretched between them. And she only had herself to blame.

For a few moments, the silence lingered, broken only by the crackling wood in the fireplace and a loud yawn from the beagle stretched on the faux bearskin rug with the puppy.

“May I ask why you said it was your fault Zoey disappeared?” he finally interrupted the silence.

She hadn’t talked about it in decades, and maybe it was time she did. “I ran into the water, just to get my ankles wet, despite the nanny telling me not to. The water was still very cold, and she was afraid I’d get sick. A jellyfish stung me, and I screamed and started crying. While the nanny attended to me, Zoey vanished.”

He hugged her. “It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault at all. You were just a child. A child who suffered. How could you predict a jellyfish sting?”

“I shouldn’t have disobeyed. I should’ve stayed with Zoey. Then she’d still be here.” Tears burned behind the backs of her eyes. She blinked furiously as she stared at the fire. She’d learned to keep her tears at bay, but it was getting more and more difficult.

He drew her closer, increasing her pulse and providing much-needed support. “Not true at all. She might’ve gotten kidnapped at a different time. Or both of you could’ve gotten taken. Bottom line, you’re *not* to blame.”

She allowed herself to stay in his embrace for a few more precious seconds, then eased away.

The dogs ran to her and started licking her hands as if sensing her emotional distress. Then Smiley climbed onto her

lap and settled there while Caramel curled up in Austin's.

She blinked her tears away as she stroked the beagle's smooth fur while leaning into Austin. Breathing became easier, but it wasn't right to feel better when Zoey wasn't here any longer. "My uncle said the same thing. But I thought it was because he wanted me to feel better."

"I want you to feel better. But I'm also telling you this because it's true."

Could she allow herself to accept it? Then she told him something she hadn't told anyone. Not even her uncle. "It's not only that. I... Before that tragic day at the beach, I prayed for Zoey's parents to become my parents. I prayed for it every night for months. But I didn't mean for it to be like that. Not like that." She tucked her face into his chest.

Smiley jumped onto the carpet, and so did the puppy.

"Oh, darling. And you carried that burden with you all your life?" He wrapped his arms around her again in a circle of affection. "You grew up with parents who were emotionally neglectful or worse. Of course, you longed for love and affection from the only true parental figures you knew. And you deserved that unconditional affection. All children do. You praying for it had nothing to do with Zoey's disappearance. Please stop torturing yourself."

She took in the words but didn't process them yet. "I still see her in my dreams sometimes. She is running away. I run after her, begging her to stop, but she doesn't."

"Is it why you have insomnia?"

"Probably."

"Is it possible she could've drowned?"

"The police considered that version. But I don't think she would've tried swimming that day. My feet had gotten so cold. Taking a full-body plunge would've been freezing. And we were wearing dresses. Besides, her body was never found."

That gave her a tiny ray of hope all this time that Zoey could be alive and well somewhere. Or maybe it wasn't hope.

Maybe it was wishful thinking.

Just like it was wishful thinking to hope Austin might love her someday. She lifted her gaze and met his eyes. They were caring, but there was heat in them. Looking at it caused heat to swirl in the pit of her stomach.

Maybe because her emotions were raw from spilling her guts to him, but she didn't move away the moment he moved closer the way she'd normally do. Not just with him, with other people. In fact, she'd allowed him much closer than she'd allowed anyone else.

Instead of the impulse to run, the desire to kiss him heightened, and it was rather high to start with. Her heartbeat skyrocketed as his eyes searched her face.

*Please don't move away. Please move away.*

She felt like she might stop breathing if he did.

"I want to kiss you so badly," he whispered, his breathing caressing her cheek.

"Finally!" she blurted out.

He brightened. "Really? Because I didn't want you to feel obligated to, just because we're married..."

Thankfully, he stopped talking and closed the distance between them. She met him halfway or at least a third of the way.

Her entire being woke to life, and every cell in her body seemed to respond to his kiss. She'd never before understood the expression of butterflies in one's stomach. Now, there seemed to be a myriad of butterflies in her stomach, fluttering their tender wings and dancing with each other.

The kiss was sweet and tender, but there was so much promise in it, like the vows he'd said at their wedding.

Maybe kissing him was a mistake, but she couldn't stop. A mistake because she knew now without a doubt this was the man she'd one day surrender her heart to, no matter how much she'd try to stop it.



# Chapter Thirteen



EXCEPT FOR THE MOMENT of the kiss yesterday, Kennedy had never imagined feeling as euphoric as she did the next morning when she and Austin had breakfast in the rose—and whatever the other flowers were—garden.

Meanwhile, Smiley and Caramel chased butterflies. Well, Caramel had the untapped puppy energy to chase them. Smiley mostly sat in one place with dignity while allowing the butterflies to fly around him.

And incredibly, Kennedy still had her own butterflies in her stomach just from the memory of the magical kiss. She could so easily get used to waking up to Austin's happy smile.

“How did you sleep last night?” He moved a saucer with croissants closer to her and slid over the deeper dish with cherry jam.

She didn't know how great the croissants were in the café Mme. Lavigne frequented, but these ones were delicious, flaky, and soft. Or maybe everything tasted and smelled better in his presence.

“Surprisingly well.”

Apparently, she'd fallen asleep while they'd been watching a romantic comedy—yes, it had a dog in it—on the sofa. He'd carried her to her bed and covered her with a blanket as soft as a whisper.

“Glad to hear it. I, um, I've worried about your insomnia.” He knew about it and had accompanied her on nightly drives after their wedding.

“Me, too. Besides, I was afraid I'd feel suffocated in a castle. It's not like I could take a long drive here.” She slathered jam on the croissant and bit into it. “Mmm, this is so good. The baked goods, not the insomnia part.”

She didn't want to admit it, but she'd been wearing herself thin being up at night so often. There was a reason people needed sleep. She'd been getting more and more fatigued.

He took a sip from his large mug that she'd packed. "Maybe it would be a good idea to see someone about that."

She drank some coffee while looking at him. It took all her willpower not to lean over the round table and kiss him again. "Already have. But anyway, if in the fairy tales, princes wake up the heroines with a kiss, you put me to sleep with one."

He coughed a little. "I hope you mean it in a good way."

Oh my! What had she just? She didn't mean he was boring. "Totally."

Heat rose to her neck. She might be comfortable in a boardroom or conference room, but she had no clue how to be romantic, much less how to navigate marriage. But she knew enough to realize the dynamic between them changed after the kiss. But how? And how much?

Later, Rachel joined them in strolling to more local businesses, though she kept a slight distance away.

Nobody recognized Zoey at the bakery.

At the museum where the muse of an eighteenth-century poet used to live, Kennedy received a call, and what Marina relayed nearly made Kennedy drop her phone. She'd stepped outside from the small house to take the call, and even after she disconnected, she stayed motionless staring at the treetops.

Austin lingered nearby, silent, but his gaze was concerned.

Finally, she was able to move and speak, so she gestured him and Rachel closer. Then she looked past them because it was easier that way. "Marina said Emma might've provided information about my hotels to my main competitor." The betrayal cut deep, and it became difficult to breathe, as if someone dumped a mountain of regrets on her chest.

It didn't make her doubt Austin or Rachel, but still, some poison spread through her. Her hands fisted, but she uncoiled her fingers one by one and resisted the urge to lean on the gray

brick wall behind the house, an area where tourists didn't stop by.

Cheerful voices reached her from the front of the well-preserved home where pansies filled tiny flower beds, then hushed as people disappeared inside the place. Joyful voices and bright flowers seemed to mock her turmoil, and so did the teal-hued bird chirruping in a nearby tree.

Austin reached for her hand and squeezed her fingers. "I'm so sorry. You don't deserve this."

Compassion flashed in Rachel's eyes but disappeared fast. "Would you like me to look into it, as well?"

"No." Maybe Kennedy just wasn't likable if even an employee she considered a good friend had sold her out. After all, nobody ever liked her enough to be in a serious relationship with her. To get married, she had to propose to a near stranger. "What did I expect? Even my parents didn't seem to like me," she blurted out.

Austin gripped her shoulders and peered into her eyes while Rachel stepped aside to give them privacy. "That was on them, not on you. It wasn't your job to earn their love. It was theirs to give it to you. And it's remarkable that, even without their love and support, you still became the amazing woman you are."

"I'm not amazing," she whispered, though everything in her was grateful for his words. Her soul opened to him like the nearby flowers in bloom.

"You are, and I still can barely believe God gave me this incredible chance to have you as my spouse." He gestured to the house. "If I were a poet, I'd write all the beautiful words in the world for you. All the ones written in my heart."

The bluish bird started singing as if to provide music for those words. Then a fiddle's lively music reached her from far away. Must be that street musician they'd encountered yesterday. A beautiful classic melody she didn't recognize. Maybe written by a local composer in love centuries ago.

Then Austin brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face, sending delicious tingles along her skin. Breathing became easier as if he removed the mountain of regrets—or at least a chunk of it—from her chest simply with a few words and a single touch. He was the man she needed, but was she the woman he needed?

She allowed herself to lean into his touch when he cupped her face. “What happened to this poet’s muse, anyway? But please don’t tell me it’s a tragic story.”

He chuckled as he leaned closer. “It’s not. They got married and had nine children. And two dogs. Oh, and he planted a beautiful garden for her.”

Her pulse spiking, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “And you’re planting a beautiful garden in my soul where I was sure the soil was dry. You’re the rain that feeds my soul and the sunshine that makes it bloom.”

He placed his forehead to hers. “Wow. You’re the one whose words sound like poetry. And what you just said... Is it okay to say right back at you?”

Laughter bubbled inside her, and she angled her face to give him better access to her lips.

“Oh, sorry! We were just trying to take a shortcut.” A woman’s voice made Kennedy jump back as if she were a teenager.

A woman in a green dress and a guy in matching shorts and a cap worn backward disappeared around the corner, but the moment was gone. Though Austin was an irresistible distraction, they had a mission to accomplish.

Reluctantly, Kennedy eased back. “We’d better get going.”

A muscle moved in his cheek, but he nodded. “Right.”

Soon, they visited a boutique clothing store and a florist. They left with a straw hat and orchids, respectfully, but no information about Zoey, sadly. Then they stopped at a stone-walled restaurant with sunflowers as centerpieces and oil paintings of olive groves on the walls. Based on the interior



and abundance of pasta dishes, it was influenced by a different European country.

By then, Kennedy had surprised herself by sharing many stories of her childhood with Austin. She'd never told all this to anyone, but once she'd started telling him, the stories became as never-ending as the breadsticks seemed to be here. He was so understanding and compassionate that it was easy to open the heavy door to the past for him, a door she hadn't opened for anyone else.

When the waiter appeared, Kennedy asked for water with lime and opted for familiar chicken Alfredo while Austin ordered chicken Parmesan with raspberry tea.

Once the waiter left, she broke off the tip of a still-warm breadstick, enjoying the aroma of freshly baked bread. "The more I remember and the more I allow myself to analyze things in light of my discoveries, the more it seems Mom never loved Dad. She just pretended to, while they were in public. It was different at home."

"That's so sad." His eyes reflected his words. "Why do you think she married him then?"

"I talked about it with my uncle and showed him the pendant with your dad's photo in it before you and I left on the trip. He didn't look surprised. Dad was a trust-fund baby." The breadstick soured in her stomach. Not a great start to a romantic lunch. "Uncle said my dad was smitten from the moment he met my mother. But it seemed to be a marriage of convenience for her."

Who'd have thought Kennedy would follow her parents' footsteps that way? Only in her case, she'd been the one to propose a marriage of convenience. Her heart constricted. Was she going to repeat her father's story and fall in love with a person who'd never love her back?

The waiter brought their food, and Austin chatted to him about different things, then showed Zoey's portrait. Kennedy suppressed a grimace when the guy turned out to be another person who'd "never seen this woman."

Once the waiter left, Austin said grace.

Kennedy munched on ripe tomatoes from her salad, then scooped up a few olives while her thoughts took a route she didn't want them to take. Just minutes ago, she was happy with Austin in this small historic country. Why did she have to dig into her past? Into the past of two people who were supposed to be dearest to her but who were instead like strangers.

Austin cut his chicken Parmesan. "I always thought marriage was between two people who love each other." Then his eyes darkened. "Though I vowed I'd never treat anyone the way Dad treated Mom and us."

Kennedy flinched from a scary thought and clutched onto the fork to prevent it from dropping. If her father had ever found this secret Kennedy had recently discovered, he had a motive to see Austin's father gone. But Austin's dad's death had been ruled suicide. Besides, nobody seemed to know about the connection between her mother and Austin's dad. Nobody had ever thought to check Kennedy's parents' alibis.

All Kennedy could do now was hope they hadn't been involved. She bit into her breadstick and flushed it down with her lime-flavored water.

Of course, Austin was caring and kind and wouldn't cheat on her. But she wouldn't want him to be miserable if he never developed feelings for her. Why did she think she could make this work when she'd had such a stark example that it never had worked out with her parents?

"They were two unhappy people stuck together." She forked chicken and smothered it in the white sauce, her appetite disappearing fast. She didn't want to live her life like that, and she wouldn't want Austin to, either. She took a bite of her chicken Alfredo, and it was juicy and tender, more than enough to feed her body. But her soul was hungry for something else.

Someone else. The person sitting right in front of her.

A fiddler started playing on a small stage, and the sounds were piercing. While beautiful, the music seemed to be written by someone who longed for love, who cried for love, and she could relate.

“Our story isn’t the same as their story. It’s up to us to live our lives honoring and cherishing each other.” He reached across the table and touched her hand.

His touch sent a lovely feeling straight to her heart. Yet she had no clue how to show him she cherished him already. She only knew she wouldn’t repeat her father’s mistake. He’d tried to buy his gorgeous wife’s affection with lavish parties, expensive trips, and sparkling jewelry.

But love couldn’t be bought, only given. And Austin wasn’t a person to be bought, anyway.

Then her phone beeped with an incoming message, interrupting their connection. He withdrew his hand, causing regret to tighten her stomach. She glanced at a nearby table where Rachel nodded, indicating the text was from her.

Kennedy didn’t like to use a phone during meals, but her curiosity was piqued. “Rachel sent us some information.”

“Please see what it is.” Austin leaned forward.

She read the text, then conveyed it in a hushed tone. “She found Mme. Lavigne’s niece.”



As much as Austin was eager to get home to his family and his menagerie of furry patients, regret stung as they flew back to South Carolina, leaving the magical tiny country with its history spanning many centuries. Not just because their mission there wasn’t accomplished. Mme. Lavigne’s niece had told them via phone that she’d deleted the video. She’d then refused to meet with them. No, his regret was because while in Lazorria, he’d gotten a chance to spend much more time with Kennedy, and every moment had drawn them closer and closer.

Now he still loved looking at the clouds below them out the window and enjoyed the luxury of the jet, but the person near him was more fascinating than all the wonders of the world. And the more he'd gotten to know her, the more fascinated he'd become.

He covered her hand with his as he shifted to her as much as the cream-hued leather couch allowed. She looked up from her laptop and smiled absently, her thoughts somewhere else. A large part of him longed to have her attention only on himself.

Yet before he married her, he knew she was a workaholic, laser-focused on her job. Well, he also worried about his furry patients and missed his human family—okay, he should've put "human family" first. But unlike her, he didn't live and breathe his job.

However, he understood her drive better now. She worked so much not just to prove herself or add more properties to an already impressive list. Gratitude to her uncle and misplaced guilt propelled her. Besides, her lonely childhood left her with a void she'd done her best to fill with work and outward success, and she wouldn't be the first one to do so.

His CEO brother, Tex, had been doing the same, only his childhood wasn't lonely.

*Lord, please help Kennedy. And please help me understand how best to help her. I want her to be happy so much.*

He glided his fingers over hers. "I hope everything is well at the hotels."

"Oh, it's not about hotels." She smiled sheepishly. "Some people have already sent their festival videos. I divided them up with Rachel. Yeah, she offered to go through them all. But I got impatient."

So it wasn't about the job. She was still desperate to find her cousin, no doubt. Even if they were searching for a needle in a haystack and that needle might not exist to start with.

"Anything useful so far? And I can look through photos, too." They were in this together, and he wanted to help. But

sometimes he felt left on the outskirts of the castle her heart seemed to be.

“Nothing useful yet.” Her eyes dimmed. “And thank you for the offer to help, but... It’s not just about facial recognition. Or knowing the placement of birthmarks. It’s about soul recognition, as well. I might be naïve, but I feel that, if I see her again, I’ll somehow *know* it’s her.”

He was about to say Rachel couldn’t claim the same vision of the heart, but then Rachel did seem to have an X-ray vision that could pierce one’s soul.

His throat felt parched. He didn’t even have time to say anything as Rachel appeared in front of them with a tray of drinks. His eyes widened. Did she read his mind? He drained his glass fast and put it back on the tray. Then Rachel disappeared just as silently.

Kennedy closed her laptop and put it away, then sipped her sparkling water. “Growing up, I always blamed myself for my parents not loving me. You’re helping me see I might not be to blame.”

He squeezed her fingers, praying for the right words. “Of course, you’re not. First, from what I know, you were a perfect child. And second, if parents’ love depended on their children’s behavior, Mom would’ve stopped loving us a long time ago. Several of us were mischievous. And I bumped into things and knocked them over even without trying to cause mischief.”

She chuckled, the sound a welcome contrast to the worried line on her forehead. She drank the rest of her water and put the glass aside. “I can imagine. And... thank you.”

Unlike humans, pets always gave unconditional love, one of many reasons he loved working with them. He brushed the back of his hand against her smooth skin, his heart beating faster when she leaned into his touch instead of moving away.

He paused. Should he say the next words? He was used to saying things out loud in his family, but despite a strong icy

front, she had a fragile core. No wonder she tried to protect it so much.

“I think, in you, your mom saw the man she didn’t love but couldn’t leave. It wasn’t your fault, and I’m so sorry you had to suffer for it.” His hand dropped back onto his lap. He’d never want Kennedy to look at him and see the man she couldn’t love.

“Those words help a lot.” Her intense gaze lingered on him, infusing him with heat. “My parents fought a lot. It’s like... Mom was torturing herself and torturing Dad. I usually hid somewhere and covered my ears when they screamed at each other.”

His heart went out to her, and he drew her to him. He stroked her back, praying for her. “I so wish that didn’t happen to you.”

After a few moments, she eased out of his embrace. Her lower lip trembled, but her eyes were dry. “It’s good to talk to someone. Someone who understands.” She hesitated. “I wonder if Dad ever thought I... I wasn’t his.” The last words were a mere whisper.

Oh no. He winced. The implications of that would be enormous for her.

But before he could say anything, her eyes darkened, and she shook her head fervently. “No. I can’t even think that. I need my uncle to be, well, my uncle. He was my only family.” Then her gaze warmed. “But now I have you.”

The plane shook, and he flinched. Her world could be shaken up much more than turbulence could cause. He was grateful she’d done that DNA test and they couldn’t be brother and sister.

“You have me,” he echoed. He meant those words. “And my entire family is yours now, too.”

The dogs barked as if offended he omitted them.

Her lips curved up. “And Smiley and Caramel, as well.”

He asked the question he ached to have answered. “What do you want in life? Truly, fervently, desperately.”

“I’m no different from anyone else. Something I always wanted and never had. *To be loved*. You?”

“Same.” He was about to say there was only one person he wanted to love him.

Truly, fervently, desperately.

She straightened in her seat. “I keep talking, but... Are you hungry? I’m not going to offer caviar. I promise.”

He chuckled. “I appreciate that.” He was much hungrier for her kiss and touch than food, but her question might mean she was hungry. So he said, “Sure. Let’s have lunch if you’d like to.”

Her gaze searched his eyes. “The novelty of the private jet is wearing off, isn’t it? You’re not looking out the window or around you with the same wonder and awe as you did before.” Then she looked away. “I don’t blame you. It often happens. In life and in relationships, too.”

Something cold squeezed his rib cage. “I see it a lot with puppies and kittens. People take them in, but when it’s not as new or fun anymore, they abandon the poor pets.”

Was the novelty of this relationship wearing out for *her*? She was still a mystery to him, one he loved discovering. But he’d always been an open book, and she might be getting bored already after reading all the pages.

He was falling in love with her, probably already had. But her parents’ story was a prime example of what happened when only one person in a marriage loved the other.

What was he going to do if she’d never be able to open her heart to him?





## Chapter Fourteen



“MAY I SPEAK WITH YOU?” Kennedy’s assistant’s neatly combed head popped into her office three days later.

“Sure.” Kennedy closed spreadsheets on her laptop. “Please come on in, Mason.” She mentally prepared herself for another issue with a hotel guest and recalled her uncle’s words.

*Rule 1: The customer is always right.*

*Rule 2: If the customer is wrong, see the first rule.*

Except when it affected other customers’ safety, of course.

The rest of the lanky man followed his head into her office, then shifted from one leg to the other. He adjusted the toffee-hued tie matching his suit. His suits never had a single wrinkle on them. He represented the hotel well and usually had much more confidence than now. “I don’t know if it’s important. And I don’t know if I should drag it up again.”

“Come on. I believe we know each other better than that.” She rolled back her chair to face him more fully and gave him a reassuring smile. He could solve many issues on his own, so whatever this was, it needed her attention. She’d already promised the bright young man a scholarship if he chose to go to college. “I’m all ears.” She gestured for him to take a seat.

He did so, and his fingers tapped her polished oak desk. For a moment, he didn’t say anything, and she didn’t push him. She breathed the orchids’ faint aroma—the nearby bouquet Austin’s gift. And for the first time, she wished she hadn’t had to come back to work. Well, Austin needed to return to his clinic, anyway.

Her entire being missed him already, and she ached to return to the world where there seemed only the two of them—plus or minus a few thousand tourists. Despite her failed attempt to find Zoey, the time in Lazoria was magical, and so far, the best time of her life.

Her heart stirred. All her time with Austin, be it in Marina's restaurant, volunteering at the animal shelter, walking on the beach, or just bathing their pets was the best time of her life—every single moment. How she craved his presence now!

And now that scared her.

Even when she tried to concentrate on work, she craved the gentle touch of his fingers on her skin, the cheerful sound of his voice caressing her ear, and yes, the butterflies quivering in her stomach the moment he'd kissed her.

“Remember, we thought my girlfriend's ex might've cut the brakes on your car?” Mason visibly swallowed as his Adam's apple knot moved. “And once again, sorry for taking your car to her place. I don't know what I was thinking. I mean, she knew I couldn't afford such a car. And anyway, we were saving for the wedding. I, um, I proposed after attending yours.”

“Congratulations! Like I said, no hard feelings. And you know you're welcome to use our venue for the wedding. Let me know when your out-of-town guests plan to come, and I'll make sure they have rooms free of charge. Within reason, of course.” She'd also write a large check to pay for the wedding. She'd take care of that this afternoon.

She believed loyal employees should be rewarded. *Loyal* employees. Her heart squeezed as she thought about Emma. Marina had said Emma met with Kennedy's main competitor. Did that mean Emma was providing inside information about Kennedy's business they could leverage?

“You're too kind, but I don't know if we'll need it.” He propped wire-rimmed glasses on his long nose.

Oh no. Compassion filled Kennedy's heart, and she leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the smooth desktop more familiar to her than anything in her living room or bedroom. “What do you mean?” But she feared she knew the answer. The wedding was canceled.

A whoosh of air left his lungs. “Robin isn’t sure she wants to get married anymore. Anyway, we blamed her ex, thinking he wanted to get back at me. He didn’t have an alibi for the time.” He tapped on the desk again. “But that changed.”

Kennedy frowned, not liking where it was going. “How?”

He ducked his head, gripped the back of his neck, then huffed. “Well, Robin has this best friend who was going to be her maid of honor. Today, when they were discussing wedding plans, that friend broke down into tears. Apparently, he was with her at the time, and she begged him not to tell anyone, especially Robin.”

Huh? The math still wasn’t matching. Kennedy’s frown deepened. “But why? They were broken up by then. Why keep it a secret, especially when he was accused of something much more drastic?”

Mason rubbed his clean-shaven chin. “No official accusations were brought forward due to lack of evidence. And, um, apparently, Robin’s ex and her best friend were an item way before Robin’s breakup.”

Kennedy palmed her forehead. “So she prevented him from disclosing an alibi when he needed it but now gives him an alibi when he doesn’t?”

“I don’t understand her logic, either. But she showed my girlfriend a door camera recording. It confirms he was at her place at that time. As for why she’s only coming forward now, she says she felt too guilty, especially when she and Robin were planning the wedding.” He raked his fingers through his brown hair. “For a while, she and Robin commiserated that all men cheat. And now, Robin isn’t sure she wants to get married. Though I’d never cheat on her. I love her so much.”

Kennedy’s fingers tightened around the gold pen her uncle had gifted her when she signed her first contract. Now she could see the best friend’s logic. That woman had an agenda, and it wasn’t to get something off her chest. Kennedy suppressed the urge to squeeze her teeth. “Would it be okay with you if I talked to Robin?”

“Yes, of course.” His shoulders slumped forward. “But all this means someone else cut the brakes on your car. As I don’t know anyone else who could wish me harm, well...”

“Then we’re back to square one. Someone might’ve wished *me* harm.” Kennedy finished the thought for him as her heart went cold.

“I didn’t want to upset you but...” He held up both hands, palms forward.

“You did the right thing. Could you please get me that door camera recording?” She needed to make sure it wasn’t tampered with.

“Of course.” Then his posture changed from miserable to confident as his slumped shoulders pulled back and his chin rose. He nudged his glasses further up his nose and focused. “Now, I wanted to go over a few things on your schedule.”

The conversation was still stuck in her head when she left during her lunch break to visit Austin’s former assistant, Mrs. Dixon. Kennedy needed to tell him about this, and at the thought of seeing him this evening, a pleasant wave sluiced through her. But at the same time, imaginary alarms rang.

Could her life be still in danger? Even worse, could she bring danger to *him*?

Soon, she pulled up to the hospital and parked in a vacant spot. Mrs. Dixon had the well-earned reputation of a grouch, and Kennedy lingered in the car, not excited by the prospect of bearing the older woman’s displeasure. Fine, Kennedy had only volunteered to visit because then Austin could eat during his lunch break instead of staying with Mrs. Dixon like he had since they’d returned from Lazorla and he’d learned the lady was in the hospital.

After work, he volunteered at the animal shelter again or helped on the ranch, making up for missed time, though he’d always asked Kennedy first if she had other plans. She couldn’t blame him for working late. She’d already fallen into old habits and stayed in her office after-hours attending to things only *she* could do. Or so she told herself.

Her heart shifted. Why was she doing this to them? She wanted to be with him so badly, and yet she kept pushing him away under the pretense of too much work. Her schedule was more flexible, or rather, she'd made it that way after she'd come back from vacation. Despite her absence, all the hotels were still standing in their places, no disasters had happened, and no bad reviews had appeared on the travel sites or social media outlets.

Then Kennedy stiffened her shoulders. In a time of someone's need, she should be more compassionate. She wasn't sunshine, either, and yet not only did Austin overlook that but also he seemed to treasure her the way she was.

Had she shown him she treasured him? Some sort of invisible wall remained between them, and she'd been the one who'd constructed it.

He didn't have to visit his former assistant, and yet he did. That was the kind of person he was. Pride and affection for her husband swelled her chest. The issue was that she didn't know how to show that affection, not like he did with how he stepped in when others needed him, giving parts of himself along the way. Like how he was taking care of Mrs. Dixon's many cats now—cats who weren't allowed to visit the hospital. And since she didn't have any children and her nieces and nephews didn't hurry to show up despite being notified, no one else would be showing up for her if not for Austin.

Kennedy's stomach tightened, and she glanced around the parking lot. Had she made a mistake when she'd told Rachel she no longer needed her services? Kennedy wouldn't know how to spot a tail even if it was right in front of her eyes. Not noticing anything suspicious, she left the car.

She stepped inside the hospital, met by a cool wave of air-conditioning. Faint scents of stale coffee and antiseptics drifted to her. Her stomach tightened further, this time more painfully. The scents reminded her of the times she'd come to see her father in a coma after the accident.

He'd looked so unfamiliar, unmoving in a hospital gown, his eyes closed. She had so many things she wanted to tell

him, so many things she hoped to hear from him, but it was too late. She'd started screaming at him to wake up, and her uncle had led her away.

A lump formed in her throat, and unshed tears burned the back of her eyes. But her family had instilled in her that one couldn't show emotions, especially in public, a rule she'd broken only twice. The first time, in her father's hospital room. The second time, in Austin's arms at the castle. She blinked furiously and kept moving. One always had to keep moving to survive, another lesson she'd learned early on.

By the time she found Mrs. Dixon's room, Kennedy sensed no trace of tears in her eyes, never mind that the lump in her throat grew bigger. She knocked on the door and, once she received permission, stepped inside.

"Hello, Mrs. Dixon." She lifted the doctor-allowed crimson-red box of chocolates, aka the bribe. From Austin, she knew the woman's favorite chocolates. "I hope it's okay that I took the liberty to visit you. I'm Austin's wife, Kennedy." She said that title with more pride and satisfaction than her business title.

Mrs. Dixon rolled her eyes. "I know who you are. Everyone in Port Sunshine does. What are you doing here? Gloating over someone's misery?"

Kennedy swallowed around the lump and resisted the urge to run out of the room. Where was Austin's jovial attitude when she needed it? "No! Of course not. I just wanted to help."

"Help, my foot." Mrs. Dixon scoffed. She didn't ask Kennedy to sit.

But standing there, towering over the bed, didn't feel right. So Kennedy took a wooden chair and brought it close to the bed. "How are you feeling today?"

Mrs. Dixon's faded gray eyes narrowed, creasing more wrinkles around them. "How do you think I feel? Horrible, weak, and ready to throw up soon on that expensive suit of yours."

Kennedy winced and resisted the urge to move further away. Her fingers tightened around the seat's wooden edges so much they bit into her skin. "Anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

"A new life would be nice, but you can't give that to me, can you?"

Kennedy squirmed in her seat. She missed Austin more and more, for more reasons than one. This lady didn't seem to want to allow any joy into her life. Kennedy could relate more than she wanted. Would she have ended up like this, minus the cats, if Austin, Caramel, and Smiley hadn't appeared in her life? Was she looking at her future? "Um, how about fluffing your pillow for now?"

Mrs. Dixon grimaced. "Do you even know how to fluff a pillow?"

Kennedy lifted her chin. "Well, I *do* work in the hospitality industry."

"You just tell other people what to do."

"Not always." Kennedy held out the box like a shield. "Would you like some chocolates?"

Mrs. Dixon's lips pursed. "Just more things for me to throw up."

Interesting that the doctor hadn't mentioned that detail. Okay, maybe showing up here wasn't a good idea. This situation required the social skills, optimism, and patience Austin had and Kennedy never would.

Proving her point, he walked into the room, and Mrs. Dixon brightened as if someone turned a switch.

"I said *I'd* visit Mrs. Dixon today," Kennedy muttered despite being glad for his presence.

She was out of ways to cheer up Mrs. Dixon and would rather surrender that mission to her much more sunshiny—was that even a word?—husband. But there was more than that. She simply liked being around him. He infused the atmosphere with joy like the air freshener in her office infused it with

vanilla scent. He was walking, breathing serotonin or some unknown chemical her organism needed for pure survival, and her entire body reacted to the influx of the much-needed dose.

Austin leaned in to kiss her cheek, sending a delicious wave through her and making everything better. “And I appreciate it very much and admire you for that, darling.”

Then he marched to the window and opened the blinds. “What a beautiful day!”

“What’s beautiful about it?” Mrs. Dixon grumbled.

Austin’s smile didn’t fade as he turned around. The sunlight highlighted the cherry hues in his hair, and all Kennedy wanted at that moment was to run her fingers through that hair, then place her palm on his nape, and bring him closer so she could kiss him. She’d fantasized about the kiss before it happened at the castle, but now she longed for it even more because she knew how incredible it could be. Her pulse spiked, and her breathing shallowed. She was melting like the ice cubes in the water glass on the table. No, much faster.

“I can come up with a long list of the things that make this day beautiful. I’ll start with the fact that you and my wonderful wife are in it.” He fluffed the pillow, then poured fresh water, and brought the glass to the woman’s lips. “Thirsty?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Dixon took a few careful sips.

Kennedy nearly slapped her forehead. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

Leaning against the pillows again, Mrs. Dixon looked at Austin, then at Kennedy. Then her face took on an upset expression as if she were about to spew something she didn’t want to. “Well, whether I want it or not, it’s about to happen.”

Uh-oh. Kennedy leaned to snatch the pan.

Mrs. Dixon waved it away. “Oh please. I’m not going to throw up, though *you* might by the time I’m done.”



Kennedy did start feeling sort of nauseous. Stepping behind her, Austin braced his hands on her shoulders, and somehow that made nausea step away. She reached up and gripped his fingers, her heart softening. She wasn't going to stay late at work today. What would he say if she suggested making dinner together? Her lips curved up.

"My prognosis isn't good," Mrs. Dixon stared at the wall.

Kennedy's heart dropped.

"We'll pray for you. I have been praying already. Things can change," Austin said.

Compassion squeezed Kennedy's heart as it thudded back into its rightful place. "Maybe there's some experimental treatment. We can fly in specialists if needed."

"That's not going to help. I need to talk to you." Mrs. Dixon pinned Kennedy with a stare. "Your husband can stay. You'll need his support."

Kennedy's eyes widened while Austin's fingers squeezed her shoulders. "You need to talk to *me*? What about?"

"Do you remember the day the nanny took you and Zoey to the beach? When she disappeared?"

Pain sliced through Kennedy's heart. "It'll be forever etched in my memory."

Mrs. Dixon's expression was grim. "In mine, too."

Kennedy leaned forward, not liking where it was all going. "What... what do you mean?"

Tears filled Mrs. Dixon's eyes. "I carried this secret for so long. Due to the early hour, the beach was deserted that day, like we hoped it would be. I was stupid and in love with a guy who was up to no good. But I didn't want to realize it. You see, he had a gambling problem and had racked up lots of debts he couldn't pay." She gestured for water.

Hand shaking slightly, everything inside her tense, Kennedy brought the glass to the woman's lips. Would she finally know what had happened to Zoey? Was it possible?

Mrs. Dixon snatched the straw, sucked up a few sips, then waved it away. “Being an office assistant, I couldn’t help him much, though I was eager to. Then he said he came up with a brilliant plan to solve all our problems.” She chuckled out a bitter sound. “Yep, he said *our* problems. We could move away and get married. All I needed to do was snatch a little girl while he distracted her nanny. You see, he was very handsome in those days and thought he could charm her easily. It was risky because the nanny would give his description. But he said he’d wear a disguise and we’d leave soon, anyway.”

“But the nanny didn’t mention a man talking to her,” Kennedy whispered. Then it dawned on her. “Because no distraction was needed. She was busy helping me when the jellyfish stung me.” Guilt slammed her again. “But why was there no ransom demand? What happened to Zoey?”

“My boyfriend had all the details. I’m so sorry. It was all a mistake. It was a horrible mistake I made, and I’ll regret it for as long as I breathe.” Mrs. Dixon stared into space and paused. “He took Zoey somewhere and came back alone. He said the girl was going to be fine, but we had to flee. He got what he needed without the risk of demanding ransom. I guess I was too relieved to ask questions. So we did flee, far away.”

“Why didn’t you tell this to the police? Zoey could’ve been found! She could’ve been saved!” Kennedy jumped to her feet, rage surging through her like hot lava. “We need to speak to him!”

“I was afraid. I was so afraid. And... we can’t talk to him. After gambling away everything again, he died in a bar fight.”

Kennedy paced the room like a caged animal. Her mind registered the words, but her aching heart prevented her from processing them.

“I’m so very sorry,” Mrs. Dixon whimpered.

She’d been right before. Kennedy felt nauseous. But utterly gutted, she also felt too empty even to throw up. After briefly giving her hope of finding Zoey, Mrs. Dixon had ripped it out of her again. They had to report all this, even if Kennedy hated to make a sick woman suffer more.

“This needs to be reported to the police.” Austin voiced her thoughts.

Kennedy froze, then resumed pacing. The trace was long cold, and the person who held the keys to unlock the secrets was gone. If only Kennedy hadn’t begged to go to the beach that day. If only she hadn’t run into the water, gotten stung, and provided the necessary distraction to snatch Zoey.

Something edged at the corners of her mind, but she couldn’t catch it. The aquamarine-blue dress Zoey was wearing to match the ribbons. It was important. Why was it important? Then a guess she didn’t want to admit sliced through her, but she couldn’t let it in.

“I understand.” Mrs. Dixon sounded dejected.

“Thank you for telling us now.” Reaching the wall, Kennedy whirled around, furious she didn’t have the answers, didn’t know what happened to Zoey, didn’t even know whether she was still alive.

“There hasn’t been a day I didn’t regret what I did. A moment when I didn’t hate myself for my choice. I didn’t want to leave this world without telling you. And you appearing here today looked like a sign from God. Like God put you in my path,” Mrs. Dixon said quietly.

Trapped in her despair, Kennedy bumped into another wall. She looked up. No, not the wall.

Austin.

His hands steadied her, and for a long moment, she looked into his blue eyes. So much compassion and understanding peered back at her that she nearly came undone. Her knees buckled. He held her up, then drew her close.

“We’ll find her. You’ll see.” He stroked her shaking shoulders.

She tucked her face against his tortilla-hued polo shirt, breathing in the fresh scent of his aftershave she’d come to associate with joy and hope and happiness. All the things he represented to her. All the things she searched for all her life and couldn’t find.

Was that enough? Was all his sunshine enough to melt the iceberg her heart had become after losing so many important people in her life? And didn't he deserve better than spending his precious life melting that iceberg?

Soon, his shirt wasn't dry any longer but soaked with her tears. When did she begin crying?

People like her didn't cry. Yes, she'd bawled her eyes out when Zoey had disappeared. But she'd learned fast that tears didn't solve anything.

*Never let people see you cry.*

Her mother didn't like to see Kennedy cry. It had given her mom headaches. If Kennedy hoped to see at least crumbs of her mother's affection, she had to be like a pretty doll with an eternal painted-on smile who never, ever cried.

Now she didn't just cry for her cousin who was like a sister to her and who might've paid the ultimate price for someone else's fatal weakness. Kennedy cried for her parents, whose love she'd never know, who had so much and yet probably wanted something—the love of someone—they could never have. She cried for Mrs. Dixon, who'd spent her life shackled with regrets and was sick now. Kennedy cried for her uncle and auntie, who'd lost their only child. She cried for Austin, who'd married a woman too broken to give him the warmth and affection he deserved.

But most of all, selfishly, she cried for herself, for the person she'd become and didn't even notice. And even more, she was crying for the decision forming in her mind.

All her life, she'd tried to be someone she wasn't. First, that smiling pretty doll her mother could play with and then place on a shelf—or rather, return to the nanny. Then the dutiful, hardworking, and intelligent mentee to her uncle, the substitute daughter who made sure to create as few issues as possible. After all, she was just a stand-in for the real daughter he'd lost because of Kennedy.

Now she was just a substitute for an affectionate, cheerful, warm wife for the most affectionate, cheerful, warm man in

the world. *She* needed this marriage—*he* didn't. She'd been unfair to him in how she'd sort of trapped him in it.

She clung to him as if he were an oxygen tube, as if she needed him desperately simply to breathe. This was unlike her. She kept her distance from people.

But as she gathered the fabric of his shirt in her little fists, she couldn't let him go. It would crush her. She *loved* him too much. It wasn't the best moment to realize it, and she struggled against it because she'd lost nearly everyone she'd loved. But because her emotions were so heightened at this moment, she knew the simple truth. She loved Austin.

Yet precisely because he mattered to her so much, she needed to give him the option to have a better life.

His arms tightened around her. "It's going to be all right."

But she didn't believe those words. And maybe he didn't either.



Austin noticed a change in Kennedy, but it was understandable. She was grieving her cousin all over again, and they weren't closer to finding Zoey.

Kennedy's wound was poked into again and again. No wonder her gray eyes were so sad. An absent smile touched her lips as she petted Caramel at home, but her eyes looked past him as if her mind was many miles away.

Helplessness in making it better for her hollowed him out, draining his energy and natural hope. But he couldn't bring Zoey back. He couldn't even bring back the Kennedy he'd gotten to know. After that fated conversation with Mrs. Dixon, something had shut down inside his wife.

"We need to talk." Her statement made his heart sink to that cold milky marble floor. Nothing good ever resulted from those words.

He picked up both dogs from the floor for emotional support because he had a strong feeling he was going to need

it. Then he sank onto the nearest chair, which happened to be near the dining table. “O—okay.”

The beagle coiled in on Austin’s lap peacefully. But the puppy squealed in protest at the tight space, so he placed her back on the floor. Caramel wobbled away, then seeming to change her mind, stretched out under the table.

Kennedy sat in the chair nearest his and chewed on her lower lip. “I... I don’t know how to say this. I believe we need some time apart. This isn’t fair to you. You deserve better”—she waved her hand in the air—“than this.”

What? His jaw dropped, and he stopped stroking Smiley’s smooth fur. “I don’t understand. My life is the happiest ever. Why is it unfair to me?”

“This marriage—I sort of pushed you into it. *I* needed it—you didn’t.” She looked him in the eye, her gray eyes bottomless and enormously sad.

This couldn’t be happening.

“Maybe not when you proposed. But that changed,” he finally managed to say. “I need you. More than you can imagine. Is this because I don’t like your house? I can get used to it. Honest. I can love it.” Because she was in it.

Her eyes widened. “You don’t like my house?”

Uh-oh. He nearly slapped himself on the forehead. She didn’t notice his dislike. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Yes, you should have. I want you to be where you’re happy and comfortable.” Shaking her head, she looked away, and her voice dipped so low he had to lean in to hear her. “But that just confirms my decision. We should take some time out to think.”

“No!” He made a sweeping gesture and somehow sent the crystal vase holding the orchids he’d bought for her flying from the table to the unforgiving floor.

The vase shattered into many particles. His heart crushed in the same way. He nearly jumped but then remembered the beagle on his lap.

“I’ll hold him. Caramel, too.” She scooped up the wriggling puppy from under the table before the little one could step on the shards and cut her paws. Then she took over the beagle from Austin for the same reason. She was barefoot and thankfully stood in place.

He’d never want her to get hurt. He’d never want to see her cry, but her eyes were filling with tears now. Confusion, guilt, and yearning for her mixed inside his stomach, sharp and painful like a porridge from these crystal shards.

“Please don’t move.” He hurried to bring the sweeper and swept up the shards. Then he went over the entire floor in the room with a wet paper towel to pick up any minuscule particles, including ones that could have flown far away. Hopefully, not into anyone’s eyes because his were burning, But that was tears wanting to slip out. All the while, her words were beating in his temples like tiny hammers.

Was he losing her? He couldn’t! He just couldn’t.

Okay, okay. He pulled much-needed air into his starved lungs, tasting the faint scent of her favorite orchids. She didn’t break up with him. Didn’t say the marriage was over. She’d asked for time off.

There was hope. She had that hyperresponsibility trait, and though he couldn’t always figure out what she was thinking—fine, *most* of the time he couldn’t—he had to find out where all this was coming from. Because he didn’t want time away from her. Ever.

He already couldn’t imagine his life without her. “How... how much time do you need? On my part, five minutes maximum.”

Her lips curled up a little, but the smile didn’t reach her tormented eyes. “How about you take the dogs for a walk on the beach for an hour? And then we’ll decide.”

*Lord, please!*

He wasn’t even sure what he prayed for, except to stay together with Kennedy. He put the dogs on their leashes. For once, they kept quiet as if as confused as he was. Soon, he

closed the front door, hoping with everything in him that the next time he stepped out of this place wouldn't be with a broken marriage and a broken heart.





# Chapter Fifteen



ASKING AUSTIN FOR TIME off was such a bad idea. What was she thinking?

Kennedy missed him so much already that it hurt to breathe. And she missed Caramel and Smiley. The large house sounded deafening quiet without their barking and playful shuffling. She never knew how sharp and painful silence could be. And this was only from him leaving for a few minutes or so. She couldn't imagine her life without him. She just couldn't.

Tears choking her, she leaped to her feet to run after him, then dropped onto her chair, then rose to her feet again. She hugged her light sweater tighter across her chest, the air-conditioning too high—or was that chill coming from inside her? She'd never needed a sweater in her house.

Her phone rang, and she snatched it, hoping it was Austin. But Rachel's name appeared on the screen. Kennedy grimaced as she answered the call. "Hello, Rachel."

"I have a feeling you wanted someone else to call you. I can sense disappointment from miles away." By now, Rachel was more a friend than an employee and therefore on closer terms. "But I do have some news."

Kennedy perked up. "About Zoey?"

"First, about Emma. Her ties to your competitor were confirmed. I have proof of their meetings. And in conversations with him, she provided sensitive information about your hotels. I have a transcript of one such conversation."

Kennedy swallowed hard. Her uncle had warned her that not all employees would be loyal, and yet the betrayal hit her with almost as much force as someone had once struck Emma.

Unless that story was untrue. “Don’t tell me you planted a bug?”

“What? I’d never. I just happen to have good hearing.”

“Yeah, it would have to be as good as Smiley’s sense of smell. Especially when he smells biscuits.” Kennedy nearly sniffled. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll handle the rest.”

“That’s not all my news. Remember, the hotel curator and several business owners in Lazoria promised to show Zoey’s portrait around, post it on social media, and ask their friends and relatives who attended the festival this year?”

“Yes.” Kennedy tensed and sat up straighter.

“They did. I viewed thousands of photos and videos. I found one photo with a woman who looked sort of like Zoey, though it’s blurry. I made some inquiries. Well, lots of inquiries. She lives on the other side of Lazoria and, believe it or not, isn’t active on social media. Marina and I did some digging. She’s single, no children, one dog, keeps to herself. Works from home as a graphic designer. I found a rare photo of her. I’ll send it to you via text and let you decide whether it’s worth pursuing.”

For a moment, Kennedy couldn’t speak. Somehow, she managed to move her tongue. “Thank you.”

“Do I see a trip to Lazoria again in your near future?”

“Yes.” But Kennedy didn’t want to go there without Austin. Her heart shifted. She didn’t want to take *any* life journeys without him. “Please keep researching. I want any information you can find on that woman.”

“I will. If you need me to go with you, please let me know. I’ll let you go now because I imagine you want to look at that photo.”

Kennedy’s heartbeat increased. “I do. And... once again, thank you.” She disconnected, and sure enough, soon an incoming photo pinged her phone. She opened it and blinked. This was a photo of Caramel and Smiley staring into the camera, their pink tongues lolling.

Oh. She didn't look at the sender first. Austin sent it, and his accompanying text made her heart palpitate.

*I know you wanted space, but Caramel, Smiley, and okay, me are missing you a lot. A lot!*

She didn't want space! She didn't want any space without him and the pets in it. But before she had a chance to reply, the next text arrived, also with a photo. This one was from Rachel.

Kennedy stared at the photo. After so many decades had passed, could this be Zoey? Could Kennedy allow herself to hope again? Her hands trembled a little.

The woman in the photo would be around Zoey's age. Her hair was darker than Zoey's had been, a lustrous chestnut brown, and fell on her face, but familiar features stamped that face. And through the curtain of hair, was that the birthmark on the left cheek Kennedy remembered so well? And another one above the woman's eyebrow? This couldn't be a coincidence, right?

The doorbell chime made her heart jump. Austin was back! He didn't listen to her.

*Oh, thank you so much for not listening to me!*

But as she rushed to the door, it registered. Austin wouldn't ring the doorbell. He had a key to the house... and a key to her heart.

Disappointment slammed into her. She hesitated. She should've looked at the doorbell camera first. But she was near the door, anyway. And it could be Marina or Skylar.

She glanced in the peephole, and her jaw slackened. The woman looked like a stranger, and yet something vaguely familiar in her posture triggered Kennedy's memory. Was she imagining things?

The doorbell rang again. "I'm not a door-to-door saleswoman." The voice!

Even after so many years, Kennedy remembered that voice. She flung the door open. "I haven't seen you in decades." She gestured for the guest to come in.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have disappeared like that. But you know why I did.” Zoey’s mother, Mrs. Crawford—if she still went by that name—stepped inside.

“I do. You look so different.” Kennedy did her best to reconcile this woman in a T-shirt, jeans, and sunglasses with Uncle’s glamorous ex-wife.

“Time is a good doctor but a lousy beautician.”

Kennedy lifted her hands. “No judgment. Great to see you. Does my uncle know you’re back?”

“I’m not back. Just visiting.” Which didn’t answer Kennedy’s question. “I brought you cupcakes. Chocolate and caramel. Your favorite.” Auntie shifted the large paper box in her hands.

Kennedy called the woman Auntie in her mind as she didn’t know her new name yet or whether there was a new name, and her heart warmed that the woman remembered Kennedy’s favorite treat after all these years. “That was very kind of you. Would you like some coffee or tea?”

“Coffee would be awesome.” Mrs. Crawford smiled sheepishly. “I wouldn’t mind one of these cupcakes, too. I’ve been salivating all the way from the store to you. And if you could tell me how you like them, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure.” Still a bit in shock, Kennedy led her guest to the kitchen. Then she placed a little container into the coffee maker and turned it on. Austin had called it “a fancy coffee machine,” but Kennedy was so used to it that she’d never thought of her things as fancy. Now she better realized her privilege and how blessed she was.

Her kitchen looked empty without him, though. They’d started cooking together, him teaching her, and she’d loved it. Her whole house was empty without him and their pets. She exhaled, but the void inside didn’t diminish. Her heart was empty without them, too.

Waiting for the coffee, she turned away from the milky-white marble counter and studied her unexpected guest. If she walked by Auntie on the street, Kennedy wouldn’t have

recognized her. Not only because so much time had passed since they'd seen each other or because Kennedy had been a little girl at the time.

Like Kennedy's mother, Auntie was fashionable and wouldn't leave the house without elaborate makeup, diamond earrings, or a designer dress. Her spectacular cherry-red hair was always long and well-tended by a skillful and pricey hairdresser.

The woman in front of Kennedy now wore cropped gray hair that barely covered ears void of any earrings. Her simple outfit was faded and well worn, and her sneakers were scuffed. She was clearly struggling, and Kennedy chastised herself for not trying to find and help her. Her uncle could've made a better effort, as well. Kennedy's rib cage tightened.

But when her guest took off her sunglasses, Kennedy recognized the eyes. Those eyes of a rare green color, while slightly faded, were still the same.

"I'm glad you came back. I mean, that you're here." Kennedy poured coffee into porcelain cups with golden trim. "Two French vanilla creamers, right?"

"No, I drink coffee black now. Thank you." Auntie accepted the delicate cup. Was it because she preferred the taste, or were things so bad she had to adjust to coffee without creamer?

Guilt stinging her, Kennedy brought her cup to the table, then sat. Normally, she'd add creamer, but this time, she didn't from solidarity. "Listen, if you need help, I'd be more than happy to—"

Auntie raised her chin—and her cup. "No. That's not why I'm here. I was in the area, and I really, really wanted to see you. I've missed you."

Heart in her throat, Kennedy jumped to her feet, then hugged her former auntie. "I've missed you, too. Very much so. You were like a mom to me."

The woman returned the hug, then let Kennedy go. Tears shimmered in those emerald eyes. "I'm so sorry."

“It’s not your fault. I can only imagine how heartbreaking it was for you.” Kennedy returned to her seat and reached for Auntie’s hand. “We’ll always miss Zoey. We’ll always love her.” She nearly said Zoey might be alive and well in a faraway country, but no. Not fair to instill hope only to have it crushed later. She’d get Auntie’s contact information and let her know once Kennedy verified the information about Zoey.

Now tears flowed from the woman’s eyes, and guilt stabbed Kennedy. She shouldn’t have said anything about Zoey, shouldn’t have salted a wound that had never healed.

An incoming text beeped Kennedy’s phone, then another one. She glanced at it furtively. It would be rude to answer it, especially in an emotional moment like this. Yet she couldn’t resist. Her hand reached for the phone on its own. “Sorry. I think it’s from my husband.”

She opened the text, and the first was from Austin indeed, making her heart turn over in her chest. He’d sent a photo of the sand where the words *MISS YOU* were written with a stick. Next to it, Smiley was sitting as if he wrote it.

She sent back the answer. *Miss you, too. Come home in half an hour.*

Sensing Auntie wanted to be alone with her, she should have asked him to stay away longer. But the desire to see Austin was too much.

Then the other text attracted her attention. Rachel had sent a bunch of photos. The text said, “The townspeople came through and emailed photos they or their visitors or relatives took at the festival. I believe the third photo is going to be of special interest.”

Kennedy looked up at her guest who was patiently sipping her coffee, muttered a sorry, and scrolled down further. For a moment, staring at the photo, she froze. Only long training from her uncle in hiding her emotions let her restrain her reaction.

She needed to say the most important thing to Austin before anything else happened.

*I love you.*

She sent the text before she could change her mind, sent Rachel a quick reply, then pressed the button she needed and tucked her phone into her sweater pocket. “I’m sorry about that. You have my entire attention now. I set my phone so we won’t be interrupted again.”

“You didn’t touch the cupcakes.” Auntie’s voice held reproach as she placed a cupcake on Kennedy’s plate. “This one has your name on it. I bought them especially for you. Please, eat.”

“Well, you probably remember I never could pass up chocolate.” Kennedy pulled the plate onto her lap, and slowly broke off pieces of cupcake coated with thick frosting before raising them to her lips. “If it’s okay to ask, where do you live now?”

“Far away from here.” Auntie looked away. “It was too painful to stay.”

“I understand. Wherever you are, are you happy?”

“I’m trying to be.” A shadow passed over her guest’s face. “A mother’s love can be overwhelming, and it’s difficult to let go. I did what I had to do by leaving.”

Kennedy’s mother’s love wasn’t overwhelming. But even bad mothers could love their daughters in their way. “Did you get married again?” Was the question too intrusive?

“I saw someone for a while, but it didn’t work out.” Auntie drained the rest of her cup.

“Let me refill your coffee.” Kennedy got up, then flopped down again onto the chair. “Whoa. I’m dizzy for some reason.”

“Maybe you should lie down. I’ll go now, let you rest.”

“Don’t go.” Kennedy brought a hand to her forehead, but it dropped onto her lap. “Please. I feel so strange. My limbs are weak. I can barely move them.”

Rather than showing concern, her guest’s green eyes gleamed as she stood. “Strange, indeed. Well, it was good to



catch up.”

“Wait! I don’t want to be alone here. Everything’s going foggy.” Kennedy forced words from her suddenly dry mouth.

“You’ll be fine.” Auntie rinsed the cups and plate, then picked up the cupcake box.

“Did you drug me? But why?” Kennedy struggled to keep her gaze focused on the woman she used to love so much. She’d been betrayed before, but this one hurt the most.

The woman shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m told it’s a fast-acting poison, and quite painless. You won’t be able to call anyone, and in a minute or two, you won’t be able to talk. But I’d better stay, to make sure you don’t. You came too close to me and my daughter. I couldn’t allow things to come to light.” She picked up a napkin and wiped the table.

“Why take your own daughter and let everyone believe she was kidnapped?” Kennedy slurred out the words.

She needed Austin. She needed him badly, and not just to lean on. Just because the marriages around her had fallen apart didn’t mean hers had to. Just because people had betrayed her didn’t mean he’d betray her. She wasn’t like her mother who couldn’t love her husband. And she definitely, absolutely wasn’t like the woman in front of her, someone she used to trust so much. She would be true to her husband and love him with her whole heart while that heart was beating.

Be it minutes or decades.

The woman in front of her might be false. And some of Kennedy’s memories of her childhood might be false.

But Austin was true. Their love was true. Their marriage was true. Had she understood that too late? Tears escaped her eyes as she slid from the chair onto the cold marble floor.

“Auntie” leaned against the door frame. “You asked why. Isn’t that obvious? Because my ex-husband would never let Zoey go, especially to a faraway country. He loved her too much. And I wasn’t about to share, either. I, well, I met a charming man on our family vacation in France. I fell in love. He turned out quite resourceful and had access to fake

documents. He came up with a plan and said he could get Zoey out in disguise and with a fake ID. I just had to keep her drugged till we were safely out of the country.”

“No.” It was all Kennedy was able to say. She tasted her salty tears. She wanted to scream, to demand to know how Zoey’s mother could do such a thing. But even if she was able to do it, it was no use. The woman had no remorse.

“Yes. If I demanded a divorce, I’d lose everything. I signed a prenup. I could try to challenge it in court. But if things dragged on and your uncle suspected I saw another man, I’d pay a high price. I couldn’t wait. I didn’t plan to do it, but then something happened that made it possible. It all worked out perfectly. Because your uncle felt so guilty for not letting me go with you girls to the beach that day, he gave me everything I asked for and didn’t enforce the prenup. ” Her olive-hued eyes narrowed.

Kennedy tried to talk, but only some weird sounds came out. Finally, she managed, “Zoey?”

“Zoey doesn’t know any of this, and she never will. She has a different name now and a different story.” The woman scoffed. “She thinks her dad was abusing me, then abandoned her, and didn’t want to see her.”

Kennedy crawled half an inch toward her former auntie.

The woman laughed. “You’d be surprised how a loving, hurt mother can rewrite her child’s memories. My daughter thinks you were a bad friend who didn’t care for her at all.”

Meanwhile, Kennedy had cared so much.

Kennedy’s “auntie” glanced at the antique grandfather clock Kennedy’s father had ordered from Germany, one of the few things she’d brought from her childhood home that her “auntie” had visited so often. “Well, I’ve waited long enough. I can’t risk someone showing up here. Oh, and if you hope the door camera recording helps the authorities find me, stop hoping. I’m wearing a disguise. You don’t think I walk around with this hairdo or would have a nose this shape, do you? Bye,

forever now.” She slipped on her sunglasses and opened the door.



# Chapter Sixteen



*TEN MINUTES EARLIER...*

Being away from Kennedy was the most difficult thing Austin had to do so far. His entire being ached to run to her from the beach, and he had to squeeze his teeth not to. Caramel and Smiley seemed to feel the same way because they were tugging on their leashes, especially the beagle. His paws made small grooves in the sand from his effort. Had they been two Newfoundlands, Austin would've been dragged to her house. Frankly, he'd prefer that.

"I know. I know. I can't wait to see her, too."

The dogs barked, clearly not satisfied with those words.

He hung onto the leashes, then scooped up Caramel, and unhooked her leash. She licked his face, while Smiley looked at Austin with reproach.

"Sorry, buddy. You're not a puppy any longer."

His heart stirring, Austin stared at the ocean, its surface seafoam pale and gentle like Kennedy's veil during their wedding, the sky gray like her eyes. He looked into the sky and saw the contours of her lovely face there in the clouds.

He urged the time to go faster. She'd set the time frame, but every minute felt like an eternity.

But she'd told him she missed him. That she loved him. She wanted him back.

She loved him! He could hardly believe it. It was the miracle he'd prayed for so many times. The most precious gift he could ever ask for. His dream came true, and euphoria expanded his every cell.

*Thank You, Lord.*

Hope filled his lungs just as the breeze sprayed salty water onto his white polo shirt. Kennedy's words made him want to

sing, scream, and dance at the same time.

And he loved her. Oh how much he loved her. “This much. Like the ocean,” he told Caramel and Smiley because he couldn’t tell Kennedy yet.

Well, he could text her, but it wouldn’t be the same.

*Lord, please guide me. Please help me do it the right way.*

In his heart, he’d known he loved Kennedy for some time, but he’d been afraid to admit it. He glanced at his watch. Only three minutes to go. Phew. He could start walking toward the house, though he’d rather fly there on seagull wings.

Seagulls cried out as if not pleased with that kind of thinking. Or maybe it was a signal for him to go home.

He was going to propose to her. It didn’t matter that they were married already—okay, that mattered a lot—but he was going to do things right. He’d ask her uncle for her hand in marriage, then propose to her with their families and friends present. And pets.

“I should go buy orchids, right? An engagement ring?” he asked the dogs, but they didn’t seem to have an opinion.

Then premonition pressed on Austin’s chest, and he had a weird push in the back as if he had to keep moving. Frankly, he wanted to keep moving toward the house on the beach. He couldn’t wait to see her, to tell her how much he loved her, to hold her in his arms, and to look into her gorgeous eyes. He didn’t understand why she’d asked him to wait before coming home, but thrilled she loved him, he hadn’t questioned it.

After all, she might be preparing a surprise for him, and he didn’t want to ruin it.

A shrill siren split the air, and he winced. The ambulance raced past him.

Why was an ambulance in this area? His every cell went on high alert, and his heart dropped into the sand. He dashed toward the house. Smiley’s leash wasn’t strained any longer as the stout dog ran beside him.

*Lord, please help Kennedy be okay. Please!*

The police car was already near the house, and a knife turned in Austin's heart. He tried to call Kennedy, but she didn't answer. He sent a text, but she didn't reply. If only he'd stayed home... A shiver went through him despite the warm weather. Smiley jerked forward, and Austin held onto his leash, just as something was breaking inside him.

A young officer in a uniform—probably a recent hire because Austin didn't recognize him—had already pulled the yellow tape around the house and now gestured for the small crowd to stay outside it. His face seemingly made of stone didn't give anything away despite the many questions thrown at him.

Austin pivoted toward the officer. "Please let me go inside. I live there."

"Sorry. It's a crime scene now." The guy's expression didn't change.

Everything in Austin shattered. "But my wife is there!"

Caramel and Smiley were barking themselves into oblivion now, and the puppy was trying to wriggle out of his hands. Austin held onto her tightly, realizing he hadn't held onto the most precious treasure of his life.

Compassion flashed in the cop's eyes, but he shook his head. "No. Please step back."

"Austin!" Marina's voice made him turn around.

He rushed to her as if she were a life-preserving buoy. "Do you know what happened to Kennedy? She... she was inside the house." He tripped over the leash and would have fallen, but Kai steadied him. "Thanks, bro."

"We just got here ourselves." Marina had the eyes of a sick dog. "I heard that someone tried to poison her. Praying she's all right."

"Who? Why?" It took all his willpower not to sink onto the sand. He was supposed to protect her. And he failed.

*Lord, please, please save her. Please!*

Kai visibly swallowed. "We don't know."

What was Austin thinking? His mind whirled, desperate for answers. He should've gone to the ambulance and asked the paramedics if they came here for Kennedy and, if so, how she was. But the moment he'd walked toward the ambulance, it took off.

No! No! No... He couldn't lose her. He just couldn't.

*Lord, how can this be? We were supposed to spend a lifetime together.*

If something happened to her, he'd have a lifetime of heartache ahead.

Kai patted him on the shoulder. "We'll know everything soon."

Just a moment's distraction, and his hold on the puppy weakened. Caramel wriggled out of his hands and jumped onto the ground, then darted between feet in flip-flops, shoes, and boots.

"Caramel, no!" Austin shouted, but the puppy had already disappeared into the crowd. He threw the beagle's leash to Kai. "Let me through! Please let me through!" Austin would torpedo into people if needed.

But people already parted, and then...

He stared, afraid to believe his eyes. "Kennedy!"

The puppy leaped into her arms, tail wagging like a propeller, barking a happy greeting.

Overjoyed, Austin swept up both his wife and puppy. "You're okay. You're alive. You're fine. You're alive. You're okay." He probably repeated it a hundred times, but he didn't care. He craved the reassurance. He needed to have her in his arms to believe it. Needed to know she wouldn't disappear like moonlight in the morning.

He kissed her cheek, her skin smooth under his lips, then kissed her again and again. And again.

Kennedy laughed as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Then she leaned to him and whispered into his ear, her breath ticklish. "I'm fine. Totally and absolutely."



Well, he was tickled that she was alive and well. Then she added, her breath warm on his skin. “Though it wasn’t easy to persuade the paramedics of that. And then I had to give my statement to the police.”

Something registered through his mental fog, and he remembered Marina’s words. “Why did you need to persuade the paramedics you’re okay? Or give the police a statement? And why is the house a crime scene?”

“It’s a long story.” She gestured for him to put her down, and so he did. “Let’s take a walk on the beach.” Away from curious ears. She didn’t say that, but she didn’t need to.

Smiley barked, and Kai stepped forward. “We’ll take care of Smiley. And of any issues that arise.”

The beagle growled, showing his disagreement, then placed his paws on Kennedy’s long legs, and she petted him. “It’s okay. Thank you, but I’ll take him with us.” She looked up at Austin. “He’s part of our little family.”

*Our family.*

His chest swelled, and he sent up a prayer of thanks as he took the beagle’s leash from Kai while Kennedy hugged the puppy. Austin and Kennedy didn’t divide the pets as yours and mine.

Several people asked her questions, and he shielded her.

Then Kai stepped forward and so did Marina, a strict expression on her face. “Please give Austin and Kennedy some grace. We’ll know everything soon enough.” Her voice didn’t leave room for discussion.

Out of earshot on the beach, he wrapped his arm around Kennedy, needing her close to him. “I’m sorry I wasn’t with you when everything happened. I was supposed to be your hero.”

Her lovely lips curved up. “Don’t you know it? You’re already my hero. You always have been. And don’t apologize. You left the house because you respected my wishes. I have larger boundaries than most, and our relationship would never work if you crossed them.”

His arm dropped.

“No, please keep hugging me. I realized you’re in my circle of love now.” She chuckled as she looked at him, but it might be because Caramel licked her face again. “I don’t want the distance between us to be longer than my fingernail.” She lifted one hand. “And I wear my fingernails very short.”

He laughed and drew her close as they walked in the sand, happy she was back in his life. Happy she was close. Just... happy.

Then her expression grew sober. “Uncle’s ex-wife—Zoey’s mother—tried to poison me with a chocolate cupcake.” She grimaced. “He’ll be devastated by this.”

Austin stopped in his tracks, and the beagle bumped into him and squealed in protest. “Wait a moment. The woman you always looked up to? Tried to poison you?”

Kennedy’s shoulders slumped forward. “Yes.”

He tried to wrap his mind around this, but it kept unwrapping. “Why would she do that? Unless... Oh, it couldn’t be because...”

Kennedy nodded. “Yes. She orchestrated her own daughter’s kidnapping.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I probably wouldn’t believe it, either, if I didn’t live through it.” As the puppy started wiggling in her arms again, Kennedy placed the little one on the sand. “Can I trust you to stay here?”

“We’ll keep an eye on her. And maybe Smiley will, too.” Austin let the beagle off his leash, and Smiley kept the puppy away from the ocean like a protective older brother.

“Good boy.” Austin petted the beagle while the puppy sneezed from the ocean spray that doused her.

Then Kennedy kicked off the white shoes matching her sleeveless dress. “The water looks warm enough. I feel like I need to wash off some of the dirt I’ve experienced in the last hour.” She walked into the water.

Watching the dogs from the corner of his eye, Austin rolled up his jeans, took off his sneakers, and followed her, the water cool against his soles. Then she told him the rest of the story as they strolled in the shallows hand in hand while the waves rolled in and the pets romped nearby.

“So you didn’t eat the cupcake?” Leave it to him to ask the obvious. But he still needed the reassurance she didn’t even inhale the scent of poison.

“Thankfully, no. Right before my aunt pressed me to eat the cake she brought me, Rachel sent me more photos of the festival crowd in Lazoria. In one of them, I saw a woman who I’m sure is my cousin, with exactly the right birthmarks. But beside her, another, somewhat older woman in sunglasses caught my attention. Even after all the plastic surgeries she’s had, I recognized her based on her birthmarks, too. She should’ve covered those with makeup, but thankfully for me, she didn’t think of that.”

Kennedy shivered and stooped. Water lapped her hem as she buried her hands under it as if she needed to wash away any residue. “She seemed so anxious for me to eat the cupcake, so I pretended to break off and eat pieces but instead tucked them in my sleeves. As a child, I often had to eat things I didn’t like without complaining. I learned how to hide them, instead, and dispose of them later. The police took my sweater as evidence.” She lifted her face to the sun, then washed her hands, and splashed salty water onto her arms. Some droplets landed on her dress, but she didn’t seem to notice. “I had to think fast. Even if my suspicions she kidnapped her daughter were right, I had zero proof. And she could easily disappear half the world away. So I pretended to be sick, as if I’d been affected by poison. Then she admitted it.”

Everything in him went cold, even if he knew the outcome. “But what if she didn’t believe you? What if she *shot* you?”

The beagle barked again, keeping the puppy away from the ocean. Austin mentally promised him a treat when they returned home.

Home... Such a beautiful word.

“I grew up with people who constantly pretended things. Like that we were a happy family at social gatherings while miserable alone with each other. I learned to pretend, as well. I got so good at it that sometimes I couldn’t figure out the real me.” She sighed. “But at least in this case, those skills became useful.”

“Promise me you’ll never do anything like that again.” He squeezed her fingers. “Please.”

“I promise. But my bluff paid off. Once she knew I had my phone on and Rachel heard her admit to poisoning me and kidnapping Zoey, she confessed when the police arrived.” Kennedy scooped up water and again let it slip through her fingers.

“You were brilliant, as always. Scared me to death but... still brilliant. But if she was hiding for so long, why did she appear with her daughter in public?”

Kennedy glanced at their pets, then the clear sky. “It’s been decades, and they were in a tiny country on the other side of the world. After all these years, I guess Auntie wasn’t as vigilant. She might’ve regretted it when she realized these days people take photos and videos and everything can end up on social media. She has connections in the small town, and when my uncle and I started searching for the person who took that video, the gossip got to his ex-wife. My guess is she threatened Mme. Lavigne to get her and her niece to remove the video.”

“What about what happened to your assistant and Emma? Did she have any part in those incidents?”

“Not in Emma’s case. It appears Emma faked the assault to make herself look like a victim. But Auntie did pay someone to cut the brakes in my car. She didn’t think Mason would take the car without my permission.” She drew a deep breath and pushed her hair away from her face.

He stopped, the water reaching his ankles, and searched her eyes. “That’s not it, is it? There’s more?”

“Yes. I have some... some suspicions.” Her eyes darkened to the shade of the ocean before a tempest. “It concerns my parents’ story.”



# Chapter Seventeen



*TWO WEEKS LATER...*

Kennedy rushed the dogs into her car. She managed to get Smiley in, who was the more reasonable—or maybe the better trained—of the two, but the playful puppy slipped away in the garage.

“Oh no you don’t!” Kennedy closed the car door after Smiley and chased down the puppy, who let out a loud squeal.

“Got ya!” She picked up the little one, carried the wiggling pet, and placed her in the car. Then she slid into the driver’s seat and took off out of the garage and along the ocean embankment where the beauty never ceased to amaze her. “We’re not going to the vet clinic for shots. Well, at least not today. I promise.”

Austin had asked her to help at the clinic before closing today, so she’d taken a couple of hours off. She’d stopped staying behind at the office, spending every evening with him instead.

They’d moved into his ranch house. Apparently, he didn’t like her house much and had only moved in with her to make her happy. She’d found she was ready for a change and a different place, and his home seemed cozier and more welcoming than her own. Maybe the reason she’d had her house designed and furnished that way was to have something as far away from the classic opulence of her unhappy childhood home as possible.

Kennedy was also glad to be just around the corner from Austin’s mother’s large ranch house where her uncle and her best friend seemed to be spending a lot of time these days. It was like all her favorite people were in one place now, and she was thrilled to be in that vicinity.

Oh, and she'd converted her oceanfront property into a rental that already had lots of interest. Her business mind wouldn't just let it sit there.

Nowadays, Austin met her at the door together with pets every day, the delicious scents of something cooking behind him, and the dogs were her faithful companions.

As if understanding her, the pets quieted in the back seat.

Austin also said he had a surprise for her. Her heart skipped a beat. What could that be?

One thing he hadn't said was that he loved her. Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel. He'd been showing he cared about her. After the fateful day when she'd nearly been poisoned, he'd prepared candlelit dinners, taken her on romantic beach walks, and danced with her to beautiful country music every evening. He'd showered her with compliments, and every morning started with breakfast in bed. She lived the newlywed dream, and then some.

But she'd told him she loved him in the text message that day, and he hadn't said those words back. She'd longed for them—passionately.

Her hands-free phone rang, and she glanced at the screen, ready to tell Austin she was on her way. Hopefully, the call meant he couldn't wait to see her. Her spirits lifted.

But the screen showed Marina's name.

Kennedy stopped at the red light and hid her disappointment as she answered. "Hello, Marina."

"Hi. I've got some news. You can probably guess what it is. But first, are you *sure* you want me to defend Mrs. Dixon?"

*Not really.*

"Yes." Kennedy took off after the red light. True to her word, she'd flown in two prominent doctors for Mrs. Dixon, and the prognosis had become much better. Kennedy tried to be a better person, and there was no time to start like now. And okay, by forgiving that woman for what had happened that



horrible day, maybe Kennedy could finally forgive herself, as well.

“All right. As per your request, I showed her photos of you as a child, one of them taken the morning Zoey disappeared. You were right.” Marina paused. “She snatched the wrong child.”

Yup. Mrs. Dixon meant it when she’d lamented her horrible mistake, but she’d meant taking the wrong person.

Kennedy eased up on the gas, going back in time. “We were cousins, but we resembled each other like sisters. I’d spilled chocolate milk on my blue dress, and Auntie let me wear one of Zoey’s, a beige one. So in return, I gave Zoey my blue ribbons for her hair. A little fashionista, she decided to wear an aquamarine-blue dress to match them. Mrs. Dixon snatched the wrong girl.” Guilt slammed into her again. She ground her teeth as she turned to the left.

“Yes. Mrs. Dixon didn’t expect two girls to be there, and Zoey looked somewhat like the girl in the photo. Blue dress, blue ribbons and all.”

Kennedy rubbed her forehead. “But Auntie wouldn’t order that kidnapping. I was no use to her.” She realized it especially sharply now.

The dogs in the back seat barked as if voicing their support or because they were dogs and barking was what they did.

“Zoey’s mother might be throwing off the blame, but she says it was your father who ordered your kidnapping.” Marina’s voice was sad and cautious as if she walked on thin ice.

Kennedy would’ve slammed on the brakes if, deep inside, she hadn’t suspected something like that. “But why?” Her father hadn’t seemed to love her much, but would he hate her enough to order a kidnapping?

“We might never know exactly. It’s all speculation now. My guess is he found out his wife was unfaithful and thought you might not be his daughter. That might be the reason he

neglected you. Sorry, Kennedy. DNA tests weren't as easy to do back then."

Strangely enough, it became easier to breathe the air scented with a sweet vanilla fragrance from the air freshener. Thoughts that she'd done something wrong for her dad not to love her had locked her in the house of guilt. Austin's words in the castle and now Marina's on the phone were opening the door for her to step outside. "What did dear Auntie say? How did he explain my kidnapping to her?"

"She said that, on the day of the kidnapping, he came to her, terrified and desperate for help. He cried and said it was all a horrible mistake and to forgive him and that he'd return her daughter if she helped cover up what happened. She was furious at first, but then saw her opportunity."

Kennedy made a turn again, rearranging memories in her brain like new parts of the puzzle. "I remembered Auntie visiting a lot, but was she *that* close with my father? He took a huge risk by coming to her for help in such a situation."

"She says that, though nothing inappropriate happened between them, they became close based on the common ground of being unhappy in their marriages but unable to leave. Plus, he thought he had leverage to make her cooperate—after all, he had Zoey." Marina cleared her throat. "I didn't answer the question why. She says he wanted to make your mother suffer. Even if she didn't show it much, she cared about you deep down."

"Must be *very* deep down. And he wanted to hurt her by kidnapping me?" Kennedy's voice rose, making the dogs bark again.

"She says he got drunk and made a horrible decision. And eventually, years later when you were a teenager he wanted to confess to the police, but—"

"My parents' accident wasn't an accident." Breathing became difficult again, and Kennedy squeezed the steering wheel so much her knuckles whitened. She pulled into the vet clinic's parking lot, gasping for air.

“He called her and gave her the chance to come clean, as well. But he didn’t realize what she was capable of. She chose a different route. I’m sorry, Kennedy.”

“Not your fault. And thank you for getting all this information. Closure is closure. I’m grateful to have it.” Kennedy parked and turned off the engine. Being with Austin taught her that one couldn’t change the past. But she could change what she did about it.

“You’re starting a totally different life with a totally different kind of family.” The sad tones vanished as Marina spoke. “A happy one.”

“I’m not sure about that. If Austin is happy with me, I mean. He still hasn’t said he loves me.” Kennedy’s rib cage tightened.

“I am sure about it. Believe me, Austin loves you as much as Kai loves me, and that’s saying something.” Marina’s voice warmed. “Okay, I hear you arrived at your destination. I’ll talk to you soon.”

After disconnecting, Kennedy got the dogs and carried them inside because she didn’t trust them not to dart away. Austin was wonderful, but a few vet visits hadn’t been exactly painless for the dogs. Her heart shifted in her chest as she approached the wall where Skylar had long ago painted a playful kitten and puppy. Kennedy had a lot of unpleasant, even traumatic surprises lately. She hoped this would be a pleasant one.

She wasn’t sure how she’d open the front door, but someone opened it for her. The moment she stepped inside, she nearly dropped both dogs.

Thankfully, she held onto them, but her jaw did drop. Bright balloons filled the hall near the ceiling so the pets couldn’t reach them, though a few tried.

She placed Caramel and Smiley on the floor as she took everything in.

Her uncle was standing close to her mother-in-law, and both of them were smiling ear to ear. Huh. While Austin’s

mother smiled a lot, that wasn't the case for Uncle, and Kennedy suspected it wasn't just because his health prognosis was much better now. Her lips widened, as well. Could she hope an unlikely romance was blooming between two people she adored and who'd become like parents to her?

Dallas and Skylar were there with their golden retriever near them. Then Kai and Marina with Caramel's sister and Kai's parrot. And Rachel—though petless—and almost all of Austin's brothers with a puppy each. As well as several of his patients and even Saylor with a cat that must've belonged to a patient. Each human was holding a sign with a letter.

Together, the letters read:

BE MARRIED TO ME ALWAYS.

Well, it read BE MARRIED TO ME ALWAYS. But that was because one pet owner had to chase their escaped cat and, therefore, couldn't hold up the I.

Austin dropped on one knee in front of Kennedy, an open ring box in his hand, and her heart just about stopped beating. "Kennedy, you're the love of my life. I love you with all my heart." He stumbled. "I'm much better at communicating with animals than humans."

Caramel and Smiley barked as if to confirm it.

"But after you appeared in my life, it feels like I didn't live before you. And I wanted you to know it. I wanted everyone to know it."

"Yeah, bro, we do know it. Even my parrot realized it," Kai muttered, causing a few chuckles.

But not Kennedy. She needed Austin to say those words. Oh how desperately she needed him to say them!

Austin grinned at her, filling her with the sunshine that seemed to be his special gift. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please be married to me always."

She nearly squealed like Caramel. "I will! I love you so much!"

“You make me so happy.” He got up and placed the engagement ring next to her wedding band while applause and congratulations erupted around them.

Some barking and meowing joined the chorus of congratulations, but it might be because the pets demanded to be fed soon.

This was her husband. The amazing man who loved her, who wanted to share life with her forever, and who managed to prevent her from pushing him away, which wasn't an easy feat. Who treasured her for who she was and not the privileges she could help him achieve.

Happiness filled her to the brim until, surely, she couldn't feel any happier. But then he kissed her, and she realized she was wrong. He stole her breath away—literally—and she was overflowing with happiness.

When she came up for air, afraid it was just a dream, she looked at her new family and friends. God had given her a much better dream than she could've imagined herself.

Austin just smiled at her, and she moved closer and hugged him again. She relished being in his arms, breathing in his fresh aftershave, and having his heart beating close to hers. His arms wrapped around her. Her marriage of convenience had become a marriage of love.

Reluctantly, she forced herself to ease out of his embrace.

Marina stepped forward. “And now I'm inviting everyone to Bay and Basin for a celebration dinner.”

Kennedy leaned toward her friend. “And if I said no?”

Marina didn't even blink. “Then it would be a *consolation* dinner. Though we knew you wouldn't.”

Austin hugged Kennedy, causing her to curve into him happily. “I love you so much, Kennedy. Considering that I love you more every day, I don't know how I'm going to hold in all this love in forty or more years. Might need way more balloons. As for dinner, I'll do my best not to knock down any plates.”

Marina rolled her eyes. “Please don’t worry about that. Someone posted the video of that evening with the caption ‘Even dogs have a lot of fun at this place.’ We’ve had more visitors than ever.”

Kennedy laughed. She was blessed to have all these people who loved her, though sometimes she didn’t make it easy: great parent figures, amazing friends, awesome pets, and the best husband in the world.



Kennedy lifted her face to the sun’s warm rays as she walked down the beach toward her husband who waited for her beyond rows of white chairs decorated with creamy satin bows.

Her uncle and her mother-in-law flanked her, and Kennedy had the mischievous thought of slipping back and letting them walk together. They still argued a lot, but her uncle had often visited family dinners at the ranch and—a shocker!—had even eaten chicken wings with his bare hands. Another shocker was that he’d begun thinking about retirement.

The breeze threw Kennedy’s hair onto her face, and she smiled as she tossed it back. The tide brought sea-foamy water onto the shore as if the ocean was overflowing, and with Austin beaming at her, her heart was overflowing, as well.

This day was so different from their wedding. Then she’d had doubts. Deprived of her parents’ affection, guilty for sort of stealing her uncle’s love after his daughter had disappeared, Kennedy had been unsure whether Austin would ever love her. She knew he’d honor her and the marriage, but she’d never intended to put him in a golden cage. Maybe it was unfair after she’d chosen him already, but she’d wanted him to choose her. Then and forever.

And he had.

Her uncle had once called her his biggest treasure and his biggest joy, and now *her* biggest treasure and joy was smiling right back at her near the altar.

She'd been shocked when Marina had decided to get married in flip-flops. Yet Kennedy had opted to go barefoot for this vow renewal ceremony, the sand warm against her toes. For the wedding, she'd worn an expensive heirloom pearl necklace, bracelet, and earrings, and she had her hair in an elegant updo with pearls, as well. Now her hair was flowing freely over her shoulders, and the only jewelry was her wedding ring, a cross pendant, and the seashell bracelets Skylar had made for her.

Kennedy's dress, as creamy in color as the satiny bows, fell to her ankles—no way for Austin to step on it—and she'd bought it in a local store for a song.

As she passed Rachel, the woman gave her an encouraging nod. Rachel wasn't here in bodyguard capacity at their vow renewal but came as a friend. With Rachel busy with assignments at different locations, the new friendship was a cautious one and far from close, but Kennedy welcomed it.

Further in the pew, Dallas had his arm around Skylar's shoulder. Her bump in a flowery dress with red poppies was barely showing. But she already had that beautiful pregnancy glow. Kennedy's hand moved to her own stomach as she walked, her heart shifting. She wasn't expecting yet, but they'd decided to try for a baby. And the thought filled her with so much tenderness already.

Then she caught Zoey's gaze. It wasn't hostile, but it wasn't exactly warm, and Kennedy's rib cage tightened. At first, Zoey had refused any contact attempts, but Kennedy had invited her to the ceremony anyway. Was there a chance to patch up their friendship? Kennedy prayed so.

As she kept walking, her lips curved up at the sight of Mason. After a long talk with Robin, the wedding planning was on again, and somehow, Kennedy had found herself in the role of maid of honor. Mason beamed with happiness as he held Robin's hand.

Now Kennedy stood near Austin who wore a short-sleeved white shirt, khaki slacks, and the biggest smile she'd ever seen. Knowing he smiled a lot, that was saying something. She

knew his heart better than her own now, and she knew it was beating for her. Just like hers was beating for him.

She'd gotten her beach ceremony, after all. Kai had even suggested having it shipboard in the ocean, but Kennedy had felt such a setting guaranteed they would drift out to sea. Smiley was sitting near Austin, pink tongue lolling. The dog was dressed in a custom-made tuxedo and was their ring bearer today. He looked rather pleased with his role.

She glanced back, glad her uncle and Austin's mom had taken seats in the front row together. Uncle's hand even moved toward Kennedy's mother-in-law's but regrettably stopped. They'd be an odd couple, yes, but Kennedy had never seen him smile as much as he did with Austin's mom. And even his health had improved dramatically.

Austin took Kennedy's hand at that moment, and she sighed out her contentment as she shifted closer. She'd been going alone through life and could go on that way if needed. But she was much more excited to go through life with Austin, their hands and lives linked like they were now.

Loud barking told her Caramel must've gotten out of Marina's embrace. She glanced back again. Blowing her hair out of her face, Marina scooped up Caramel from the sand. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Kennedy petted the puppy before returning to her place. She'd never complain about being loved.

Caramel wore a cream ribbon and a bewildered expression. As Marina made it back to her seat, the beagle barked from his place as if chastising a younger family member with the rights of the more experienced one. Never mind that Smiley's time with the family was much shorter than Caramel's.

A few people chuckled, including Austin. She loved the sound of his laughter, loved that he always seemed to know how to make *her* laugh—which wasn't easy. She loved this man, and he loved her back.

That was what mattered the most.



The first time, even with such a small wedding, she'd worried so much about everything going smoothly and keeping up the image of perfection, even if she hadn't fully realized it. Now, she didn't care if she had to chase Caramel all over the beach. Or if Smiley stole a few pieces of chicken at the backyard reception later. Or if Kai's parrot created a commotion. And not only because the videos of the bouquet smashing a guest and the groom smashing the cake had been posted online and gone viral and only added to the hotel's popularity.

After working in the hospitality industry and helping with animals, she'd learned she couldn't make order out of chaos. And after she'd gotten to know Austin, her priorities had shifted.

Love, not prestige or the appearance of success, truly mattered.

He'd also helped her grieve and accept what had happened to her parents. She didn't need to forgive herself for not earning their love. That love should've been unconditional. And now she understood that her parents had been unhappy people who'd tried to find happiness in the wrong places.

For a moment, she heard the sound of silver bracelets, and the painfully familiar, faint scent of the sophisticated perfume drifted to her. She winced, then shook her head. It must've been her memory. She'd stopped wearing her mother's bracelets and switched from her mother's perfume to a spray with pleasing vanilla notes.

At the wedding, she'd used the scripted vows. Everything was rehearsed. Now, when she had the chance to renew those vows, happy tears burned her eyes, and just as those tears flowed from her heart, so did her words.

Her own words, this time.

“Before you, I tried to figure out the past, ripping off the bandages again and again. I was scared of being ridiculed, of falling, of losing people I cared about if I opened myself to affection. Your openness showed me how life could be if I took the risk. Your kindness healed me. Your love saved me

from an empty life. I don't care if I stumble, even if in public. Even if I fall."

"I love you so much," he whispered. "But sometimes I might be the reason we fall."

"And that's okay. We'll help each other up and help each other forward." Then she reiterated, "Your love saved me."



# Epilogue



WAS THIS WHAT CINDERELLA felt like?

Rachel was used to working undercover, but this time, she ironed the nonexistent wrinkles on her stunning lavender-hued dress with her sweaty palms, feeling ill at ease.

It didn't help that she'd had to leave her trusted gun at home to attend this charity ball and masquerade. Of course, there was no way to conceal the weapon, but still... Maybe she should've tried harder to work it into her masquerade costume.

The high updo decorated with semiprecious stones instead of her usual ponytail felt weird. The high heels were uncomfortable, and impractical if she had to give chase. No wonder Cinderella lost her shoe. Rachel would love to lose both of hers and change into familiar comfy sneakers or, even better, combat boots. Also a big plus for combat boots—one could hide a knife in their ankle shaft.

She lifted her head, channeling back her confidence. Nobody knew her here or could guess she didn't belong to the upper-crust society. The diamond-studded mask over her eyes, a nice match to her gown, covered the upper half of her face, which was useful for her purpose. When her gaze fell on the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, she could barely recognize herself.

Her client had spared no expense or effort, including loaning Rachel a diamond necklace. People here might not spot a fake smile immediately, but they could discern fake diamonds. The invitation screening was strict, so she'd gone under the guise of being her client.

Then her gaze followed the subject of her investigation, Tex Lawrence. The only Lawrence sibling who didn't remain on the family ranch and become a cowboy. Now, the founder and CEO of a large company, he seemed far more at ease in these surroundings than she could ever be.

She suppressed a scowl. She'd first seen him at his brother's wedding to a local heiress when said heiress had hired Rachel to provide the security. Thankfully, except for a ruined cake, nothing untoward had happened at the wedding. Well, Rachel had caught the bridal bouquet by accident, but she'd rather not think about *that*. She wasn't in the market for romance whatsoever.

She'd disliked Tex Lawrence immediately. Engrossed in his phone, he'd barely paid attention to his family. He certainly hadn't noticed her as she'd worked undercover as a waitress. Her eyes narrowed. She'd met plenty of snobs, though. Her stepmother and two stepsisters were like that.

He was different today, of course, schmoozing with influential people. Again, like her stepsisters, though they'd never reached this level of success. She let out a rush of breath. At least, she'd escaped this kind of life.

Coming from a family of cowboys, Tex wasn't a prince. But he was *charming*, and any woman he bestowed his attention on seemed to melt in his presence. Yes, he was handsome, and he carried the dashing tailored tuxedo well. But—go ahead, call her prejudiced—she had an instant dislike of people who looked down on others less fortunate. She doubled the smile to cover how he nauseated her.

Now, Kennedy was different from other heiresses Rachel had met. Kennedy was sweet and hardworking and a little shy—a trait someone could presume standoffish if they didn't know better. But Rachel had known better. They could even become friends. That was, if Rachel allowed it.

Nope, Tex Lawrence hadn't noticed her as a waitress, but he noticed her now as their gazes met and held across the room, and a sense of satisfaction sizzled through her. As well as a weird jolt to her heart, but she dismissed that one. Unlike many other ladies here, she was immune to his great looks and status. Besides, she'd never break one of her profession's most important rules—never fall for the subject of your investigation. A few people had broken that rule, and it never ended well.

Then her heart skipped a beat.

With a confident swagger, he strode across the dance floor—straight toward *her*—as the music started playing. Her lips widened on their own this time. Approaching him and talking to him was her goal. But she'd much rather the mouse came to the trap voluntarily, all the time considering himself not just a cat, but a tiger.

She held his gaze and readjusted the cheese—ahem, her stylish hairdo and ridiculously expensive dress—and lowered her head to infuse a flirty expression in her eyes.

But first, she had to make him work even to get close to said cheese. He'd had too many conquests already and would get bored. She'd caught his interest, but she needed to keep it, at least for some time.

She turned around as if ready to leave and made a few steps, but not so fast he'd lose her in the crowd. She nearly stumbled. Well, she couldn't walk too fast in these treacherous shoes, anyway. Then she glanced back.

Just like she'd expected, his hand was extended to her. "May I have this dance?"

"I was about to leave." Her smile turned coy, conveying she could be persuaded to stay.

"Please?" So simple yet elegant. He grinned as if understanding the rules of the game he'd undoubtedly played many times.

While she was a novice at it. She considered stalling longer. No, best not to. "I'd love to."

She placed her hand in his, and his fingers tightened around hers as he led her to the dance floor. Her eyes widened when his touch sent a delicious current through her blood. She steeled herself against the weird reaction and placed her other hand on his shoulder. This was a work assignment.

Nothing else.

Nothing less.

Nothing more.

“Masquerade or not, I know most people here. But I can’t guess who you are.” His gaze unnerved her.

And now she couldn’t escape.

Huh. She’d been the one to lay out the cheese, but now, she felt trapped in his arms. At the same time, she didn’t *want* to leave.

“Maybe I’m a princess of a faraway country. Or maybe I’m the girl next door. Or maybe I’m a celebrity.” She didn’t like those claims, though she needed his curiosity freshly stirred.

“I think, whoever you are, you’re a thief. I know you’re stealing my breath.” He whirled, then brought her back, his lips inches from hers.

*And you’re stealing mine.*

Oh boy. He was dialing up the charm, and based on her racing heart, it might start working.

She’d started this game, so she needed to respond. “I meant to.”

Okay, okay. She took a deep breath of air filled with a myriad of perfumes and colognes, including her own. But the most exciting scent from the mix was his—musky but fresh, undoubtedly masculine but with a slight note of vulnerability to it. If she’d made a commercial for his cologne, she’d praise it as irresistible.

Kind of like his blue eyes. Filled with so much confidence, which wasn’t a surprise, but the hint of vulnerability there was. It was so barely there she might’ve imagined it. Surely, she’d imagined it? And yet, wanting to know for sure drew her closer, tempted her to look again and again. Never look away, in fact.

A tremble went through her when she nearly got lost in his baby blues. Why was this happening? She wasn’t attracted to him. She couldn’t be.

People around them stopped dancing, giving them space, watching them.

She swallowed hard. She didn't like being the center of attention. Her mere survival often depended on her ability to blend in. But she kept her head high and her back straight.

He whirled her around again, making her head spin for a different reason. "Are you a heartbreaker, Thief? Because when you look in my eyes, I feel you aim to steal my heart."

Seriously? How many times had he used those lines?

She nearly stopped but forced herself to keep moving. "I'm not. Because when I aim, I don't miss." She meant when she aimed with her gun—which she'd still love to have with her—but again, he didn't need to know that.

"I'm sure you don't miss. So you'd like to keep your identity a secret." His gaze bored into her. "Do you know who I am?"

"I do. But I want to know more." That was the truth, but he wouldn't like her reasons.

"I find myself at a disadvantage that you know who I am, but I don't know who you are." Despite his words, his tone wasn't whiny but fascinated.

Did she intrigue him? Good.

"But don't you enjoy a little mystery?" Her expression turned coy again, on purpose. She might be out of her league, but she'd give it her best shot.

He laughed, a deep throaty sound that sent her off-kilter. "I do. So can you tell me something about yourself? Your phone number would be best." He dipped her, all the while staring into her eyes. "But I'm guessing you're not going to divulge that."

Her breathing went shaky, and not from the dip. *Concentrate!* "You're guessing right. Well, let's see." What could she reveal about herself? "I have a stepmother and two rather arrogant stepsisters. I talk to my pet mice. And a resourceful female helped me get to this ball."

His eyes widened. "That reminds me of something."

*No kidding.*



She'd expected him to be quick-thinking. "Your turn. I already know you grew up in a local ranch family. All your brothers carried on the family tradition and became cowboys. But you have a tremendously successful company you founded yourself with your best friend who happened to be a genius inventor." She paused while they moved in sync with the music. "You like a well-done steak and a loaded potato with bacon and lots of sour cream. You work twelve-hour days and sometimes sleep in the office. Yet you always look like you stepped from a magazine cover."

She almost mentioned his favorite cologne and car make and model, as well as his favorite color and scent of air freshener for said car. But she bit her tongue. After all, no reason to sound borderline stalkerish.

"I'm impressed and almost worried by how much you know about me." He dipped her again, making her head spin even more.

"But you're still a mystery," she added, attempting to regain her balance. "Besides this charity ball you organize every year, you're rarely seen in public. You've dated several celebrities in the past, but the relationships didn't last. Are you married to your job?"

His lips curved up. "I'm only engaged to it, and now I'm considering breaking that engagement."

At that moment, the music stopped, and a sharp stab of disappointment surprised her. She lingered in his arms longer than she should have. Then she forced herself to step away, pleased disappointment reflected in his eyes, as well.

"May I have the next dance, please?" He seemed reluctant to let her go. "I won't ask you for your name. Unless it's Cindy Ella."

Her mouth curved up. So he'd caught her hint. Then she reminded herself to dim her smile. "I need to step out to make a call. Remember, you stopped me from doing so before?" She didn't need to make a call, but she needed to move the cheese from his grasp while he was still hungry.

Hmm, she was going to have cheesecake tonight. Her mouth watered.

He led her across the dance hall back to where they'd started. "Then I'll be waiting."

She lingered for a few moments, watching him. He didn't invite anyone else to dance but chatted to a white-haired lady who looked about eighty and her stooped, balding, but smiling partner.

Not just one but three men asked Rachel to dance now. Her rating had gone up once people had seen her dancing with Tex Lawrence.

She declined, then walked outside the room and, several minutes later, outside the building. The dress felt suffocating, so fresh air wouldn't hurt. And she needed Tex to be missing her.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who needed some fresh air. A woman in a golden lamé dress and matching shoes was scrolling on her phone. Maybe this spot had better Wi-Fi? Rachel stepped into the shadows to give the woman privacy.

Then a man in a gray suit with a silver mask walked to the exit. After he'd passed the woman, her diamond necklace no longer shimmered on her neck.

Rachel's eyes widened. "Stop! Right now!" Now she *really* wished she had her gun!

The woman looked up, her expression puzzled, but the man took off running. So did Rachel.

"Don't leave yet!" Tex's voice hit her in the back somewhere from the balcony.

She cringed, though a part of her went excited. Such not great timing! She pumped her legs. She was a good runner due to daily runs, but if high-heeled shoes were designed for legs to look great in, they weren't designed for running. Tex might have teased her as a thief, but now, a real thief was going to get away!

*Well, not on my watch.*

She squeezed her teeth.

“Cinderella at least left her shoe!” Tex shouted behind her. He didn’t catch up with her. Clearly, he was no stranger to the gym, but he must pump iron and not exert his legs on a treadmill. Plus, she was already much ahead of him.

She kicked off her shoes to run faster, snatched one, but didn’t have time to pick up the other because the man had already disappeared around the corner. She didn’t consider leaving her shoe hygienic, romantic, or even safe, but she didn’t have a choice.

Breathing fast, she rounded the corner.

And was met with gunfire.



THE END



From Alexa: Did you enjoy reading Austin and Kennedy’s story?

If so and you’re curious about Rachel and Tex, here’s the link for the next book in the series, [Seaside Cowboy’s Fairy Tale](#).



And if you’d like to know what happened to Austin and Kennedy on their second honeymoon and if Kennedy and Zoey became friends again, please click [here](#) to download a bonus scene totally free. You’ll have the option to sign up for my newsletters where I might talk about going to the wrong house, talking to GPS, getting misunderstood, or more embarrassing moments. Thank you very much for reading!



## Other books by Alexa Verde



TO SEE AN UPDATED LIST of all my other books or subscribe to my weekly reader newsletter (and get a free ebook as your welcome gift!) click [here](#).



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