



Sunsets at the Beach House

*Diamond Beach
Book 4*

MAGGIE
MILLER

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SUNSETS AT THE BEACH HOUSE: Diamond Beach, book 4
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All she wanted was one last summer at the beach house...

Captivated by the beautiful weather and gorgeous sunsets of Diamond Beach, Claire and Roxie have both made decisions concerning their old lives. They're done with them. Life at the beach offers the brand-new start they've both been ready for.

For Claire, that means focusing on her new business venture with Danny, selling her old house, and officially making the beach house her home. She's got work to do and she's looking forward to it.

Roxie, however, has a new struggle to overcome. One created by her late husband and one she never anticipated. This sudden revelation has left her with all kinds of emotions and dealing with them isn't easy. Thanks to some advice from a friend, she finds the courage to make peace with the past.

She's not the only one in the beach house who's made a decision, however. There's a wedding on the immediate horizon. Can they get it planned in such a short amount of time?

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Chapter One

Claire couldn't think or speak or move for a good thirty seconds. She just stared, mouth open, at the young woman, Paulina, standing in the foyer of the beach house. Claire looked at the baby in the woman's arms, searching for some resemblance to Bryan, Claire's late husband, just to see if that really could be his child.

Maybe there was a little something in the nose or the shape of the eyes. Mostly Claire just found herself staring in disbelief. Except that she didn't disbelieve it at all. This seemed right on course for Bryan.

Roxie, who was standing beside Claire, nudged her. "Now you see why I wanted you to hear this for yourself."

Finally, Claire found her voice. She cleared her throat before speaking to Paulina. "You were married to Bryan, too? Is that really possible?"

Roxie snorted. "Sure it is. He married both of us, didn't he?"

"But you're divorced now, right? Both of you, I mean?" Paulina asked. She shifted the baby in her arms.

"What?" Claire blinked, still trying to comprehend what was going on. "You think we're Bryan's ex-wives?"

Roxie laughed but it was a bitter sound that died off almost as soon as it had begun. "No, we're not divorced from him. We're *widowed* from him. Like you are, I suppose." She sighed. "I take it Bryan lied to you as much as

he lied to us.”

Claire felt like she might pass out. Maybe that would be better. She really didn't want to deal with this. She was so tired of Bryan constantly throwing curveballs at them from the grave. That shouldn't even be possible. And yet, here they were. Meeting *another* of his wives. “Why are you here? Why are you looking for his family?”

Paulina's brow furrowed. “You were both still married to him?” She blinked and shook her head. “He lied to me.”

“He did that a lot.” Roxie seemed to ignore the lack of answers to Claire's questions. “Trust me, it came as a pretty big shock to us, too. When did you marry him?”

“Three years ago. In Mexico. We were so happy.” Paulina sniffed. “I thought.”

“Mexico?” Claire frowned. She really did not want the young woman to start crying. She was in no mood to be comforting. “What were you doing there?”

“I lived there. And it's where we met. He was there on business, and I was working at the resort where he stayed. I was the conference coordinator. Things happened between us and we fell in love.” The baby started fussing, so Paulina put him on her shoulder and bounced him a little.

Roxie glanced at Claire. “I remember that trip. He had a client there who wanted him to look at some investment properties.”

Claire nodded as the recollection came to her. “Yes. He brought me back a silver bracelet.”

“Me, too,” Roxie said. “I bet they're identical. The louse.” Her gaze shifted back to Paulina. “He was doing a lot more than looking at investment properties.”

Claire's focus returned to the baby in Paulina's arms, then to Paulina. Claire had so many questions. “You brought the baby, I assume, because you knew Bryan had other children, is that right?”

Paulina nodded. “Two daughters, right? Or did he lie about that too?”

“No, that part was true,” Claire confirmed.

“Hmph.” Roxie crossed her arms. “He sure told you more than he told us. This is the first we're finding out about you and the kid, but then, we didn't know anything about each other, either. What's the kid's name, by the way?”

“Nicolas,” Paulina answered. “Nico, for short. And, yes, I brought him because I didn't want him to grow up without knowing his sisters. Now that

his father is gone.” She patted the baby’s back. “I thought I should at least try. If they are willing.”

Claire was filled with questions and misgivings. She shook her head. “I don’t know what Kat’s going to make of this.”

“Trina will be thrilled,” Roxie said. “She loves babies. And she’s always wanted a brother.”

Claire didn’t think Kat would react that way at all. She put her hand on the stair railing. “I’ll go get Kat. We were about to eat, but dinner can wait.”

“Hang on,” Roxie said. “Why don’t we do this downstairs? On the ground floor? We can bring the girls down there without disturbing the rest of the house.”

Claire liked that idea. “Yes. Good thinking.” She looked at Paulina. “I’m sure you have questions for us, just like we have questions for you. We can all sit and talk down there where the conversation area is. Just go have a seat on one of the couches and we’ll bring our daughters down.”

Paulina looked uncertain but nodded. “All right.”

“Just give us a couple minutes,” Roxie said, escorting the young woman to the door. “Would you like something to drink? I can bring you something. Water? Soda?”

“Water would be fine.” Paulina was on the front porch now, but Claire lingered in case there was anything else she needed to hear.

“Be right there,” Roxie said. She closed the front door and looked at Claire with utter frustration in her eyes. And maybe a little anger. “Can you believe that man? A *third* wife? *Another* kid? I no longer have any idea who I was married to.”

“I know,” Claire said. “I feel the same. Do you think she’s really just here to introduce her son to the girls? Or do you think there’s some other reason?”

“Like money?” Roxie snorted. “That can’t be it, because I have no doubt she’s where the rest of the insurance money went.”

Claire sucked in a breath as she realized Roxie was right. “Of course she is. That makes perfect sense. But do you really think Bryan left her six hundred thousand?”

“Probably three for her and three for the kid, but yeah, I do. Kinnerman told us there were *beneficiaries*, remember? Plural.”

“How could I forget,” Claire said. Losing that money meant her stake in the bakery wouldn’t be nearly as substantial.

Roxie rolled her eyes, obviously over the whole thing. “I suppose we

could ask her about the money. I will, anyway. People expect those sorts of questions from me. And we deserve to know. Not that it matters. We can't do anything about it."

Claire frowned. "It would be nice to know for sure, though. I guess it's good that he took care of them, but wow. Just...wow. To all of it. I really hope she's the last one. If he has any more wives out there, I'd rather not know."

"Me neither," Roxie said. She heaved out a breath like she was trying to get an enormous weight off of herself. "You okay?"

"Not really. You?"

Roxie pursed her lips. "Not by a long shot. She's Trina's age if she's a day."

"Maybe she's a little older."

"Well, she's not our age, is she?"

"No." Claire couldn't deny that Paulina was *much* younger than her or Roxie.

Roxie looked like she could have chewed nails. "As much as I don't want to, we should get the girls and go have this talk."

"Yes." Claire nodded. "See you down there." She went up the steps, trying to work out how she was going to explain to Kat what was going on. There was no easy way to do it. Better to just come out with it.

Kat was on the couch, watching a show with her grandmother, Margo. Claire's half-sister, Jules, and Jules's son, Cash, were in the kitchen and just about done with the dinner they were making for everyone.

Jules glanced at Claire as she joined them. "You look like you just got bad news. Everything okay?"

"I don't know anymore. I guess it's fine. But I did get news. Not great news, either. Although that depends on how you look at it, I suppose."

Jules laughed. "Well, that explains everything perfectly."

Claire walked through the kitchen and went straight to the living room area. She picked up the TV remote and hit Pause. "Listen, everyone. There's no easy way to explain this, so I'm just going to say it. A young woman showed up at the front door downstairs. That's why Roxie called me down there. That young woman was apparently also married to Bryan—"

"What?" Margo's mouth gaped. "You can't be serious."

"I am. Very serious." Claire looked at Kat. "She came here because she knew your father owned this house and she was looking for his family."

“Why?” Kat said. “I can’t see any reason we’d want to know her. Unless I have another sister you haven’t mentioned yet.”

Claire took a breath, preparing herself for whatever reaction Kat might have. “Not another sister. But you do have a brand-new baby brother.”

Kat blinked. “I what?”

“You heard me. The woman who showed up, Paulina, she’s young. Maybe your age. And she’s just had the baby. Nico. They’re downstairs right now. The baby is why she came. She wanted him to know his family. Apparently, Bryan told her about us, but told her that we were his *ex-wives*. He said he’d divorced me and Roxie. Can you believe that?”

“The nerve,” Margo said. “And a liar to the very end.”

Kat didn’t move. “I don’t know how I feel about this.”

“Trust me,” Claire said. “I’m right there with you.”

Jules walked over, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “Are we all supposed to go down and meet her?”

“I’d like to take Kat first,” Claire answered. “Roxie’s bringing Trina. I can text you once we see how things go. But Kat’s the only one the baby’s related to by blood. So it’s up to you if you want to meet him or not.”

Kat got to her feet. She looked about as uncertain as Claire felt. “Are you okay with this, Mom?”

Claire sighed. “I honestly don’t know what I am.”

Chapter Two

Roxie knew Trina would be receptive to the idea of a baby brother, but Roxie's mom, Willie, was a different story. She was a lot less likely to believe Paulina was strictly here to introduce her son to his half-sisters.

Roxie had her doubts about Paulina's intentions, too, but until she could talk to the woman in more depth, she was trying not to jump to conclusions.

Unlike Trina, who generally saw the good in everyone first, Roxie was a touch more jaded. More like her mother. And Paulina, showing up here right after the insurance money had been delivered, seemed awfully suspicious to her.

Maybe she was wrong. She wanted to be wrong. But life had taught her that people weren't always to be trusted. Especially when it came to money. Money made people do awful things sometimes.

Roxie walked back into the living room.

Trina was pulling a cookie sheet out of the hot oven. She'd lined it with tin foil before adding their leftover pizza to it to reheat. "Who was that, Ma?"

Roxie sat on one of the stools at the narrow kitchen counter without making eye contact. She was still searching for the words to explain what had just happened.

Willie spoke up before she could answer. "Wasn't someone you were expecting to see, by the looks of you."

Roxie exhaled and finally lifted her gaze toward her mother and daughter. “You’re not going to believe this, but that was another one of Bryan’s wives.”

For a few long seconds, both Trina and Willie just stared at her.

Trina held the cookie sheet mid-air, but finally set it down on the hot pad and took her oven mitt off. “Another of his wives?”

Roxie nodded. “A young woman named Paulina and she brought her—”

“Young?” Willie’s brows went up. “That’s a curious way to describe someone.”

“Well, it fits,” Roxie said. “I bet she’s not much older than Trina.”

“Are you kidding me?” Willie made a face. “That husband of yours was a complete bum. And maybe a little bit of a pervert.”

“Ma.”

“Well, what do you call taking up with a woman the same age as his daughters?” Willie made a spitting sound. “It’s a good thing he’s dead or Margo’d make sure he was. She likes him less than I do, and I wouldn’t pee on him if he was on fire.”

“Ma.” Roxie shot her mother a look. “I had a lot of happy years with the guy.”

“Sure, but he was still a louse.”

“Mimi, that’s my dad you’re talking about,” Trina said.

“Sorry, honey, but you can’t be happy about this. Are you?”

“No, but—”

“Hey,” Roxie interrupted. “I wasn’t done.”

“Sorry, Ma,” Trina said. “You say whatever else you were going to say.”

“Thanks.” Roxie exhaled. “Paulina didn’t come alone. She brought her newborn son with her. Trina, you have a half-brother named Nico and if you’d like to meet him, he’s downstairs with Paulina right now.”

Trina inhaled, already smiling. “A baby brother?”

Willie sucked her teeth. “Oh, Lord, help us.”

Trina came out from behind the counter. “Of course I want to meet him. How do I look?”

“You’re going to meet a newborn,” Willie said. “Unless you’re the Cookie Monster, it doesn’t matter.” Then she looked at Roxie. “I don’t have to come, do I? *NCIS* was just getting good.”

“No.” Roxie knew better, though. Willie would want to see this woman for herself. “You can if you want to in a few minutes. Claire and I were going

to give the girls some time with Nico while we get more details from Paulina.”

Willie nodded. “Good plan. Shoot me a text when you want me to come down.”

“All right. You ready, Trina?”

“Yep.” Trina was all sparkly-eyed and smiling, just like Roxie had expected her to be. “Stairs?”

“That’s fine.” Roxie glanced over her shoulder as she and Trina left. “Don’t wait on us to eat, Ma, or that pizza will just get cold again.”

Willie threw her hands up. “I can’t eat at a time like this!”

Roxie just shook her head as they went out the door and down the steps and to the conversation area. Paulina was sitting on one of the couches, Nico in her arms. She stood when Roxie and Trina appeared.

Roxie gestured to Trina. “This is my daughter, Trina. Trina, this is Paulina and Nico.”

“Hi,” Trina said. “Is that really my baby brother?”

Paulina nodded. “He is. Bryan was his father, too.”

“Wow.” Trina breathed the word out as she walked toward the baby. “Hi, little brother. Oh, he’s so beautiful. Could I hold him? Would that be okay?”

“Sure,” Paulina said as she handed the baby over.

The elevator doors opened. Claire and Kat got out. Claire made her introductions, then Kat went over to Trina and looked at the baby. Her brows were bent, and she seemed to be staring at him with an analytical eye.

Roxie sat near Paulina, who then sat back down. Claire joined them. Roxie didn’t know how much time they’d have, so she started right in. “I assume you got your insurance check like we did?”

Paulina nodded, her eyes widening slightly, like she hadn’t been expecting that. “I did. I was happy to see that Bryan cared enough about us to do that.”

“Did you think he wouldn’t?” Roxie was surprised by her response.

“I wasn’t sure,” Paulina said. “But I hadn’t given it much thought, either. I never thought he’d pass away so suddenly.” She sniffled.

“Neither did we,” Claire said, without any real emotion in her voice. “So, he told you he had two ex-wives?”

Paulina nodded. “Yes. That’s why he traveled so much. For his business, of course, but also to spend time with his daughters. I always loved what a good father he was.” She glanced at her son, still in Trina’s arms. “I can’t

believe Nico will never get to know him.”

A strange thought came to Roxie. “Did he get to meet Nico? How old is that baby?”

“Almost two months. Yes, Bryan met him.” Paulina sniffed again. “He was so happy to have a son.”

Roxie exchanged a look with Claire before speaking. “I’m sure he was. But you realize there’s no way you were legally married to Bryan. Not when he was already married to us.” Her brows went up as she looked at Claire again. “Come to think of it, since he married you first, I’m not sure I was legally married to him.”

Claire shrugged one shoulder like it was no big deal. “Only takes seven years to be common-law, but I’m not sure Florida recognizes that anyway. Regardless, you were married to him as much as I was. And at this point, it doesn’t really matter.”

“True.” Roxie returned her attention to Paulina. “What exactly do you hope to gain out of this visit?”

Paulina seemed confused by that question. “I told you. For Nico to know his family. That’s it. If you think I’m here for money, I’m not. I have the condo Bryan bought for us and that’s paid for, so I should be just fine. It’ll be a while before I can work again, but I also have my mother here from Mexico to help out with Nico. Bryan helped make that happen.”

Of course he did, Roxie thought.

Paulina sighed. “It’s hard being a single mother.”

“Yes,” Claire said. “I know all about that. Roxie and I both do.”

Roxie nodded. “Yep.”

Paulina frowned. “But you had Bryan.”

Claire laughed. “Not much, I didn’t. And when he was home, he wasn’t a lot of help.”

“Same here,” Roxie said. “But we got our girls raised.” A soft spot opened up in her heart for Paulina, one she didn’t want to acknowledge. She didn’t want to like this woman. “I guess we’re here, if you’re ever desperate.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Sorry, but don’t include me in that. With the bakery opening, I’m not going to have a moment to spare.” She sighed. “I don’t mean to be unkind, but my tolerance for Bryan and his philandering has pretty much been used up. I’ve already spent too many years of my life held back by that man. I’m focusing on myself and my own family from here on out.”

Paulina nodded. "I suppose I can understand that. He was really married to both of you at the same time?"

"Yes," Claire said. "He married Roxie a few years after he married me. Our daughters are the same age, too. Only born a day apart."

Roxie snorted. "He even named them the same so he wouldn't forget which is which. Kat and Trina are both short for Katrina."

"Oh my," Paulina said. "I'm starting to feel like I didn't really know Bryan at all."

Roxie sat back. "Welcome to the club."

Chapter Three

Jules pulled the last piece of chicken out of the sauté pan and put it on a plate, then headed for the laundry room to get Toby's leash. "I'm going down there. Toby needs to go out."

Cash chuckled. "Mom, Toby is asleep on the couch. You just want to see what's going on with Wife Number Three."

Jules grabbed the leash and came back, jangling the leash and patting her leg to get Toby's attention. "Come on, boy. Let's go out to pee." Toby got off the couch and trotted over as Jules looked at her son. "Okay, maybe I do want to see this woman and find out what's going on, but that's my sister and niece down there."

"I'd like to know, too," Margo said. "But I'm not sure Claire wants us to get involved."

Cash shook his head. "Like that's ever stopped either of you before."

"Cash." Jules raised her brows at him before talking to her mother again. "We're Claire's family." She clipped Toby's leash to his collar. "We're already involved."

Margo stood. "True." She picked up the remote and pressed Pause. "All right. Let's go. Just to make sure Claire and Kat are all right."

Jules turned around and pushed the call button for the elevator. Her mom joined her. Jules slipped her hand through the leash's loop. "Cash, if you

want to eat, you can. Just leave some for the rest of us.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The elevator doors opened. She and her mom got on with Toby between them. The doors closed.

“I don’t like this at all,” her mother said. “Another wife shows up just as Bryan’s insurance money gets distributed?”

“I agree,” Jules said. “The timing is pretty interesting.”

The doors opened. Claire and Roxie were sitting with a young woman in the conversation area while Kat and Trina were a little further away. Trina had a baby in her arms.

Jules gave them a nod as they all looked over. “Hi. Toby needed to pee.”

Claire waved them over. “Come meet Paulina.” Claire introduced Paulina to her family. “This is my sister, Jules, and my mother, Margo. Ladies, this is Paulina. Another of Bryan’s wives.”

Margo sniffed. “Hopefully the last.”

Claire nodded. “That would be nice.”

Jules smiled at the young woman, who looked like she’d gotten more than she’d bargained for and wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with it. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Paulina said. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” Jules wasn’t sure how nice it really was, but she wasn’t going to put that into words. “This is my dog, Toby. As you probably figured out.”

Toby was already moving toward the grass. Jules let him lead, but her gaze shifted to Trina and Kat. She caught Kat’s eyes and subtly shifted her head to the side, indicating she wanted Kat to join her.

Kat said something to Trina, then met Jules on the grass. “Hey.”

“Hey. How’s it going? Do you think this is legit?”

“I guess so. Not sure why she’d make it all up. Plus, she knew my dad owned this house.”

“I didn’t think she was making up the part about being married to your dad. I was just curious if it might be some kind of money grab, since she must have just gotten her insurance check like your mom and Roxie did.”

“Oh.” Kat turned to look at Paulina. “I hope that’s not what this is. Mom’s had enough drama already.”

“You can say that again. What do you think of the baby?”

Kat shrugged. “He’s cute and everything, but it’s not like I can have a conversation with him.”

Jules laughed. “No, of course not. But you have a little brother.”

“Yeah. One who’s twenty-eight years younger than me. It’s...weird.”

“You don’t seem all that excited.”

“I’m not,” Kat said. She made a face as she looked at Jules. “Mostly because I’m more worried about Mom than anything. She was just finding herself again, you know? Moving forward in a way I’ve never seen her do before. Now this?” Kat sighed and went back to watching Paulina. “She doesn’t need a setback.”

“No, she doesn’t, but your mom’s come a long way in a short amount of time. I don’t think she’ll let this be more than a blip on her radar.”

“That might not be up to her if this woman starts trouble.”

Toby whined.

Jules looked down at him. “Ready to go back up?”

“I can take him,” Kat said.

“Don’t you want to hang out?”

“Yes, but I’ll come back down. You’re better at being nice to people than I am. Go see what you can find out about this woman.”

Jules snorted. “I’ll do my best.” She handed the leash over to Kat, who took Toby back to the elevator.

Jules joined the other women on the couches. Trina came over, too, bringing the baby with her. She handed the little one back to his mother. Jules smiled. “I bet you didn’t count on there being so many of us, Paulina.”

Paulina sat Nico on her lap, leaning him against her so he could see everyone. “I didn’t know what to expect, really. It was sort of an impulsive decision.”

“Really?” Jules asked. “What made you do it then?”

Paulina took a breath. “Bryan’s death has hit me hard. I suppose I’m more emotional than usual, having just had a baby. But the idea of Nico not growing up with a father...”

Paulina swallowed. Tears slipped down her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come. I just wanted Nico to have some family.”

If Jules had been closer, she would have reached out to comfort the young woman. “Hey, it’s all right. You were just doing what you thought was best as a mom. I have two boys myself. I get it. I really do.”

“Thank you,” Paulina said. She held onto Nico with one hand and wiped her face with the other. “I know you must all be suspicious of me. I realize that now. I swear to you, I only want Nico to know his sisters. That’s it.”

The elevator doors opened, and Kat came out. This time, Willie was with her. The pair came over and took seats with the rest of them.

Willie squinted at Paulina. “You *are* young.”

Roxie held her arm out toward her mom. “Paulina, this is my mother, Willie. Willie, Paulina Thompson.”

Paulina stared at Willie’s lavender hair, which didn’t surprise Jules. It was hard not to look at it. “Nice to meet you.”

Willie just grunted.

Jules filled the silence with small talk. “Your son is beautiful, Paulina.”

That got her to smile. “Thank you. You have two boys?”

“I do. Cash and Fender.” Jules laughed. “My husband and I are both musicians and singers, hence the names.”

“Is your husband here, too?” Paulina asked.

“No, we’ve been divorced a long time. I should have said ex. But my son, Cash, is upstairs. Waiting on us to eat dinner, actually.”

“I’m waiting on the same thing,” Willie said. “Pretty sure the pizza’s cold by now.”

Paulina shook her head. “I’m sorry. Please, you should all go eat. Nico should be in his crib by now anyway. Like I said, it was an impulse that drove me here.”

Trina pulled out her phone. “Let’s exchange numbers. Otherwise, I won’t know how to see my little brother.”

“Of course,” Paulina said.

With what seemed to Jules to be a little reluctance, Kat got out her own phone and did the same. Roxie, too. Claire, Jules noticed, did not.

In a matter of minutes, they were saying their goodbyes, which were quick, and headed back upstairs. Kat, Trina, and Roxie took the steps, letting Willie ride up with Margo, Jules, and Claire.

Willie said nothing until her stop. “Thanks for the lift, gals. Have a good night.”

“You, too, Willie,” Jules said. She looked at her sister as the doors closed. “You didn’t give Paulina your number.”

“Nope,” Claire said. “I see no reason for her to contact me. If Kat wants to see Nico, that’s up to her.” There was pain in Claire’s eyes.

Jules understood. Once again, Bryan had betrayed her. And this time it had not only been recent, but with a woman about the age of his daughters. Jules put her arm around Claire. “I’m sorry, sis. I know this has opened up

wounds that were just starting to heal.”

Claire nodded. “Thanks. I’ll live. But I could have done without that woman showing up, too.” She shook her head. “Bryan really did a number on all of us.”

The doors opened and they all got out. Margo stopped to look at Claire. “It’s true what he did affects all of you, but you were the first one he married. And you were the only one he should have married. Feel free to hate him as much as you want to. He deserves it.”

Claire just shrugged. “All I want to do is eat some dinner and go read my book.”

Cash got up from the table and came over. “You okay, Aunt Claire?”

She gave him a quick smile. “I will be. Thanks for asking, honey.”

He held his arms out. “You want a hug?”

She laughed. “You know what? I do.” She hugged him, letting out a sound that might have been a soft sob. “Thanks, Cash.”

Jules smiled. He was such a good kid. She went to the table to make sure they had everything they needed for dinner. Her heart went out to her sister. What an unfaithful husband and scummy human being Bryan had turned out to be. She was surprised Claire had an appetite, but Jules was glad about it.

The last thing Claire needed was to let this new wrinkle get the best of her.

For a moment, Jules wondered if she should reach out to Danny and let him know what was going on, but it wasn’t her place. If Claire wanted to tell him, she would.

She glanced at her sister again. Claire was getting a glass of water. And looking very much like she had right after she’d first found out about Roxie.

Jules would have to keep an eye on her. Now was not the time for her to sink into a dark place. Jules might be busy with her music and trying to get songs written for her new album, but family came first.

Chapter Four

Trina could still smell the powdery soft scent of Nico's little head and feel the way his tiny fingers had wrapped around her pinky. "Aren't babies the best?"

"Sure," Willie said, settled in her chair once again. "Especially when they're not yours. Different story when they're screaming their lungs out, or you're the one in charge of poopy diapers and three a.m. feedings."

Roxie laughed. "You know, that's true. I remember those days." She winked at Trina, who was putting the pizza back in the oven to warm up a second time. "You weren't that bad, though. You were always such a happy baby."

Trina shut the oven door, then shrugged one shoulder. "I wouldn't care about any of that. I can't wait to have some babies of my own. I want at least two."

Her mom looked at her from the kitchen. "Does Miles know this?"

"No." Trina shot a look right back at her. "We only just started going out, Ma. It's a little early for that kind of conversation."

"It's never too early." Willie pointed at her granddaughter. "Better you find out now if he wants kids or not before you fall in love with him and then get your heart broke because he doesn't."

The thought that Miles might not want kids had never even occurred to

her. Now Trina was wondering if she should work it into her next conversation with him and if she could do it without scaring him off.

“How are you going to have kids when you’re about to open a salon?” Roxie asked. She got the leftover salad out and started dishing it into three small bowls. “I’m putting Italian dressing on all of these, by the way, unless someone tells me different.”

“Sounds good to me,” Willie said.

“Me, too. I won’t have kids right away,” Trina answered. “I’m not even married yet. I can wait a few years. Lots of women have kids in their thirties these days. Even later, too. Although I’d rather have mine sooner.”

“Baby or no baby, I don’t like her,” Willie announced.

“She’s not that bad,” Roxie said. “I think her heart is in the right place, anyway.”

Trina frowned. “Are you talking about Paulina?”

“Yes,” Willie said. “A third wife.” She shook her head. “Your father certainly made the most of his years on Earth, didn’t he?” She snorted air through her nostrils. “What a loser he turned out to be.”

Trina couldn’t argue, but she didn’t like her dad being called names, either. Although he had earned them. She glanced at her mom. “Are you mad at him again, Ma?”

Roxie stuck forks in the salad bowls and brought them over. She put one on Willie’s side table, then the other two on the coffee table. “I guess I am a little. But I’ll tell you something else. I’m more bothered for Claire. I know how she feels now. Or rather, how she felt when she found out about me. I sort of understood it before, but for Claire, I was the other woman. Now, I have an ‘other woman’ of my own.”

She sighed. “It’s not a great feeling.”

“I’m sorry he did that to you, Ma.” Trina didn’t know how to make her mother feel better and she wished she did.

Roxie sat on the couch beside her and picked up her salad. “I’m sorry he did it to both of us.” She let out a short laugh. “Actually, I’m sorry he did it to all four of us. You, me, Kat, and Claire. You know, I’m really starting to like Claire. I mean, I can see things from her point of view pretty well and it’s not a fun place to be. I didn’t get a chance to talk to her about Paulina privately too much, but I know she’s upset.”

Willie sipped her drink, a cherry soda left over from Ethan’s last visit. “How could she not be? Who wouldn’t be upset to find out that kind of

news? Not to mention Paulina and that baby are the reason you and Claire didn't get as much insurance money as you thought you would. Might not bother you, but I know from Miguel that Claire was counting on it to help her invest in the bakery."

Trina speared a slice of cucumber. "Maybe you should text her, Ma. See how she is. You might be exactly who she needs to talk to right now. No one else understands the situation like you do, that's for sure."

"I will tomorrow," Roxie said. "She and I both need some time not thinking about this for a while."

"Does that mean you want to stop talking about Paulina?"

"It does," Roxie answered, but she said it with a smile.

Trina smiled back before focusing on the *NCIS* rerun playing on the television. "Okay. Let's just eat and wait for Gibbs to smack someone on the head. By the time we finish our salads, the pizza will be warmed up again."

Willie snorted. "I know who I'd like to smack on the head, but what's left of him is currently in an urn on Claire's nightstand."

Trina laughed to herself. Her grandmother had no problem expressing herself, no matter what the subject. Trina wasn't always so good at that. She'd have to get better, though. She was about to be in charge of her own salon. If she couldn't say what she needed to *when* she needed to, her employees would walk all over her.

She didn't feel like dealing with employees would be as hard as talking to Miles about what he wanted for his future, but her mother and grandmother were right. What was the point of getting involved with a guy if their plans for the future didn't align?

She liked Miles a lot. She could very easily see herself in love with him. He was such a good guy. Kind and sweet, handsome, too. The kind of guy you could look up to and admire. And not just because he was a paramedic. He was just that kind of person. The reliable sort. If he said he'd do something, you could take stock in him doing it.

He'd want kids, wouldn't he?

Trina hoped so, but she had no way of knowing until she talked to him about it. And a conversation like that could go really well. Or it could be the end of them.

She didn't want things with Miles to end. Then again, if he didn't want children, what was the point of staying with him?

She was suddenly miserable. The oven timer dinged, announcing the

pizza had been reheated a second time. While her mom got up to deal with it, Trina pulled her phone out and sent Miles a text.

Hey, there. Just thinking about you. Any chance I could see you soon?

Hey, pretty girl. You want to go surfing again?

Trina smiled. *Sure, but I was thinking maybe lunch?*

How about breakfast tomorrow? That soon enough?

Perfect. Where?

Beachbums. 9 ok?

Trina nodded as she typed back, *9 is great.*

That didn't give her a lot of time to figure out how to bring up the topic of kids, but she'd work something out. In the meantime, she'd pray that Miles wanted them. Because if he didn't, she didn't see any other option but to break up with him.

Her mom put a plate in front of her with two slices of pizza on it, but Trina's appetite had suddenly disappeared. She stared at her plate.

Her mom sat beside her again. "What's wrong? I can tell just by looking at you something's going on."

Trina saw no reason not to tell her. "What if Miles doesn't want kids?"

Her mom didn't say anything for a moment. She tucked a loose strand of Trina's hair back. "If he doesn't, that's his right. But it's also your right to move on and find someone who does. Is that what you're upset about?"

Trina nodded forlornly. "I like him. A lot. But if he doesn't want kids, that's a deal breaker."

Her mom put her arm around Trina's shoulders and pulled her in. "Honey, I know you like this guy, but you just met him. If he isn't the right one for you, well, there are a lot of other guys out there."

"I don't want another guy. I want Miles." She could feel tears welling and she didn't know why. She was getting way too upset over something that might not even happen. She exhaled a long breath and tried to shake the mood creeping up on her. "You know, I think I'm just stressed. There's a lot going on with getting the salon ready and then Paulina shows up. It's just stress. I'm fine."

Her mom kissed her cheek. "Okay, but if you want to talk more, I'm right here."

"Thanks." Trina picked up a slice of cheese pizza and bit the end off. She still wasn't that hungry. Just like she wasn't sure it was really just stress.

Why was she so upset about losing Miles? Could it be that she'd already

fallen in love with him?

Chapter Five

*K*at ate the last bite of her salad. “That was good. Really good.” She looked at her aunt and cousin, seated across from her. “Why haven’t you two made dinner before?”

Cash grinned and shook his head. “Good to know you’re impressed by very little effort. That will come in handy when we move your stuff.”

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Oh, no, you don’t. No slacking. I can’t have any dead weight, or we’ll never get it all done. Which, by the way, I’d like to do day after tomorrow. If that works with your studio schedule, Aunt Jules.”

Her aunt nodded. “My session isn’t for another three days. You’ll be back by then, right?”

“Oh, definitely. I don’t want to be gone longer than a day and a half if we can help it. Alex has to be back for his shift that next day, so it’s a hard deadline. Although, if we were really behind, I could always send him back in my car, then Cash and I could return in the rental truck.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” her mom said. “Don’t forget, I’m going with you the day you go. I plan on bringing back as much of my baking supplies, clothing, and personal effects as I can fit into my car.”

Kat nodded. “I could actually help you with that some if you want. Because I’m going to need your help, too. I’ll need you to go through the

house and mark anything you want brought back here.”

Claire sipped her water. “I know. I’ve actually started making a list of everything I’d like to keep. The problem is, I don’t know where it’s all going to fit.”

Margo cleared her throat softly. “Claire, why don’t you and I go secure a storage unit tomorrow? I’m going to need one for my things as well. There’s no reason we can’t share one. Then you won’t be cramped here.”

“I’d love to do that,” Claire said. “But I thought you and Conrad were going to Landry tomorrow to get your car.”

Margo shrugged. “Pushing it back one day won’t matter.”

“Okay, then let’s do that.”

Margo got up. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to call Conrad right now and let him know about the change of plans.”

“Sure, Grandma,” Kat said. “Tell him we said hi.”

Claire stood and started picking up plates. “Come on, Kat. Jules and Cash made dinner. That means we’re on cleanup.”

“Right.” She got up and picked up the big salad bowl. “There’s enough left over for a couple of lunches tomorrow.”

“Perfect,” her mom said. “I could eat that salad every day. It’s really good.”

Jules and Cash helped anyway, bringing their plates into the kitchen.

Jules opened the dishwasher to start loading.

“Shoo,” Claire said, laughing.

“Just trying to help.” Jules looked at her son. “If we’re getting kicked out, why don’t I take Toby out, then we can go upstairs and run through the song a few times?”

He nodded. “I could use the practice. I’d love to get a new version recorded, too.”

Kat waved them off with her hands. “Go on. Make Aunt Jules sound as good as possible so she can get super famous and the rest of us can stop working.”

Jules snorted as she went into the laundry room to get Toby’s leash. “Is that what you think’s going to happen?”

Kat smiled. “A girl can dream, can’t she?”

“Dream all you want, kitty cat,” Cash said.

Kat rolled her eyes. “Go walk your canine brother.”

“Mom,” Cash said, his grin stuck on his face. “I think Toby should get a

diamond-studded collar, don't you?"

"Yes, right after I buy you a Lamborghini." She shook her head, pushing the elevator's call button.

"Hey, I could use a Lamborghini." Cash hooked his thumbs in the belt loops on his shorts. "I bet Sierra'd really go for a guy with a Lambo."

"Sierra?" Kat said. "Who's that?"

The elevator doors opened. Cash went a little sheepish. "Just a girl I've started seeing."

"Come on, Tobs," Jules said. The little dog followed her onto the elevator. "See you upstairs, Cash."

"Right, Mom," he replied.

"Sierra?" Claire said. "Pretty name. Pretty girl?"

Cash nodded enthusiastically. "She's gorgeous. Not sure she knows that about herself, but she is."

Claire smiled. "Why don't you invite her over for dinner some night?" She looked at Kat. "You could bring Alex. We could do a cookout."

Kat nodded. "Might be nice, but with the moving and the double-date you want us to go on with you and Danny, our social calendar is getting pretty full. And Alex only gets a couple of nights off a week."

"We're going to be here a long time," her mom said. "We'll make it work eventually."

Cash was looking around on the counters. "Is there anything for dessert? Maybe some more of those cookies?"

"There are," Claire said. "I bagged up whatever was left into a bunch of sandwich bags and put them in the pantry. Help yourself to a bag."

"Cool," Cash said. "Thanks." He went for the pantry.

Claire sighed. "I wish I had that boy's metabolism."

"We all do," Kat said.

Cash came back with two bags of cookies. "Tell my mom I went upstairs, okay?"

"Sure," Kat said.

He went out the sliding doors and she started loading stuff into the dishwasher. "Mom, what are you baking next?"

"Believe it or not, a wedding cake." Her mom emptied what remained of the salad into a big glass container with a snap-on lid.

Kat straightened. "You are? Wait. Did something happen with you and Danny that you didn't tell me about?"

Her mom laughed. “No, silly. But I guess I did forget to tell you that Willie and Miguel have decided to tie the knot. With Paulina showing up, it sort of slipped my mind. Roxie wanted to hire me to make the cake, but I told her I’d do it as a wedding present to them.”

Kat put her hand on her heart. That was some very cool news. “There’s something so romantic about getting married at that age.”

“You think?” Her mom took the big salad bowl to the sink to wash it.

Kat nodded. “Heck, yes. I mean, to find love again so late in life...it’s kind of magical. Meant to be. You know?”

“Maybe it is.” Her mom gave her a funny look. “I did not expect you to have that kind of reaction.”

“You mean because of everything with Ray?” Kat tipped her head. “Did you think I’d be bitter about love?”

“Not bitter, exactly. But maybe a bit jaded. Or at least reluctant to believe in anything remotely romantic.”

“Nah.” Kat added detergent to the dispenser, then closed the dishwasher door. “I might have been that way, if not for Alex. He’s helped me realize a lot of things about life. And not just relationship stuff. Life stuff.”

She leaned on the counter. “Surfing was kind of a life-changing experience.”

Her mom put the salad bowl on the drying rack. “In what way?”

Kat picked at one of her nails, feeling a little self-conscious. “I was kind of scared of being in the water. Trina said something about sharks, and I couldn’t stop thinking about them. I know it’s dumb, but—”

“Doesn’t sound dumb to me,” her mom said. “I was thinking about them, too, and I wasn’t even there!”

“Well, Alex talked me through it. He got me out of my head and back into reality. And when I actually tried surfing, it was such a...high. I’ve never felt anything like it before.” The memory of flying over the water made her smile. “It made me feel like I can do anything. I just need to be willing to try.”

“Like your new job?”

She nodded. “Exactly like that.” She exhaled. “I can’t believe how many years I wasted being okay with okay. Ray, my actuary job, living at home—which I loved, by the way, but I’m twenty-eight. Who still lives at home at twenty-eight?”

Claire laughed. “In this economy? A lot of young people. And I loved

having you there.” Then she frowned. “Does that mean you want to live here by yourself?”

“What?” Kat jerked back. “No way! Mom, I love us being here together. I know Grandma’s going to move out and Aunt Jules, too, at some point, but I don’t care if Alex and I get married, I want you here. There is more than enough space.”

Claire smiled. “That’s very kind of you.”

“I’ll tell you something else,” Kat said. She hesitated, trying to find the right words. “I haven’t felt this close to you ever before. I don’t want that to go away.” Liquid rimmed her lower lids. She hadn’t expected to get emotional. She chuckled. “Look, I’m all weepy now.”

Her mom hugged her. “Oh, honey. I don’t want that to go away, either.”

The elevator doors opened, and Jules came out with Toby in her arms. “Did I miss something? No one died, did they? Did another wife show up?”

Kat let go of her mom, laughing. “No, but there *is* going to be a wedding.”

Chapter Six

Margo had just hung up with Conrad and stepped out of the bedroom in time to catch Kat's words. An icy feeling slithered down her spine. A feeling that could only be described as dread. "A wedding? Who's getting married?"

She stared at Claire. "Please tell me you and Danny did not—"

"Mom," Claire said. "Don't panic. None of *us* are getting married. But Willie is. To Miguel."

Margo put her hand to her throat and exhaled the breath she'd been holding. "Thank heavens."

"Yeah," Jules said. "I was wondering about that, too." She carried Toby into the laundry room to wash his feet.

Claire arched her brows. "What would be the big deal if Danny and I *were* getting married?"

Margo hesitated to answer. She wasn't sure if her daughter was being serious or not. "For one thing, Claire, you've only just lost your husband. For another, you've known Danny less time than you've been a widow. You're already going into business with the man. Don't you think that's enough?"

Kat looked at her mother. "Do you really like him that much?"

Claire laughed and shook her head. "I like him a lot, but don't read anything into what I said. I was just asking a question."

“Good.” Margo took some comfort in that. “I wanted to tell you that I spoke with Conrad and he’s fine postponing our trip until the day after tomorrow. In fact, he asked if you’d like to come with us, Claire. We can take you to your house before we go to mine.”

Claire nodded. “That would be great. Then the kids can have their fun without Mom in the car.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “We wouldn’t have minded one bit.”

“That’s sweet of you to say,” Claire said.

It was, Margo thought. But she had no doubt Kat, Cash, and Alex would still enjoy their time without parental supervision.

Toby came scampering out of the laundry room with a treat in his mouth. Jules was right behind him. “I’m headed upstairs to practice. I assume Cash is already up there?”

Kat nodded. “With cookies.”

Jules laughed. “Of course he is. If we get too loud, just text me.” She headed for the sliders, went out, and up the back steps.

Margo went to the coffeemaker. “Anyone want some decaf?”

“I’ll have a cup,” Claire said. “Are you going to watch your murder shows?”

“I am. I have a few recorded that deal with autopsy. I need to get some practical experience and make notes of the proper terminology.”

“Autopsy sounds kind of gross,” Kat said. “Are they going to be gory?”

“I don’t think so.” Margo took the carafe to the sink to fill it with water. She hoped not. She could only stomach so much. “If it’s gratuitous, I’ll turn them off and we’ll watch something else. All right?”

“Deal,” Kat said.

“You two go ahead,” Claire said. “I’ll have my decaf in the bedroom. I have a book to read. Although I have so much to do that I’m not sure I’ll get to the book.”

About to scoop coffee into the filter basket, Margo glanced over. “Such as?”

“Bakery stuff. But as I was telling Kat, I’m also making Miguel and Willie’s wedding cake as my present to them. I need to do some research on that. Figure out my decorations, the proper supports, that sort of thing.”

Margo added the ground coffee. “That was very generous of you.”

Claire shrugged. “Roxie asked me to do it. She wanted to pay me, but I figured it might as well be my gift. Wedding cakes aren’t really my area, but

it'll be a challenge and I like that. Hopefully, it comes out nice enough."

"It'll be beautiful," Margo said. She pushed the button to start the brewing process. "You do wonderful work."

"Thanks, Mom. If you and Conrad need a cake for anything, you just let me know."

"We just might."

Kat gasped. "Grandma, are you and Conrad getting married, too?"

"What? No." Margo frowned at her granddaughter. "I was talking about for a possible book launch party. If and when that day comes. My word, you two have wedding fever all of a sudden."

Kat laughed. "Gotcha. Just teasing."

Margo rolled her eyes but smiled all the same. She'd already given some thought to what it would be like to be married to Conrad, but she wasn't going to tell them that. "I don't need to marry him. I'm going to be living a few minutes' walk away. That's close enough."

"I can't wait to see your new house in person," Kat said. "I think it's cool you're getting your own place. And that it's so close to your boyfriend. Except if you two break up, that could be awkward."

"We're adults, Kat." Margo took some cups down. "If our circumstances change, I'm sure we'll be able to deal with it in a civilized manner."

She didn't see their relationship dissolving, though. If they could write a book together, they could accomplish just about anything.

Willie and Miguel getting married was quite interesting, though. What had pushed them to do something that permanent so soon after meeting? Could they actually be in love? Margo had her doubts. Willie had been married so many times she was probably doing it out of habit.

In Margo's experience, love was something that developed slowly, over time. Lust and infatuation, however, could ignite instantaneously with a flame that burned white hot.

A flame that rarely lasted.

Perhaps Willie was just infatuated. Or maybe it was Miguel, since the man usually did the asking. Although Willie had obviously said yes. Margo shook her head. She didn't understand it at all. Maybe she'd text Willie under the guise of saying congratulations and see what she could find out.

She went back to the bedroom she shared with Jules and got her phone, then went to her chair to sit and wait on the coffee. She texted Willie.

I just heard the news. Congratulations to you and Miguel. What a

surprise! I had no idea you were that serious.

The coffeemaker had just begun to sputter out the last drops.

“I’ll fix your cup, Grandma,” Kat called from the kitchen.

“Thank you. That’s very nice of you to do.” Margo picked up the remote and turned the TV on, scrolling through to the DVR option and the shows she’d recorded. She clicked on the first episode to bring it up.

Her phone vibrated in her hand. She looked down to see Willie had responded.

It was a surprise to me too but why not? We’re not getting any younger, are we? No point in waiting, we figure. That would only leave us with less time to spend together.

Margo couldn’t argue that. It was true that the years seemed to go by faster when you had fewer of them left. To that end, she could only nod at her phone in agreement. *I wish you all the best.*

You’re going to be there, aren’t you?

If I’m invited, of course.

You are! All of you are. Bring a date if you want!

I will. Thank you. Margo smiled as Kat came over with her coffee. She liked the idea of attending the wedding with Conrad. Of being officially out as a couple like that. Which they had been at the play but taking someone to a wedding felt like more of a commitment.

“You’re awfully happy about coffee,” Kat said.

Still smiling at the thought of seeing Conrad dressed up, Margo shook her head. “I was thinking about something else but thank you for the coffee. Will you be inviting Alex to attend Willie’s wedding? We’re all invited.”

Kat set her own cup on the coffee table. “I don’t know. It’s the first I’ve heard about it. How do you know we’re all invited?”

“Willie just told me in a text.”

Kat nodded. “I probably will then. If it’s a night that he’s not on duty.” She snorted. “Can you believe they’re getting married?”

Margo lifted her cup and took a sip, using the action to gather her thoughts. “I can. And I have to say I understand it.”

Kat’s brows went up. “Really? I thought you were going to say something about how foolish it was or how they couldn’t possibly know they were in love or something like that.”

“I might have just a few minutes ago, but Willie made a point that’s got me seeing her side of things. At our age, time isn’t the luxury it was when we

were young.” Margo shrugged. “If they want to be together, why shouldn’t they be? The longer they wait, the less time they have.”

Kat nodded slowly. “I guess that’s true.”

It was. And now Margo couldn’t stop thinking about it, either.

Chapter Seven

Willie tucked her phone away. “Margo’s coming and she’s bringing a date. I guess I need to officially invite the crew upstairs, although I’m sure they all know now.”

Trina looked up from her salon binder. “We could still send invites if you want, Mimi.”

“Nah.” Willie shook her head. “Seems silly when we’re inviting such a small number of people.”

Roxie was in the other chair, feet up. “I’m getting to work on the wedding stuff in earnest tomorrow, Ma. Once we have an officiant and I know the restaurant can handle the catering, we’ll be in good shape. I’m going to ask Jules if she’ll play the wedding march for you, too. If not, we’ll just use a speaker attached to Trina’s phone. Everything else is just fluff.”

“What about my flowers? It doesn’t need to be a big bouquet, but I’d like to carry something,” Willie said.

“You’ll have flowers. Any kind you want in particular?” Roxie asked.

“No lilies. Those are for funerals. How about lavender roses? To go with my hair.” Willie patted her curls and smiled.

Roxie nodded. “I’ll see what I can find. I bet they won’t be cheap.”

“That’s all right. Miguel will need a flower for his shirt. And maybe get some nice centerpieces made up for the tables, too. I suppose I should ask

Miguel if they have any extra tables. We might need to get some. And chairs. And –”

“Ma.”

Willie looked at her daughter.

Roxie smiled. “Don’t stress. We can handle this. *I* can handle it. It’s not much different than throwing a big cookout. Just a few more details is all.”

Willie nodded. “I promise I won’t turn into a bridezilla.”

Roxie laughed. “I know you won’t. Anything you want, you just let me know and I’ll take care of it, okay?”

“Okay,” Willie said.

Trina nodded. “And I’ll take care of your hair and makeup that day, if you want.”

“Of course I want,” Willie said. “I need to look my best. Especially since there will be pictures.” She looked at Roxie again. “We need a photographer.”

“I know. I have that on my list. I swear, I’ll get it all taken care of.”

Willie exhaled. She was getting a little stressed out and that was not like her. “Maybe I need a little gin and tonic to take the edge off. This whole wedding is starting to feel like a very big undertaking.”

“It’s not,” Trina said as she got up. “I’ll fix you a drink. Then you’ve just got to relax and let Ma do her thing.”

“But the timing is terrible,” Willie said. “I admit that much. We should be concentrating on the salon.”

“We are,” Trina said from the kitchen. “And it’s all under control. Don’t forget, we’ve got Ethan helping us there, too.”

“I know.” Willie was glad about that. He was such a help. Just knowing he wouldn’t let anything slip through the cracks was enough to bring her blood pressure down a few points.

Trina brought a glass to her, a wedge of lime nestled among the ice cubes. “There you go.” She went back to the couch and took her seat.

“Thank you.” Willie took a sip and felt better. “I don’t mean to get both of you spun up. There’s just so much going on.”

Roxie looked at her. “What else is going on besides the wedding and the salon?”

“Well, we need to get everything moved out of the Port St. Rosa house. Or at least donated so we can get that place sold.”

“True.” Roxie nodded. “But that can wait until after the wedding, don’t

you think? Although I would like my car. That would help a lot.”

“Let’s do it tomorrow,” Trina said.

Roxie’s brow furrowed. “Get my car?”

“Yeah. I’ll drive and you can make phone calls in the car to the restaurant and the florist and whoever you’re calling about performing the ceremony. Whatever you need to do.”

“I don’t know,” Roxie said.

“It’s a great idea.” Willie lifted her glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

“Ma,” Trina said. “Very soon, I have a bunch of different interviews lined up over at the salon. Tomorrow is the best possible day for me. The rest of the week is going to be a lot busier.”

“Okay,” Roxie said. “Tomorrow it is. Can we leave early? Like eight, maybe?”

“Wow, that is early, but sure.” Trina smiled.

“That way we can get there and come back and still have most of the day left. The restaurant I’m calling about catering probably won’t even be open until eleven a.m.,” Roxie said. “If we get back early, there will be lots of time for making phone calls and anything else I need to do.”

Trina pulled out her phone. “Oh, wait. I can’t leave that early. I’m supposed to have breakfast with Miles tomorrow morning. I don’t want to cancel that.”

Willie had half of her gin and tonic gone and the gin had already softened her mood. “Let Trina go on her breakfast date. You can make your phone calls and leave when she gets back. Miguel and I are going over to Dunes West to look at the lots and model houses they have and see if there is anything we like.”

Trina let out a little gasp. “You’re going to build a brand-new house?”

Willie nodded. “We are. Isn’t that something? Never had a brand-new house in my whole life and now I’m getting one. Maybe. We’ll see what they have over there. We might not like any of it.”

“That is so exciting,” Trina said. Then her smile fell. “But it means you won’t be living here anymore and that makes me a little sad.”

“My girl, I won’t be far away. And you can come visit anytime. Besides, you’re going to want this whole place to yourself someday soon.”

Trina frowned. “Why would I want it all to myself?”

Willie laughed. “You were just talking about having babies! You’re going to need those rooms your ma and I are sleeping in. And I don’t think your

husband, Miles or whoever he ends up being, is going to want to live with his mother-in-law, either.”

She wiggled her finger at Roxie. “But maybe there will have been another wedding by then. Maybe you’ll be living with Ethan by that time, hmm?”

Roxie smiled. “Ma, we aren’t you and Miguel. We’re taking our time.”

“Which is just fine,” Willie said. She swirled the ice in her glass, listening to it. “You should take your time. Make sure things are right. Miguel and I already know things are right. And we have a lot we want to do.”

“Like that honeymoon to Puerto Rico?” Trina asked.

“Exactly like that. And a little trip to Las Vegas, eventually. I’ve got tickets whenever I want them to see Zippy’s son’s magic show. I think Miguel and I could have a good time in Vegas. But Puerto Rico is first.”

“Are you really going for a month?” Roxie asked.

Willie nodded. “Why not? It won’t be until after the salon is open, I promise. But once that happens, you’ll both be busy. You’ll be glad to have me out of the way for a while. Danny will probably feel the same way about Miguel, too, because he’ll have his hands full with the bakery.”

“Mimi, I will never be glad you’re gone or think you’re in the way. But it will be nice knowing you’re off on your honeymoon.” Trina sighed dreamily. “I hope you have the best time ever.”

Willie sat back and drank a little more of her gin and tonic. “I have no doubt it’s going to be the best trip of my life. But it probably would help me to learn a little Spanish. I wonder if I should take some classes.”

Trina laughed. “Mimi, you’re about to marry a man who already speaks Spanish. Why don’t you just ask him to teach you?”

Roxie nodded. “I’m sure he would.”

Willie nodded. “You both make good points. It’s just one more reason for us to spend more time together, too. I’ll text him in the morning about it.”

“There are apps that can help you learn, you know,” Trina said. “I can help you download one on your phone if you want.”

Willie, warmed by the gin, shook her head. “Thank you but that’s too fiddly for me. Apps and all that nonsense. I wouldn’t know what to do with it.” She smiled. “Miguel is the only app I need.”

Chapter Eight

Claire stepped out of the shower and smelled coffee. When she and Kat had gotten back from their beach walk, Kat had promised to get it going while her mom showered and got ready for the day.

There was nothing as good as that first cup, but it was even better knowing that her exercise for the day was already done.

She dressed in her new floral Bermuda shorts and a cute T-shirt. Easy, comfortable clothes for the day ahead of her. Most of the day would be spent in the kitchen, but first she had to take a trip to Michael's, a big arts and crafts store that had a good baking supply section. There she could get the pans she needed for the wedding cake. After that, she'd be off to Publix for a few groceries and some other important ingredients, both for the wedding cake and for another recipe she wanted to work on first.

She was glad they had one more day before the trip back to Landry. Once she got back, she'd have to focus on icing, layering, and decorating the wedding cake. But today, she wanted to try out an old recipe. One of her own, but old in the sense that it had been around a long time.

Sour orange pie.

She'd called around to a few bakeries in the area and no one made them. That surprised her, but then again, the sour orange pie had long ago been supplanted as the Floridian favorite by the now traditional key lime. She

wasn't sure why.

Key lime pies probably had a better public relations department.

Sour oranges had been brought to Florida by Spanish settlers in the 16th century, something she knew from her research. Those oranges, also known as Seville, were still used to make marmalade and marinades. One marinade in particular was popular with both the Cuban and Puerto Rican communities, the mojo marinade. That fact alone made her think that Danny might appreciate reviving such an old, and once very much beloved, recipe.

It was also the kind of dish that could help the bakery stand out. She hadn't made it in a long time, however. She'd gotten the recipe from her mother, who had gotten the recipe from *her* mother. That's how Claire had first experienced it, in her grandmother's kitchen. She wondered when the last time was that her mother had made it.

She went out to the kitchen. No one else was out there yet. "Mom," she called out. "Are you still here?"

Margo came out of the bedroom, drying her hair with a towel. "Shh. Your sister's still sleeping."

"Sorry," Claire whispered.

Margo walked over to her. "That coffee smells wonderful. Is this about the storage unit?"

"No, but thanks for the reminder. Listen, I'm not sure we should get one yet. I'm going to try to bring as little back as possible."

"All right, but I still need to rent one, so it's not a problem either way."

"Okay." Claire got three cups down, knowing Kat would be out soon, too. "What I was going to ask was, when was the last time you made sour orange pie?"

Margo blinked. "I haven't made that in years. It was your father's favorite, you know."

"Was it? I had no idea. Is that why you used to make it all the time?"

Margo nodded. "And the reason I stopped making it."

"I'm thinking it might be a good choice for the bakery's signature pie. I'm going to make a few today." Claire filled two of the cups with coffee and handed one to her mom.

"You are?" Margo smiled as she added cream and a little sweetener to her cup. "That's lovely. About making it the bakery's signature, I mean. It's such a good pie that's basically been forgotten."

"I was thinking the same thing. I'll make three and you can take one to

Conrad. If you think he'd like one."

"I bet he'd love it. I know he likes key lime and, frankly, the sour orange is better, in my opinion. That's very nice of you."

"I'm happy to do it. I'm going to be baking all day anyway." Claire fixed her coffee, then eagerly took a sip. It tasted even better than she'd anticipated.

"Do you have a source for sour oranges?"

She nodded. "I saw them at Publix the other day, but I also know the produce place near the flea market has them. But seeing them at Publix was what got me thinking about the pie again."

"Meringue topping or whipped cream?"

"Meringue. I think traditional is best for this one."

Margo sipped her coffee. "I couldn't agree more. That's how your grandmother always made it."

"And that's how I remember it—with that fluffy mountain of burnished meringue. I plan to recreate the pie of my childhood as best I can."

"Do you have your grandmother's recipe?"

"I do. The original is in my recipe box in Landry, but I have a copy of that card in one of my recipe books here."

Frowning, Margo leaned on the counter. "I don't recall you ever baking that pie while we were here."

"Neither do I, but I must have intended to. I have copies of almost all my recipes here. Mostly what I made was those kitchen-sink bars, chocolate chip cookies, and lemon squares. Bryan always wanted a Publix key lime pie."

Margo sighed. "Those are fine. Publix has a good bakery, but nothing compares to your homemade baked goods."

Claire grinned. "Thanks, Mom."

Kat came out. "Please tell me you two haven't drunk all the coffee."

"Settle down," Margo said. "There's plenty left for you. But we might need to start another pot for Jules and Cash. If they ever wake up."

Claire went ahead and filled Kat's cup, then carried the carafe over to her mom. "Warm you up?"

"Sure." Margo held out her cup.

"Perfect." Claire topped her off, then added the rest to her own cup. "Now I can start a new pot."

Kat held her cup in both hands. "Man, this tastes good today. Did you do something different to the coffee?"

"I put a dash of cinnamon in the grounds," Claire said. "I was in the mood

for a little kick.”

“It’s a good addition.”

“Thanks,” Claire said. “Can I borrow your car for about an hour or so this morning? I need to run out for a few things.”

“Sure,” Kat said. “Anything I can help with?”

“Not really, but you’re welcome to come if you want. I’m going to Michael’s to see about buying larger pans for the wedding cake, then Publix for a few groceries.”

Kat shrugged. “I’m showered and ready. I’ll tag along, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all.” Claire got to making the second pot of coffee. “It is your car.”

“I can drive, too,” Kat said. “I like Michael’s. It always makes me want to make something.” She laughed. “And I am not that crafty. But it might be fun to try a new little project.”

“What kind of project?” Margo asked.

Claire was curious, too.

“No clue,” Kat said. “Maybe something will inspire me in the store. I could use a little inspiration as to what to get Miguel and Willie for a wedding present, too. What do you get two people who probably already have everything they could ever want?”

Claire shook her head. “No idea.” Then she laughed. “Why do you think I’m making them the cake?”

Chapter Nine

Trina wore a cute sundress and put her hair in a high ponytail. She did simple, easy makeup and went light on the jewelry, too. She intended to have a serious conversation with Miles during breakfast and that had put her in a different sort of mood.

She wasn't her usual self, she recognized that. She hoped it wasn't as obvious to him. But the more she thought about having kids, the more she realized she couldn't be with a man who didn't want them.

Beachbums was a funky little place not far from Coconuts in the more artsy part of Diamond Beach. At least that's how Trina looked at it. There were some galleries here, as well as little clothing boutiques, a place that sold homemade candles, soaps, and bath bombs, a tattoo parlor, a juice bar, and one of the Chauncey's surf shop locations.

She'd have to come down here sometime when she could walk around and take a better look. She parked at the restaurant and went in.

Miles was already there, waiting by the front door. "Hey. Morning."

"Hi. Good morning to you."

He leaned in and kissed her. "You sure look better than I do." He laughed.

He was in a surfing T-shirt and a pair of board shorts. "You look just fine to me," Trina said.

“Come on, let’s snag that booth.” He pointed toward the one some folks were just leaving.

“Lead the way,” Trina said. Her nerves were making her jittery. She prayed this conversation was not the last one she ever had with Miles. She liked him too much to want to end things. She would, though, if he was against having kids. That just wasn’t a dream she was willing to give up on.

He stood while she took a seat on the right side of the booth, then he sat across from her. “Is this okay?”

She nodded. “This is great. I like sitting next to you, too, but it’s easier to talk to you this way.”

For a moment, he didn’t react. Then his brow furrowed. “Did something happen? Or is it about to? Is that why you wanted to see me so soon?”

Trina hesitated, not sure how to answer.

He sat back, the look on his face one Trina could only describe as concerned. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“What?” Trina opened her mouth to get more air in her lungs. She hadn’t been expecting that. “Why would you say that?”

He shook his head, eyes narrowed. “You’re not wearing any pink. You always wear pink.”

“Not always.” She glanced down at herself. He was right. Not a speck of pink.

A server came over and dropped off menus and two glasses of water. “Morning. I’m Gina. I’ll be taking care of you this morning. Today’s pancakes are coconut. We also have a mango smoothie as our smoothie of the day. Be right back to get your order.”

Trina swallowed as she picked up her menu. “Coconut pancakes sound good.”

Miles leaned forward. “Are you sure everything’s all right? You didn’t say you *weren’t* breaking up with me.”

She couldn’t lie to him. Maybe she should just flat-out ask him the question she needed an answer to. At least then she’d know if there was any reason for them to keep sitting here, having breakfast together. She took a sip of her water.

“Whatever it is,” Miles said. “I can fix it. Or do better. Or stop doing it. Just give me a chance, okay?”

He was going to make her cry being sweet like that. He had no clue what she was going to say, and he was already trying to keep her from leaving. She

shook her head. "I just need to know something."

"Anything. Whatever it is, I'll tell you."

"I know we've only just started going out, but I like you a lot and—"

"I like you a lot, too."

She smiled. He was sincere. "That's why I kind of need to know how you feel about kids."

"Kids?" He blinked like he wasn't quite understanding the question.

She nodded. "As in, do you want them? Someday, I mean. Not right now. But do you see yourself as a dad?"

He blinked a few more times. Then a slow, easy smile spread across his face. "Yeah, I'd love to have kids." The smile vanished a second later. "Wait. Do you not want kids?"

"No, I do. I do a lot. I just needed to know where you stood on them, because I'm sort of right in the middle of my child-bearing years and being with a guy like you, who's got me thinking about the future, means I'm thinking about kids and if you didn't want them—"

He took her hand. "I do. Like maybe three. But I'd be okay with two. Or four. I have three brothers and two sisters, so I kinda dig the idea of a big family."

Trina exhaled and grinned. "You're one of six?"

He nodded. "Crazy, right?"

"Not crazy. Super cool." Trina's excitement came back. She'd been worried over nothing. She squeezed his hand. "You know what? I just found out about and met my baby brother last night."

"What?" Miles's brow bent. "You're going to have to explain that one."

She laughed. "I will, totally. Maybe we should figure out what we're getting first."

"Right." He let go of her hand, picked up his menu, then put it down again. "Hey, we're good, right?"

She nodded, admiring his handsome face. He'd make a great dad someday. "We are so good."

"Cool." He went back to his menu.

Trina stared at him over the top of hers. Miles wanted kids. Lots of kids. She kind of wanted to text her mom and Mimi to tell them, but that was silly. She focused on deciding about her meal.

"Do you know what you're getting?" Miles asked.

"I was thinking about the Surfer's Delight. Veggie omelet with pepper

jack cheese and a side of home fries.” She lowered her menu. “You?”

“I’m thinking the Elvis Special.”

Trina frowned. “What’s that? I didn’t see that.”

“Second under Pancakes.”

She looked. Banana pancakes layered with peanut butter and served with a side of bacon. She laughed. “That looks like a lot of food.”

“I’m going to hit the waves for a couple hours before I go in tonight. I’ll work it off. You’re welcome to come. Can you?”

“No. I’m driving my mom back to Port St. Rosa so we can get some more of our stuff and she can bring her car back.”

“Oh. Next time?”

“Definitely next time.” She put her menu down. “Can I have a bite of your pancakes?”

“You can have anything you want.”

She smiled. That had never felt more true.

Chapter Ten

Roxie went out for her beach walk as usual, but all the wedding talk had gotten her thinking about dropping a few pounds before the big day. Mostly so she could eat an extra slice of cake and not worry about it.

She added a few bursts of running to her walk. Near the end, she added some walking lunges. The sand made them trickier than usual. She made sure to take the stairs when she got back, too. She was dripping with sweat by the time she reached the first floor. No surprise there, since she'd stayed out longer and gone farther, thanks to the running.

Despite the sweat, she was glad she'd done it. She'd gotten in a great workout she hadn't expected. She went in through the back sliders and looked through the reading nook at the bedrooms.

Trina's door was open. Roxie knew she had already gone to breakfast with Miles, though, because her car hadn't been parked under the house.

Roxie prayed that conversation went well. She knew how bothered Trina had been last night at the thought of having to break up with him. The last thing Roxie wanted was for that sweet girl to get her heart broken.

There would never be a good time for that, but now was especially not a good time. Not with the salon and the wedding to work on.

Willie's door was shut, which meant she was still in bed. No shock there. Roxie went to her room and straight to the shower. She was still thinking

about changing the color of her hair to a softer, strawberry blond. Or maybe that was called rose gold these days?

There was just too much going on for her to bring it up to Trina. Maybe in the car on the way to Port St. Rosa today would be the perfect time. They'd have a couple of hours to do nothing but talk.

Especially if Roxie got a lot of her calls made this morning. The restaurant would have to wait, but the rest she might be able to do. She took a shower, shampooing her hair, which she knew would take a little of the color out of it. She didn't mind. It would only lighten up the red, which she wanted to do anyway.

When she got out and towel-dried her hair, she checked the red in the mirror. Didn't look like she'd lost much color. Trina was just too good at what she did. If Roxie really wanted to strip the color, a dip in the pool's chlorinated water would help. She didn't have time for that today, though.

Roxie dressed in capri leggings and a cute top that would be comfortable enough for the trip, then went out to make coffee and find something for breakfast. She settled on a yogurt cup for the meantime. After her mom got up, she'd make a protein smoothie but using the blender now would make too much noise.

She finished the yogurt about the time the coffee was done, so she fixed a big cup, then took it, her phone, and her wedding notebook out to the back porch.

She opened to a blank page and wrote Officiant on the top. She knew Miguel wanted a priest but she wasn't sure if she should start by calling churches or if he already had one in mind. She had his number. She supposed she might as well text him to ask. If he wasn't up yet, he could answer when he was.

Morning! Do you have a priest in mind for the ceremony? Or should I just see who I can find? Let me know when you get a chance. Working on planning the big day. Thanks!

While she waited for him to respond, she went about halfway down the page and wrote Flowers.

She went to Google on her phone and typed in, "florists near me." She looked at the first three that came up. All of them had good reviews.

She called the first one.

"Good morning, Tara's Flowers. How can I help you?"

"Hi. We're looking to do a small beach wedding very soon. We wouldn't

need a lot of flowers. A bridal bouquet, a boutonniere, and maybe three centerpieces. Is that something you could handle?”

“Maybe. How soon is soon?”

Roxie squeezed her eyes shut. “This weekend.”

“This coming weekend?”

“That’s what we’re hoping for.”

“Hmm. We already have two events on the calendar. I don’t think we could handle another one. I’m sorry. We’re a small shop.”

“Okay, I understand. Thanks.” Roxie hung up, had a drink of her coffee, then dialed the second place on the list.

“Fresh Vines, Kim speaking. How can I help?”

Roxie decided to go with more info up front. “Hi, Kim. We’re hoping to do a small beach wedding this weekend and need some flowers. Nothing major. A bridal bouquet, a boutonniere, and three centerpieces. Any way you could do that?”

“Wow, this weekend?”

“I know,” Roxie said. “It’s very short notice, but it all just sort of happened.”

“Are you flexible on flowers? Or is there something particular you’re looking for?”

“Lavender roses. No lilies.”

“Hmm. I can get lavender roses, but they aren’t cheap, regardless of the variety you pick. And it might mean expediting them to make sure they arrive in time to be arranged. Do you have a budget?”

“We’re flexible on that. You said you have a variety of lavender roses?”

“We do. There are moonlights, which are kind of a lavender-gray; cotton clouds, which are a white-based rose that have lavender and pale blue petal tips; and the vogue roses, which are a pinky-lavender.”

“I’ve never heard of any of them, but the cotton clouds sound like something my mom would love. She’s the one getting married.” Roxie picked up her coffee and took a few sips. This was a job for caffeine.

“How nice! Just so you’re aware, the cotton cloud roses would need to be expediated, since they’re a hand-tinted rose and take a little more time.”

Roxie had been wondering how they could get those colors into a single flower. “Could you send me a picture of all three roses so we can see them for ourselves? I’m ready to make this happen today, I just need to be sure my mom is happy with the selection.”

“Sure. Do you want me to email them or text them?”

“Email them. You know what? Email them *and* text them, just to be sure.” Roxie gave the woman Trina’s email.

“I’ll get those right to you. A decision today would give us the best chance at getting this done in your timeframe.”

“I totally understand. Kim, right?”

“Right. And you are?”

“Roxie Thompson. Kim, I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome. I look forward to hearing from you.”

Roxie hung up and went inside to refill her coffee. If Willie wasn’t up, Roxie was going to wake her. She felt like she had to get these flowers ordered as soon as possible to make sure they could be done.

Thankfully, Willie was already at the coffeemaker. Still in her robe, but awake was all that mattered.

“I’m glad you’re up, Ma. We have flowers to look at.”

Willie turned, cup in hand. “Already? You work fast.”

Roxie nodded. “That’s the only way we’re going to get this wedding done. The woman from the flower shop is going to send me pictures. I had her email them to Trina and text them to me. I haven’t seen them yet, but she described them to me on the phone.”

Willie took her cup to her chair and sat. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Let me just grab a second cup of coffee, then I’ll see if they’ve come in.” Roxie filled her cup, fixed the brew the way she liked it, and went to sit by her mom. She put her cup on the coffee table, then looked at her phone. The text had arrived.

Kim had shared a link with her. Roxie clicked it and gave the photos a second to load. As the one of the cotton clouds came in, she almost laughed. The rose was about as perfect as could be. The soft white base of the flower melted into a pastel lavender and a soft, sky blue at the ends of the petals. “Oh, Ma. You are going to love these. They look like they were made for you. Which, technically, they will be, because as the woman explained to me, they’re a hand-tinted rose.”

Roxie tapped on the picture, then made it bigger so the single bloom filled the screen. She held it out to her mom. “What do you think?”

Willie leaned in, squinting. “Is that a real rose?”

“It is. It’s a white rose that they hand-color somehow.”

Willie put her hand to her mouth. “I’ve never seen anything like it. They match my dress perfectly. I don’t care what they cost. I want those.”

Roxie grinned. “I thought you would. Bridal bouquet, boutonniere for Miguel, and three centerpieces, right? That’s what I plan on getting.”

“That sounds right,” Willie said. “Plus the arch.”

Roxie frowned. “What arch?”

“I want an arch of them for Miguel and me to stand in front of when we say our vows. It’ll look nice in the pictures.”

Roxie nodded. “I agree with that. But we don’t have an arch.”

“Maybe the florist does.” Willie shrugged. “If not, we can buy one. I bet Amazon sells them. Amazon sells everything.”

“Any other flowers you’re going to want before I call the shop back?”

Willie drank her coffee and seemed to think about that. “How about some petals to throw around on the ground? To make it look pretty.”

“Petals. I can ask.”

“Great.”

Roxie called Fresh Vines again.

Kim answered, just like she had the first time.

“Hi, Kim, it’s Roxie. Just showed my mom the pictures and she loves the cotton clouds. We both do. There’s one thing we’d like to add, if possible. An arch of those same roses. Something that my mom and her fiancé can stand in front of during the ceremony. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Sure, we do those all the time for weddings. Especially beach weddings.”

“So you have an arch we can borrow or rent or however that works?”

“We do. And you want that whole thing covered in the cotton cloud roses?”

“Yes. With greenery, too, or whatever you normally do. My mom would like some petals to scatter around the ceremony site, as well. Is that something you can provide us with?”

“Absolutely. Give me a little time to talk to our supplier and price this out and I’ll get back to you in maybe an hour or two? Then, if you’re happy, I can take a verbal approval and a credit card deposit, and we’ll get started. I’ll need the address of the venue, as well.”

“Sounds good. I look forward to hearing from you.” Roxie hung up and looked at her mom. “Well, I think we’ve got flowers. Now we just need someone to marry you and someone to make the food and we’ll be just about

there.”

Chapter Eleven

Jules sat on the porch, staring out at the water, sipping her much-needed cup of coffee. She hadn't slept so late in a long time, but she and Cash had been up until almost one a.m. practicing *Dixie's Got Her Boots On* and working on a new song that Cash had been noodling around with, a song he called *Bayou Moon*.

It was a sweet, rolling tune about falling in love and being so smitten with the object of that love that you couldn't see their faults. Jules loved the song and after tweaking some of the lyrics, had decided it was perfect for the album.

Which was now really coming together, something she was very thankful for.

She should really go in and get her day started, but the warmth of the sun and the gentle breeze had lulled her into an almost trancelike state. If not for the fact that she was just about out of coffee, she might have stayed longer.

Reluctantly, she got up and went inside. Cash was in the kitchen, getting himself some coffee.

"Morning."

He turned. "Morning, Mom. I know we're supposed to go practice in the studio today, but I haven't showered yet or anything."

"No worries, neither have I." She stood by while he finished getting his

coffee. “I was thinking about your new song. I really like it.”

“*Your* new song.”

“You did most of the work on it.” She smiled. “*Our* new song. How about that?”

He nodded. “Cool with me. Can I get like an hour before we go?”

“That sounds fine.”

He moved away from the coffeemaker but didn’t head back upstairs like she expected. “So, um, Mom. Would you mind if Sierra sat in with us today?”

Jules picked up the carafe to refill her cup. She hadn’t expected that. “Sat in with us? In what way?”

He shrugged. “You know, like played the keyboard. Maybe sing a little backup on some of the songs.”

Jules gave him a look. “You already told her she could come, didn’t you?”

“I might have kind of mentioned it. But she’s good, I swear. I know how important your music is. I would never have brought it up if I didn’t think she was worthy of being there. Okay, in truth, I have no idea about her keyboard skills. But I’ve heard her sing, and she would be great on backups.”

Jules filled her cup, then put the carafe back. “Okay. I trust you. I am giving you an associate producer credit on this album, so that means I have to actually let you associate produce. But if I don’t think she’s right for the album, I get final say.”

He grinned. “Absolutely, you get the last word. Thanks, Mom. You’re really going to like her.”

“I hope so. Now, I’d better get in the shower.”

“Yeah, me, too. See you back here in an hour.”

She nodded as she went off to the bathroom. She was pretty sure she and Cash were the only ones still here. Kat and Claire had gone to run some errands, and Margo had left earlier to go write with Conrad.

Jules turned the water on to get warm, then picked out her clothes. Jeans, in case the studio was cold, which they could be sometimes, a Dolly Parton T-shirt, and her boots. That was really all she needed to get herself in the mood to work in a studio.

She went back to the bathroom, bringing her phone with her but leaving it on the counter. She wanted to replay the recording she’d made of *Bayou Moon* while she was getting ready. The last verse felt not quite right to her

yet.

She showered fast, got out, and got dressed, then went back into the bathroom to dry her hair and put on some makeup, all while listening to the song on repeat. She just about had some new lyrics worked out when the song stopped. She glanced down at her phone. The screen was lit up, but went black as she looked at it, making her realize she'd missed a call.

She swiped her finger across the screen to see who it had been from. Billy, her agent. She called him right back.

"Jules! How are you?"

"Really good. The album is taking shape beautifully."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear. You'll be happy to know I secured the rights to *Folsom Prison Blues*. It's all yours to record."

"Excellent news! That's fantastic! Thank you."

"The Johnny Cash Estate was happy to do it and, I quote, 'very interested to hear what such a talented musician like Julia Bloom would do with the classic song,' so no pressure or anything."

She laughed. "I'm actually going to be working in the studio today, getting a feel for the place. Maybe Cash and I will do a run-through. My son, I mean."

"I know who you mean."

"You should hear the song he wrote for the album. The kid is on fire these days."

"You know," Billy said. "I believe that whole mother-son angle will really appeal to the media. Good idea there."

"I wasn't doing it because I thought it would be a good gimmick," Jules clarified.

"I know that," Billy said. "Just pointing out that it's the sort of thing that will get latched onto. It'll be all over social media. You need to prepare Cash for what could be coming."

Jules nodded, even though Billy couldn't see her. "I'll mention it to him."

"Good. Can't wait to hear that demo."

"You'll have it sometime next week. Promise."

"I'm already working on a press release. Talk to you soon." Billy hung up.

Jules put her phone down and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Cash had never wanted to make his way in the world because of who his parents were, but that might no longer be an option once this song went live. Billy

was right. Social media would definitely take notice of who he was.

She had to make sure he understood that and was, like Billy said, prepared for what it might mean.

Of course, much of that depended on how well this song did.

She used a wide-tooth comb to detangle her hair and comb it into place, then she let it air dry while she finished her makeup. Nothing fancy. Just enough to brighten up her face and look cute. Jesse would be there, after all.

She sighed. She still hadn't talked to him about the possibility of joining her for some of the tour. Mostly because she wasn't sure how he'd react. But maybe today there'd be a good time to bring up the subject.

It would be nice to have him along. She'd never toured with anyone she'd cared about in that kind of way. If he said yes, she'd have Jesse and Cash with her.

She smiled. That would be something, wouldn't it?

She brushed a little setting powder over her makeup, dried her hair, then grabbed her purse and went out to see if Cash was ready. He was. And he'd remembered to bring her guitar down, in its case. "Thanks, honey. I forgot to mention I'd need that."

"Associate producers just know that kind of stuff." He was sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone.

She smiled. "I guess they do. Hey, I heard from Billy. I got the rights for *Folsom Prison Blues*."

He looked up. "Sweet. Can we run through that today? That would be fun."

"Sure." She thought about what else Billy had said. "Listen, Billy thinks you need to be prepared for being outed as my son on this album. He said it's exactly the kind of thing social media will pick up on and probably leverage for clicks."

Cash nodded. "Yeah, I thought about that."

She sat on a couch, a cushion away from him. "You okay with that? You've always wanted to make it on your own."

"I know." He leaned forward, putting his phone down. "It's a two-edged sword, you know? I mean, I'm having a lot of fun and really grateful for this chance, but at the same time, you know there's been a lot of garbage in the media lately about nepo babies."

"You mean kids of famous people making a name for themselves because of their parents."

He nodded. “Yeah. I guess it’s inevitable that I’ll get called that.” He shrugged. “Not much I can do about it, so why get bothered. Maybe we should take advantage of it and push the family angle ourselves.”

“Maybe.” There was some wisdom in that.

“Whatever happens, I’m not about to turn down working with you. This is the most fun and the most I’ve felt in a long time like I was doing something that I was meant to be doing. I don’t care what anyone says about me. I want to keep doing this.”

Jules reached out and patted his leg. “So do I. Let’s go see how we sound in that studio, okay?”

Cash nodded. “Yeah. Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate you doing this for me.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.” Then she winked at him. “I’m so glad you haven’t seen through my plan of using you as cheap labor.”

Chapter Twelve

*K*at hadn't been in a Michael's craft store in a while. She was amazed by how many different things they offered. Pretty much anything crafty, they had. Plus a lot of stuff that was only marginally crafty.

While her mom went nuts in the baking section, Kat wandered the aisles, looking for inspiration. There was plenty of it available. Jewelry-making kits, but also tons of supplies that could be bought separately if you knew what to do with them. She didn't, as much as she loved the idea of making jewelry.

There was yarn of every color, thickness, and texture you could imagine. Knitting needles in metal, wood, and plastic. Some as big around as her thumb. Some so thin they looked like they were meant for mice. Another area held paints, brushes, and canvases, all of which she found intimidating. Her skill set did not lie in that direction, that much she was sure of.

It wasn't in scrapbooking, either. That felt like a lifetime commitment, which was definitely more time than she was willing to spend.

Some of the aisles, like the ones that held all of the artificial flowers, vases, and the stuff that went with making bouquets, she skipped altogether. Creating silk arrangements held no appeal.

She moved on to look through the seasonal stuff, which was heavily focused on summer, Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July. Some of it was already marked down, because apparently, they needed to make room for,

what, Labor Day stuff? Back to School?

She had no idea and didn't care. All she wanted was something simple and fun, that wouldn't create too much mess, take three weeks to complete, or require a set of skills she didn't already possess.

There had to be something in the store that fit that description.

She was currently standing in an aisle that seemed to contain mostly pre-made wall-hangings that looked hand-painted but probably weren't. Silly little signs that said things like, "Just Breathe," and, "Eat, Sleep, Beach." That last one was actually cute and might look nice over the sliders that went out to the porch.

Maybe she could make something like that. She'd seen unpainted wood plaques in another area, along with all sorts of unpainted wooden things. Boxes, letters, numbers, birds, bunnies—you name it, they had it in wood or brown papier mâché.

Would she be able to paint letters that looked that nice, though? She doubted it. Her handwriting wasn't even that good.

Then she took a few more steps and found the exact thing she'd been looking for. Smiling, she reached up and took the box off the shelf. It was a kit to make a clock, the body of which was a surfboard about eighteen inches long. It came with a small palette of paints in plastic pots and a single brush, as well as the clock mechanism and a hanger on the back to attach it to the wall.

There were only two kits left, because they were marked down to half-price, which meant she could get both of them for twenty bucks total. She took them and put them in her basket, then went back to the area where she'd seen craft paints and brushes.

She picked up a few bottles of colors that were beachier than what was included. An aqua, a soft coral, and a lemony yellow, then a bright white, because that seemed like an important option to have. She also selected two additional brushes.

She'd already decided to use the first kit as practice. She'd make it for herself, so if it didn't come out that great, that was okay. But the second one was going to be a gift for Alex. A thank you for teaching her how to surf and for always being there when she needed him and for just being a good human. And a pretty spectacular boyfriend.

She put everything in her basket and went to find her mom. Kat found her still in the baking section, looking at flavorings. Her cart was nearly

overflowing.

Kat glanced in. “Did you leave anything for anyone else to buy?”

Her mom laughed. “Not much.”

“What is all that stuff?”

“Mostly wedding cake supplies.”

Kat just nodded, not fully understanding what that meant, but if her mom needed it, Kat was sure it was important.

Claire nodded at Kat’s basket. “What did you find?”

Kat pulled one of the kits out. “Make-your-own surfboard clock kit. Half-price. I’m going to make one for me and one for Alex.”

“How fun. Did you see anything that might make a nice gift for Willie and Miguel’s wedding?”

Kat sighed. “No. To be honest, I completely forgot. I was so wrapped up in trying to find a crafty thing I could actually do that it just slipped my mind.”

“Why don’t you go back toward the front of the store and look at all the picture frames? A beautiful picture frame for a wedding photo always comes in handy, even if it’s not the first time you’re getting married.”

“Hey,” Kat said. “That’s a great idea. Okay, I’m off to look. Are you just about done?”

Her mom nodded. “Yep. I’ll see you at the checkout in about five minutes.”

“Deal.” Kat went toward frames and found one pretty quickly that felt just about perfect. It was a chalk-white frame with shells carved into it but also accented with spots of clear glitter. And it held an eight-by-ten photo, which seemed like a nice size for a wedding photo.

Kat added one to her basket, then headed for the registers. Her mom was last in line. Kat stood next to her and showed her the frame. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s very Willie. Not only that, but it’s going to match the cake beautifully.”

“Yeah?”

Claire nodded and pulled something out of her cart to show Kat. She held up the small container. “Edible glitter.”

Kat laughed. “Now that is *very* Willie. It’s very Roxie and Trina, too.”

Claire smiled. “It is. I really hope this cake ends up looking as good in real life as it does in my head.”

“Mom, I’m sure it will. You have skills in the kitchen. Plus, you can always learn new ones by watching YouTube.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“Yep,” Kat said. “There are videos that will teach you just about anything you want to learn. From changing your own oil to replacing guitar strings and everything else. I’ve never looked for ones about cake decorating, but I guarantee you they’re on there.”

“Hmm.” Claire looked at her daughter. “I just realized what I need from the Landry house more than anything.”

“What’s that?”

“My laptop. You know, I never did much with it beyond email and some Facebook, but I think it’s about to get a whole lot more use. I could definitely use a class in gum paste. And fondant work.”

Kat just nodded, not entirely sure what those things were. “Well, YouTube will have whatever you need.”

“Good,” her mom said. “That will help a lot.”

“Do you plan on doing wedding cakes at the bakery?”

Her mom frowned. “No way. That is way too much work.”

“That’s why the bakers who make them charge thousands of dollars.”

Her mom’s eyes narrowed. “Did you say thousands? That can’t be right.”

Kat laughed. “Mom, when was the last time you priced wedding cakes?”

“Never, actually.”

“Well, I did when Ray and I first started talking about getting married and a nicely decorated cake to feed two hundred people, without any fancy flavors or over-the-top design features, would have been eight hundred dollars. The really high-end cakes go for crazy money. One of the wedding sites I used to visit said to expect to pay as much as fifteen dollars a slice for a premium custom cake.”

“Fifteen?” Her mom blinked. “That’s ... three grand for a cake to feed two hundred people.”

Kat nodded. “That’s what I was saying.”

Claire glanced at her cart full of baking supplies. “Maybe I shouldn’t be so fast to say no to wedding cakes, huh?”

Kat grinned. “Just remember who suggested it.”

Chapter Thirteen

“All right. What comes next?” Conrad asked.

Margo pressed her lips firmly together and tried to think as she stared at the computer screen. That didn’t help. She had no answer to Conrad’s question. “I don’t know.”

He looked over at her, his hands coming off the keyboard. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I just don’t.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ve been thinking about the house here and the house in Landry and getting a storage unit and everything that has to be done and I’m ashamed to say I’ve lost the thread of the book.”

His mouth bent in a quirky little smile, and he chuckled. “That happens. Trust me. I’ve been in the middle of writing an article and forgotten what the subject was.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not. The brain doesn’t always want to focus on what we want it to.” He leaned back. “You know, this might be the perfect stopping point for us to print this thing out and take some time to read through it and mark it up.”

“Mark it up? You mean rewrites?”

“Maybe not rewrites, unless you think it’s needed. Just a little preliminary edit. Typos, maybe a change of a word, an addition to clarify something or

deepen the emotional impact. That sort of thing.”

“Do you think we’re ready for that?”

“I do. We’ve got fifty pages, so it’s a decent chunk to work on.”

Margo gasped. “Do we really? I had no idea we’d written that much.”

“Impressive, isn’t it?”

She smiled. “It is, rather.”

“So is that a yes to the read-through? We’ll both get ourselves firmly back in the story and we may even come up with some new ideas.”

“That’s a yes,” she said.

“All right. Let me just make sure my printer has enough paper in it and we’ll get it going.”

He fiddled around with that for a few moments, then came back to the computer, and tapped a few keys. The printer started up and, seconds later, began spitting out pages.

“Want an Arnold Palmer while we wait?”

“I’d love one,” Margo said.

They went off to the kitchen. He added ice to two glasses, then got the bottles of iced tea and lemonade out of the refrigerator. He filled the glasses halfway with iced tea first, then topped them off the rest of way with lemonade. He handed one to Margo. “Cheers.”

She clinked her glass against his. “Cheers.” She took a sip. Living in Florida as long as she had, she’d known what an Arnold Palmer was, but she didn’t think she’d had one until meeting Conrad. He loved them on a warm day, and she had to admit, it was a very refreshing drink.

“Where are you going to read?” he asked. “Living room?”

“Maybe. Are you going to be in there? I don’t want to bother you if you are.”

“It won’t bother me if you’re in there, too. I’ll be in my chair. You can have the couch.”

“All right.”

He held his glass out to her. “If you take the drinks in, I’ll go get the pages and two pens.”

“Will do.” She headed off to the living room. It was a very manly room, with beige shag carpeting, a blue and tan plaid sofa, and a large tan leather recliner. The sofa had a throw on it with the Marine insignia. Most of the art and knickknacks were nautically or patriotically themed. A big-screen television was the main focus of the space, but there was a stack of books on

the table beside Conrad's recliner.

She set the drinks down, but quickly pulled out two cork coasters bearing the Marine insignia on them and put those underneath the glasses. One on the table by his recliner and one on the coffee table for her.

That done, she went to get her phone out of her purse on the kitchen counter, just to be sure she didn't have any messages.

There was one from Claire. *Need anything from the store? Kat and I are headed there next.*

Margo typed back, *You're getting groceries, right?*

Yes.

I like that salad Jules made last night. Let's have that again this week. But with shrimp and some feta cheese. Margo had enjoyed her lunch with Conrad at the Olive Grill so much she wanted those flavors again.

Okay, Claire responded. *Anything else?*

Nothing I can think of, Margo answered.

Conrad returned. "Here you go." He handed Margo a stack of papers and a pen but gave her a look that held some uncommon tension in his gaze. "I hope this holds up."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. I hope so, too."

She went to the couch. She supposed they wouldn't really know if the book was any good until someone else read it. They were obviously too close to the words to be truly objective, even if they tried.

But she felt like reading it this way, as a whole body of work, as opposed to just the snippets they reread on a daily basis, would definitely give them a feel for how the book was coming along. She hoped it would also help them uncover any obvious flaws or plot holes.

For a moment, she questioned their decision to write a thriller that required so much setup and intelligent planning, but they'd made it this far. Might as well push on. If nothing else, it would be a learning experience.

She sat down, pulled her reading glasses off the top of her head to settle them on her nose, and began.

In his recliner, Conrad did the same. Almost immediately, he paused and made a notation in the margins. She looked more closely at the words in front of her. What had he seen that she hadn't? She read a little further and found the typo she suspected he'd marked. They'd missed a preposition.

She made a note of her own, just in case that wasn't what he'd spotted, and read on. More than once, she found her attention disappearing into the

story. She had to remind herself that she was supposed to be reading critically, looking for places to tighten or improve.

She backed up once or twice to reread certain paragraphs. She made a couple of notes. Found a few spots that needed different words. Added a line of description. But nothing major. She even underlined a particularly good phrase she liked, uncertain which one of them had come up with it.

By the time she was done, an hour had passed. Conrad finished a minute or two after her. She waited, watching for him to look up.

He did, his gaze focusing on her expectantly. “What do you think?”

“I found a couple things to improve on. Some words to change. A spot that could be expanded. Minor things, really.”

He nodded. “So did I. But what did you think of the story so far as a whole?”

She hesitated. “We’re both biased, obviously.”

“Obviously. But we’re also going to be our own worst critics.”

“Right.” She glanced at her pages again. “It feels odd to say this, but...”

“Yes?”

She looked at him again. “I loved it.”

He grinned. “So did I.”

Chapter Fourteen

Willie was about as happy as she'd ever been. Her wedding was coming together. The flowers Roxie had shown her were perfect. Willie couldn't have imagined anything better. Now she and Miguel were off to Dunes West in the Uber he'd hired to take them there.

Shopping for land and a new house wasn't something she'd ever thought she'd get to do. The very idea of a new house, a place that no one else had ever lived in, was pretty thrilling. To think that she and Miguel would be the first ones to call it home felt like a gift.

What would it be like to have a new house? She imagined it would be like having a new car, which was something else she'd never had before. As a little girl, she remembered her uncle having one, once upon a time. She could just faintly recall the scents of leather and a kind of antiseptic cleanliness she'd never smelled in a car before.

She looked over at Miguel, seated next to her in the back seat. "Do you think a new house has a new house smell?"

He smiled and nodded. "I do."

"I can't wait to see what they have."

He was holding her hand. He gave it a little squeeze. "Me, too. Nothing is too good for you, my love."

He'd started calling her that and it tickled her every time he said it. "Well,

I feel the same way. Nothing is too good for you. Remember, we're going fifty-fifty on this."

"I know," he reassured her.

"Although I don't mind pitching in a little more."

He shook his head. "I won't hear of it."

Ten minutes later, the Uber driver pulled into the driveway of the model home that was also being used as the sales office for the Dunes West development. There were more homes lined up down the sidewalk, five or six of them in a row, all with narrow, vertical flags outside proudly proclaiming them as models.

Willie and Miguel got out and went inside. Miguel had made an appointment with a man named Rob Downing and as they walked in, he greeted them.

"Hello, folks. I'm Rob Downing. You must be Miguel and Willie."

Miguel nodded. "We are."

The place smelled like cookies. Willie took that as a good sign.

Rob shook their hands. "Great to meet you. I understand you'd like to look at some of our model homes."

"And see what lots you have available," Willie said.

Rob nodded. "Why don't we start there? Sometimes the lot will dictate what can be built, depending on the size and location. Certain neighborhoods in Dunes West have certain requirements."

"Sounds good," Miguel said. "We'd also like something with a water view. If you have that."

Willie nodded. They'd talked about it and since they were leaving the beach, they were hoping for some other kind of water. Dunes West had several lakes and canals. Either of those would be fine with her.

"We do," Rob said. "If you're looking for something boatable, we have an area called The Preserve. It's our most exclusive neighborhood. The lots are oversized, and they all have direct access to the Gulfway Canal, which leads directly to the Gulf, as the name implies." Rob seemed to be watching their expressions. "Those lots go for a premium, as you can imagine."

Willie lifted her chin. Premiums didn't frighten her. "Can you show them to us on a map?"

Rob held his hand out toward the center of the office, where a large table held a display. "I have the layout of the entire property right over here. I can show you exactly which lots still remain."

“Lead on,” Willie said.

Rob went ahead of them.

Miguel glanced at her. “You know what he means by premium, don’t you?”

Willie nodded. “Expensive. I don’t care. This is the last house I’m ever going to live in. I want exactly what I want.”

He smiled. “Whatever you wish, my love.”

They met Rob at the table. He showed them on the map where The Preserve was. A fat line of blue meandered through it, with some smaller blue offshoots. “There’s the main canal, as you can see here. And then there are some smaller ones. There are pros and cons to being on the main canal. For one thing, it has the most boat traffic. We have rules about speed and noise and all of that, but it can still be busy at times. The pros, however, are that it’s faster to get to the Gulf, if that’s something that matters to you. And you’re more likely to see dolphins in the main canal. Not that they won’t show up in the side channels, too, they just seem to favor the main canal more.”

“Dolphins?” Willie smiled. She liked the sound of that. She didn’t think she’d mind the boat traffic, either. It would give them something to sit and watch in the morning while they had their coffee.

“Absolutely.” Rob nodded. “There can be some good fishing in the main canal, too. If that interests you.”

“Sure,” Miguel said. “I like to do a little fishing now and then.”

There was one lot that caught Willie’s eye. Because of a slight bend in the canal, the lot was pie-shaped with the widest end being on the canal, meaning it had more waterfront than the rest. She pointed to it. “How much is that one?”

Rob smiled. “You have great taste, Willie. That’s the last of our estate lots. It’s even bigger than the average Preserve lot. It’s currently listed at five hundred and ninety-nine thousand.”

Beside her, Miguel stiffened slightly. He glanced at her, but Willie just smiled and nodded. “Let’s go have a look at it.”

“I’ll get the keys to one of the golf carts,” Rob said.

As he went off to do that, Miguel looked at her. “That is an awful lot of money for land that still needs a house on it.”

“I can afford it.” She smiled at him. “And just think, if we get a boat, our families will have that much more reason to come visit us.”

He nodded. “That is true. But it’s so much money.”

“Do you have anything better to spend it on?”

He shook his head and laughed. “No. Let’s go see this lot.”

Rob returned with the keys and a folder emblazoned with the Dunes West name on the front. “I brought you a folder of our nicest floorplans, too. That lot will take any house you like in here.”

“Thanks,” Willie said.

Rob led them out to the driveway where the golf carts, also bearing the navy and green DW logo, sat waiting.

“I’ll sit in the back,” Willie volunteered. She figured that way the men could talk. She wanted to be able to look at the area, see what sort of place Dunes West was. She hoped it wasn’t full of fuddy-duddies. Some old people were downright boring.

She saw all sorts as they drove through the streets. Old people who looked old. Old people who looked young. Some who looked exactly their age.

They turned into The Preserve, which was easy to tell, because the entrance was marked with a grand sign and lots of big palms and showy landscaping. She liked it already.

Rob slowed as they went toward a guard shack. He waved at the guard and the long gate in front of them went up.

Now that was impressive. Willie leaned forward. “This is a gated area?”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Our most secure. No one who doesn’t live here is allowed in unless they’re on a guest list, and even then the guard will call and get the homeowner’s permission.”

“Fancy,” Willie said. The place was growing on her by leaps and bounds.

They drove on. A golf cart went past. The woman driving it had a pink streak in her silver hair. She waved at Willie and Willie waved back.

“I think I found my people,” she said to herself.

But they still needed to see the lot and figure out what kind of house they could have. If they were going to spend a lot of money on the lot, that meant the house couldn’t be too outrageous. Then again, they were splitting everything fifty-fifty.

She’d be okay putting a million bucks up for her part.

But maybe that was more than Miguel was comfortable with. She knew he had money, but not how much exactly.

Seemed to her the time was right for a more serious conversation about the subject. Later, though. Not now.

Rob parked beside an empty lot. The land had several nice-sized trees. Willie liked those. On either side were two good-looking houses.

“This is it,” Rob announced as he got out of the cart. “Why don’t we walk through and have a look at the canal?”

They both got out and followed him. Willie took Miguel’s hand. “What do you think so far?”

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “Living here, with you, would feel like a dream.”

She smiled. “It would. I know it’s a lot of money—”

“Pah.” His brow furrowed. “Don’t listen to me. How can you put a price on a dream? You can’t.”

She kissed his cheek, more in love with him than ever. “I agree.”

Rob was standing at the end of the property line. He pointed toward the canal. “Look. What did I tell you?”

Willie and Miguel joined him. A pair of dolphins were swimming by.

Willie’s heart fluttered a little at the sight of them. It felt like a sign to her.

Miguel looked at Rob. “You are a man of your word.”

He glanced at Willie.

She had no trouble reading the question in his eyes. She nodded, giving him her answer.

Miguel smiled at Rob. “We’ll take it.”

Chapter Fifteen

Claire was grateful for Kat's help bringing the groceries in. Claire had enough bags from Michael's that her hands were already full. Kat helped put the groceries away, too.

While she did that, Claire worked on organizing the new baking supplies she'd bought. She set the pans aside to handwash, and found a drawer for the rest, except for the flavorings, food dyes, and decorating bits. Those went on a shelf in the pantry.

"What do you need left out, Mom?"

Claire looked over. "You can leave the oranges, the pineapple, and that bag of shredded coconut on the counter. And the butter. And the eggs."

"You're making the wedding cakes first?"

Claire nodded. "Once I get those done, I'll wrap them in lots of cling film and put them in the freezer until I'm ready to decorate. After that, I'm working on the sour orange pies."

"I can't wait to taste that. I know you said I had it as a kid, but I can't remember it."

"I bet you will when you taste it," Claire said. "But I'm looking forward to it as well. It's been years. I hope it tastes as good as I remember."

"You need help with any of this?"

Claire smiled. "It's kind of you to ask, but I know you probably want to

go work on your new project.”

Kat laughed. “I kind of do. I was thinking I’d work out on the porch. I’ll cover the table with some newspaper, so I don’t get paint on it.”

“That’s fine, but if you get hot, you can work on the table in here.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll turn the fans on. Besides, I don’t want to bother you.”

“You won’t, I promise. Work wherever you want, okay? And thanks for your help and your company today. That was nice.”

Kat nodded. “It was. I’m glad I came. I know I’m about to be busy with my new job. I figured it was a good chance to spend some time together.”

“I agree. Hey, before I start baking, we should have some lunch.”

“I could eat.” Kat went to the fridge. “There’s the salad left over from last night. More than enough for two of us. Maybe I’ll even add some lettuce to it just to freshen it up.” She pulled the container out.

“Good enough for me.” Claire got down one of her cookbooks. Because it was one of her favorites and one she referenced all the time, she had a copy back at the Landry house too. But she wasn’t as interested in the recipes on its pages as she was the collected recipes that had been stuffed into both ends of the book.

All of those were her own, tried and true recipes she’d used for all the many events, fundraisers, bake sales, charity auctions, church functions, funerals, potlucks, and everything else under the sun that she’d contributed to over the years. Her winners. Her mainstays. She paged through them, reminiscing about times she’d made the various treats.

“Okay,” Kat said. “Salad is ready and I’ve got water for us, unless you want something else. You want to eat outside?”

“Sure.” Claire set the cookbook aside. “Especially because I’m going to be spending the rest of the day in this kitchen.”

They took their bowls, napkins, and glasses of water out to the porch. It was warm but a nice breeze made it bearable. They sat and ate, chatting about the wedding, the big day of moving tomorrow, and, of course, Paulina and Nico.

Claire didn’t have much to say about them, but she could tell that Kat’s interest had developed a little further. She seemed hesitant to say much, though.

“Listen,” Claire said. “If you want to get to know Nico, do it. You’re not going to make me feel bad. He is your brother.”

“Half-brother,” Kat corrected. “Are you sure? It’ll mean seeing Paulina

and spending time with her and that feels like betraying you.”

Claire shook her head. “I appreciate that you want to protect me, or that you feel loyal to me, but again, he’s your brother. Half or otherwise. And you’re never going to get another one, so you might as well.”

Kat nodded thoughtfully.

“Not only that,” Claire said. “But it’s not Nico’s fault he was born into this difficult situation. He shouldn’t be punished for what your father did.”

“That’s really understanding of you, Mom.”

Claire stabbed the last bite of chicken. “To be honest, I’m still a little numb about it. The best way for me to handle this is to imagine what an outsider would do. And blood is blood. Nico deserves to know his family.”

Kat frowned. “I can’t believe Dad lied and told Paulina you and Roxie were his ex-wives.”

Claire snorted. “I can.”

“Yeah, I guess you can.” Kat leaned forward. “All done? I’m ready to get to work on my surfboard clock.”

Claire smiled. “All done. I have a lot of baking in front of me.”

They both got up. Kat took her mom’s dish. “I’ll clean up. You have a lot more to do than I do.”

“Thanks.” She went back to her cookbook and the search for one recipe in particular, a lemon sponge cake. She was thinking about doing it without the lemon, but adding in some finely diced fresh pineapple and shredded coconut, then doing a pineapple curd as the filling between the layers with a coconut buttercream on the exterior.

The buttercream would have to be flavored with coconut cream and extracts, because adding shredded coconut to it would make it impossible to get a smooth surface to decorate on. She hoped that would be enough pina colada flavor for Willie and Miguel.

She found the recipe and read through it. She was tempted to change out the fresh lemon juice for pineapple instead. It was only three tablespoons. She glanced at the pineapple she’d bought. She had to cut it up anyway. Maybe that small bit of juice would be just the thing to give the cake an extra layer of flavor.

Kat came through again, this time with her bag from Michael’s and an old *Gulf Gazette* under one arm. She went outside and started setting up.

Claire decided to try using the juice. She didn’t think it could go wrong, other than possibly overpowering the coconut. She got to work finely dicing

the pineapple. Her plan was to let it sit out on some paper towels while she made the cake batter so that it would dry a bit. If the fruit was too wet, it could ruin the batter.

This first batch of cake was really a test. If it tasted good, she'd use it. If not, she'd tweak some things to get a better flavor. She might just be making this cake as a favor, but it was still her reputation and it was a very special day for Willie and Miguel.

She didn't want the cake to disappoint them in any way.

She got the pineapple diced and spread out on the paper towel. She juiced enough for three tablespoons and set that aside.

Next, she set her oven temperature, then greased and floured the two smallest of the round pans she'd bought. She'd need two of each of these in total, but today was really more about making sure the flavor was right. If this recipe worked out, she'd have one of the four total cakes she needed. Not much of a head start, but enough.

If this recipe didn't work, she'd be back to square one. Which probably meant she'd do something simpler and more reliable.

She made the batter, added the juice, the diced pineapple, which had dried nicely, and the shredded coconut, divided it into the pans, then they went into the oven.

She stared through the glass at them for a moment, but she had too much to do to watch them bake.

Juicing sour oranges was next. Even more than the wedding cake, she hoped these pies came out perfectly. They could mean a lot to the bakery, and she felt the pressure.

Chapter Sixteen

Trina got the car started and the air conditioning on, then put her seatbelt on as her mom did the same. “I can’t believe we’re going back to Port St. Rosa.”

“Me, either,” her mom said. “But it’ll be good to get some more of our things. Your grandmother gave me a whole list. Basically, she wants her entire closet.”

Trina laughed. “Of course she does. How do you think she and Miguel are doing with the house hunt?”

“No idea.” Roxie pulled out her phone and looked at it. “I thought we’d hear something, but she’s been quiet.”

Trina pulled out of the driveway and headed for the highway. “What do you think that means?”

“Hard to say with your grandmother.” Roxie put her phone into the cupholder. “It could mean they’ve found nothing, and she’ll come back in a bad mood. Or it could mean things are going great, but she doesn’t want to text because she’d rather tell us in person.”

“She knows we’re going to be gone for a while getting your car.”

Roxie nodded. “She does, but she’ll wait. She loves a big reveal. She might not even tell us until tonight.”

“You think?”

Roxie nodded. “Yep.”

“I’m going to miss having Mimi around, but I can understand her wanting her own place to live with Miguel. They are going to be newlyweds.”

Roxie let out a soft groan. “I really don’t want to think about what that means.”

Trina laughed. “I understand. It’s weird to think about you kissing Ethan.”

“Then don’t think about it.”

Trina snorted. “I try not to, but easier said than done.” She grinned at her mom. “You know I’m just teasing. I’m super happy for both of you.”

“I’m happy for you, too. And I’m really glad your talk with Miles went so well at breakfast.”

Trina smiled. “So am I, so much. I really like him, Mom. And it seems like he really likes me. I feel like this talk moved us forward in a new way. I was scared to have it, but it was the right thing to do.”

“Now that you’re not breaking up with him, when are we going to meet him?”

“At least at the wedding. Sorry it hasn’t been sooner. Things have been busy.”

“I know they have. And they’re only going to get busier.”

Trina nodded. “I didn’t tell Miles this, but his ex-girlfriend came into the shop to interview for the receptionist job.”

Roxie made a face. “How do you know she was his ex-girlfriend?”

Trina explained about meeting Liz at Coconuts and how she’d texted after seeing the ad online on the *Gazette*’s job board. She also shared what Miles had told her about what went wrong in their relationship, that Liz came from money and she and her family looked down on him for being a paramedic instead of a “real” doctor.

“Hmph. Doesn’t sound to me like she comes from that much money if she’s looking for work. How did the interview go?”

“It went okay.” Trina didn’t want to be mean, but she wasn’t going to lie, either. “She doesn’t have much work experience at all. She had two summers of being a camp counselor and two summers of being a cart girl. Part-time. Nothing in the last seven or eight years, though.”

“What’s a cart girl?”

“Apparently, it’s the girl who drives the snack and beverage cart around the golf course and sells stuff to the golfers. She worked at Sand Hills

Country Club. Her family are members. She made sure to point that out.” Trina shook her head. “Something’s up with her. Something she didn’t tell me. But there’s got to be a reason she’s looking for a job now.”

“Probably,” Roxie agreed. “Your instincts about people are usually pretty good. Maybe her parents cut her off.”

“Could be.”

“Are you going to hire her?”

Trina sighed and checked her mirror before merging over. “I don’t think so. Like I said, she has no experience. And I would never want her attitude around clients. Although part of me is curious about her.”

“Do you think Miles would care one way or the other?”

Trina thought about that. “My guess is that he’d probably rather I didn’t. He wasn’t thrilled to see her at the restaurant that night. He said she wasn’t a very nice person. But then again, they did break up, so...”

“Some people stay friends after they break up, you know. If he says she isn’t nice, I’d believe him. She might be up to something more than you realize.”

“I don’t know about that.” Trina shrugged. “But I’m not going to hire her anyway, so it really doesn’t matter.”

“I can’t wait until the salon is open. It’s so exciting.”

“It really is.” Trina smiled thinking about it. “I already told Miles he should let me cut his hair.”

“He should,” Roxie said.

“He’s going to. Tomorrow, actually.”

“Hey, speaking of hair, and not that you don’t have enough to do already, but I was thinking about changing the color of mine.”

“You were?” Trina glanced over at her mom. “To what?”

“Just something softer. Strawberry blond. This red is starting to feel a little...harsh.”

Trina nodded. “Strawberry blond would suit you. Especially since you have a little bit of a tan. Might be more youthful, too.”

“It would?” Roxie sat up straighter. “Have you always thought that?”

“I mean, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because you love your red hair. It’s not my job to talk you out of something, unless it’s a really, really bad idea. I just do my best to make whatever someone wants work for them in the best way possible.”

“You think this red hair makes me look old?”

“Not old, no way. But the change will be good. I can see it now, a soft rose gold. It’ll just brighten you up and make your eyes sparkle.”

“Yeah?”

“Totally,” Trina said. “Won’t be that hard to do, either. I’ll have to run to the beauty shop and get what I need but I’ve probably got most of it at the house. I’ll just be sure to grab all my supplies.”

“You want to do it that soon?”

“Don’t you?” She glanced at her mom. “You want it before the wedding, don’t you?”

“Yeah, that would be nice, since there’ll be pictures and all. But I don’t want to stress you out with everything else you have going on.”

“It’s no stress,” Trina said. “Truth is, I get antsy when I haven’t done hair in a while. I’m looking forward to this. And to cutting Miles’s hair.”

“Okay.” Roxie smiled. “You’re a good daughter, you know that?”

Trina grinned. “Thanks. You’re a good mom.”

“I don’t mean just because you’re going to do my hair. I mean everything. Driving me back to get my car. Helping take care of your grandmother. Being so sweet all the time. I love you, Trina.”

“Ma, you’re making me tear up. I love you, too. Now quit it.” Trina laughed as she sniffed back tears. It was nice to hear. She loved her family fiercely. She still missed her father. She supposed she always would, even if he hadn’t turned out to be such a decent guy.

Her mom laughed, too. “Sorry.”

“No big deal.” Thinking about her dad was getting easier, especially if she just focused on the good memories. Or at least it had been until Paulina had arrived with Nico. Her mom hadn’t said much about it, but the young woman had certainly been on Trina’s mind, so she figured her mom had been thinking about her, too. “Did you say all of that because of what Dad did?”

“You mean Paulina?” Roxie let out a long sigh. “I feel like I need to apologize to you for that, but he’s the one who needs to apologize. He just can’t. And never will. Dead men get off so easy. I feel bad for her, too. She got lied to just as much as Claire and I did. Just a different kind of lie. But you and Kat didn’t deserve that.”

“It’s okay, Ma.” Trina hurt for herself, but she hurt for her mom, too.

Roxie stared out the window, her mind clearly weighed down by a lot of thoughts. “You seemed pretty taken with Nico, though.”

“I love babies. That’s nothing new. And he is my brother. But the fact that Dad told another woman he’d *divorced* you...” Trina shook her head. “That made me mad. I didn’t say much to Paulina. I couldn’t. I don’t get mad often, so I was afraid of what might come out of my mouth. I thought it better to just stay zipped.”

“Are you going to text her about seeing him again?”

“Yeah, probably. I mean, I will. I don’t know when. I’m not sure how much it matters right now. He’s a baby. He’s not forming a lot of long-term memories at the moment. And I am pretty busy.” She glanced over. “Why? Do you think I shouldn’t?”

“I think you should do whatever you want to. You’re an adult. You can make the decision that makes you happy. Totally up to you.”

“Thanks.” Trina thought about it. “You know what would be best? I think, anyway. If Kat and I went to see him together. Then neither of us would have to be alone with Paulina. Kind of like a built-in defense mechanism. Not that I think she’d be mean or anything. It was her idea to seek us out. But I just don’t want to have to talk to her in any kind of meaningful way. I don’t think Kat does, either.”

“You should talk to Kat about that, but I think going together is a great idea.” She pulled her phone out. “Guess I should take care of a few more wedding things.”

“Go ahead.” Trina nodded, going back to her thoughts. She wasn’t sure what Kat would say about visiting Nico, but it might be the only way Trina could see their baby brother again.

Chapter Seventeen

“*M*a. *Ma.*”

Roxie woke with a start. “I fell asleep?” She was still in the car, but they were parked. In a very familiar driveway. Their driveway. “We’re here?”

“Yeah and yeah,” Trina said, turning off the car. She laughed. “You snored a little, too.”

“Sorry. So much for me being company.”

“It’s all right. At least you got your calls made before you passed out.”

Roxie remembered talking to the priest, and the restaurant. Then she’d sent an email to the photographer. But she didn’t remember falling asleep. “Car rides do that to me sometimes. I’ll be better on the way back.”

Trina snorted. “You’d better be. You’re going to be driving your own car.”

Roxie laughed. “Good point.”

She opened her door and got out. “Boy, the house looks different somehow, doesn’t it?”

Trina nodded. “Smaller. And dingier.”

“That’s because it *is* small and dingy. I wonder if we’ll get much for it when it comes time to sell.”

“Maybe if we get it painted.” Trina looked around. “And get the yard

cleaned up. That kind of stuff.”

“Right.” Roxie got her keys out and went to the front door. She unlocked it and they went inside. Despite the air having been on, the house smelled stale. “I’m going to work on your grandmother’s stuff first. Yell if you need me.”

“Okay. I’ll be in my room or bathroom.”

They went their separate ways, Roxie heading for the back bedroom that belonged to her mother. It was pretty neat and tidy. Willie wasn’t a messy person. Roxie was drawn to a frame hanging on the wall near the closet.

It held five pictures. Willie and each one of her husbands. Roxie smiled as she looked at it. “I bet you guys never thought she’d marry again, huh?” Then she kissed her fingertip and touched her dad’s face. “Miss you, Daddy.”

She kissed her fingertip again, this time putting it to Zippy’s face. “Thank you, Zippy. You changed our lives.” She took the picture down and set it on the bed. That ought to come back with them.

She opened her mom’s closet and stared at the colorful array, only to realize there was no suitcase still in the house that would handle half of what was in there. “Garbage bags it is.”

She went out to the kitchen and found Trina already there, getting the garbage bags down from the pantry shelf. “I don’t know what else to put my stuff in. We should have gotten boxes.”

Roxie nodded. “I had the same thought looking at all of your grandmother’s clothes.”

Trina held out the roll. “Take whatever you need.”

Roxie grabbed three. “These’ll do to start with.”

Trina lifted the roll overhead as she went back to her room. “Let the packing begin!”

Roxie chuckled and returned to her mom’s room. She started with her jewelry box, closing and making sure the latch was shut before putting it on the bed beside the framed photos. Both could go in the back seat. They’d be safe there.

Then she got to work on the clothes that were hanging in the closet. She took them section by section, pulling a garbage bag up over eight or ten hangers’ worth of stuff, then tying the bag’s drawstring handles around the hangers like a bundle.

As soon as she had two bundles, she carried them out to her car. No point in piling them up on the bed. Plus, this way, she’d know when she’d reached

the car's limit. They still needed room for their own stuff, too.

She worked for a solid half an hour, leaving behind the clothes at the very ends of the closet that probably hadn't been worn in years anyway. She bagged up a few of her mom's shoes, specifically the strappy silver sandals she wanted to wear with her wedding dress, then carried that bag, the photo collage, and the jewelry box to the car as well.

With that done, she went to her own bedroom. The smell of Bryan's cologne hit her as she walked in, right at the same time that she saw their wedding picture on his dresser.

She stood there, paralyzed by memories and feelings. Things had certainly changed since the last time she'd been in this house. She shook her head, coming back to the present, but her gaze stayed on his face. "I can't believe what you did to us."

She could almost hear his voice in her head, telling her it wasn't that bad and to remember all the good times they'd had together.

She walked closer to the picture, staring at him. "You told Paulina we were divorced. How could you?"

Frowning as fresh anger curled through her belly, she turned the photo face down. That would not be accompanying her back to the beach house. At least not on this trip.

Impulsively, she opened his top drawer a few inches. She'd been in Bryan's dresser a thousand times to put his laundry away, but never his top drawer. That had always been his private space. He hid presents in there, she knew that much. But mostly it was sort of a catchall. A junk drawer, except the stuff in here wasn't really junk. Just a collection of random bits and pieces.

She stared at the contents. An old wallet. Keys that probably no longer went to anything. Papers. Expired driver's licenses. A little pile of coins, not all of them minted in the U.S. A few folded two-dollar bills, something he'd always said were good luck.

She pulled the drawer out a little further, revealing a tattered pack of playing cards, his passport, a couple of rubber bands, a stack of folded handkerchiefs, a pen, an old pocket watch with a broken chain, and some business cards.

Just as she was about to shut the drawer, she noticed something behind the pack of playing cards. A small velvet box almost the same size as the cards.

She pulled the drawer open all the way and took the box out. Could he have already bought her birthday present and tucked it away in here for safe-keeping?

She sat on the bed and opened it.

The contents felt like a punch to the stomach. A delicate gold chain bore a diamond-crusted initial. The letter P.

This wasn't for her. It was for Paulina. Maybe a present to celebrate the birth of his one and only son?

Roxie snapped the box shut. She felt like throwing it against the wall, but the necklace looked real, which meant it was worth something.

She sat there, stewing in anger, trying to decide what to do with it.

"Ma, I think I'm just about done. What can I—hey, are you okay?" Trina came in and stopped at the end of the bed.

Roxie couldn't look at her. If she did, she'd cry. "No." She held out the box.

Trina took it and opened it. She didn't say anything. Just closed the box again and sat beside Roxie. "That sucks, huh?"

Roxie nodded. "I don't know what to do with it."

"You could always give it to her."

Roxie gave a slight shake of her head. "She and Nico already have half of the insurance money."

"I know you're mad about that. I don't blame you. But I think you're really mad at Dad."

Roxie took a few breaths, still fighting tears. She nodded. "I am. Really mad. Madder than I've ever been."

"Give her the necklace," Trina said softly. She held out the box. "It's not her fault that he lied to you."

Roxie pushed the box away. "If you want to give it to her, you can. I don't ever want to see that woman again."

Chapter Eighteen

Jules hadn't been in a studio in a while, not even the one in her home in Landry. She hadn't had anything to record, so no reason to be in one.

It felt good, though. Especially when she was excited about the music she'd be playing and singing here. She loved the quiet of a studio space and how it allowed her to be fully engaged with the sound she and her bandmates were producing.

Today, her only bandmate would be Cash. Jesse wouldn't be doing anything more than listening.

He'd met her and Cash at the Dolphin Club, even though it was far earlier than he needed to be here for running the club. Now he sat in the control room looking at them through the glass. She and Cash did a quick sound check. She smiled, happy with what she was hearing. The studio had nice vibrations.

Jesse looked toward the door, then got up, and went to it.

She had no idea who he was talking to, as the door was tucked back out of her line of sight. Not only that, but no one in the studio could hear him unless he spoke through the intercom. The whole idea was that the studio was soundproof so that no outside noises interfered with the music being recorded.

He came back to the control panel, leaned in, and pushed the intercom as he spoke. “Cash, Sierra’s here. Were you expecting her to sit in with you?”

“Um,” Cash glanced at his mom. “It’s more like an audition first.”

Jules nodded. “She’s here to audition.” She wasn’t about to give approval to a new musician she hadn’t heard. She just raised her eyebrows at her son, looking for his agreement. He nodded in understanding. Sierra would have to audition like any other unknown.

“Right,” Cash said. “She’s supposed to play and sing for my mom so she can get a feel for Sierra’s sound.”

Jesse spoke through the intercom again. “I’ll tell her.”

Jules was curious about the young woman, but at the same time, if she wasn’t up to par, Jules would have no choice but to tell her it wasn’t going to work out. She wasn’t going to take on a substandard musician or backup singer just to keep Cash and his new girlfriend happy. This was Jules’s livelihood and there was a lot riding on this demo.

She knew he knew that. She just hoped Sierra did, too.

Sierra came through the studio door and Jules could instantly see why Cash was taken with her. Long, curly, honey-brown hair, big blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles gave Sierra a definite country-girl-next-door vibe. She was tall, but a little on the curvy side, too. No doubt a very different sort of woman than those Cash had been around in L.A., where thin was in and blond was everything.

She wore ripped jeans, a cropped Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt, and had a silk daisy tucked behind one ear. Or maybe it was a barrette. Multiple strands of tiny, colorful seed beads encircled both wrists and a myriad of silver rings adorned her fingers. A silver cross hung around her neck.

She smiled shyly at Cash, then Jules. “Hi.”

“Hey, Sierra,” Cash said. “Come on in. This is my mom, Julia Bloom. Mom, this is Sierra Townsend, who I was telling you about.”

Jules stood up, adjusting her guitar strap as she did, and stuck her hand out. “Nice to meet you. Cash tells me you sing and play keyboards.”

Sierra shook her hand. A nice firm grip that felt more confident than the young woman looked. “That’s right. Yes, ma’am.”

Jules smiled as she sat back down. “Don’t be nervous. I don’t bite. But I will be honest. I’m looking for a certain sound for this demo.”

“I understand. I appreciate you giving me a chance.”

She was getting that chance because of Cash, but Jules suspected she

knew that.

“Did you prepare anything for me to hear?”

Sierra bit her bottom lip. “I did. One of your songs, actually.”

Jules lifted her brows. “Well, then. Let’s hear it.”

“Okay.”

As Sierra moved to the keyboard that was already set up in the studio, Jules shot Jesse a look through the glass window, mentally asking him what he thought about Sierra.

He shrugged and shook his head as if to say he had no idea.

Interesting. She worked for him at the club, after all. But, if she was a server, he’d have no idea about her musical abilities.

Sierra got the keyboard turned on, played a few keys to get the feel of it, then started right in. Jules recognized the music immediately. It was from Jules’s most popular album, a song called *Midnight Memories*, a simple tune about a woman thinking about her lost loves in the middle of the night.

Sierra not only played beautifully, but she had a clear, sweet voice with a soft, compelling vibrato.

Jules had only ever heard *Midnight Memories* sung by one other person, a woman on an electric guitar playing in a little club in Nashville. The woman had seen Jules in the audience and done it, but she’d given it a much quicker tempo, losing a lot of the soul of the piece, in Jules’s opinion.

Sierra sang it like she’d experienced that heartbreak herself. For a young woman, she had impressive emotional range.

When Sierra was through, Jules clapped, giving her the praise she’d earned. “Well done. That was impressive. Both the song and the keyboards. Where did you learn to sing and play like that?”

Sierra smiled. “Church. My dad is the associate pastor at Beach Life Church. I play in the praise band and sing, too.”

Jules nodded. “I could hear the gospel in your voice. Works well with a song like that. Have you heard the song we’re doing for the demo? *Dixie’s Got Her Boots On*?”

Sierra glanced at Cash before answering. “I have. Cash played it for me. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine. Saves us some time. I’d be happy to have you sit in with us.”

“Really?” Sierra blinked, then a wide grin spread across her face. “Thank you so much. I love the song.”

“Thank you.”

Cash leaned in. “Told ya, Mom.”

“Yes, you did. I need to have more faith in you.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“Why don’t you run through the song with her a few times? I need to talk to Jesse for a minute anyway.”

“Okay.”

Jules took her guitar off, set it in the stand, then slipped out and went into the control room.

Jesse looked like a kid in a candy shop, about as excited as she’d ever seen him.

“You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “You have no idea.”

She laughed. “I think I do.”

“I had no idea Sierra could sing or play.”

Jules nodded. “Thankfully, she’s pretty good.”

Strains of music filtered through the speakers in the control room as Cash played for Sierra. Jesse reached over and turned the volume down.

It occurred to Jules that this might be the exact right moment to ask him about joining her on tour. “I love how much you love music. I know I’ve said that before, but it’s worth repeating.”

He stood up. “It’s true. Music means a lot to me. But I think this experience means even more because it’s not just anyone in that studio. It’s you. I’ve always enjoyed your music, but getting to know you, getting to care about you, has been amazing. It’s made all of this so much more important.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I’m pretty glad Shiloh got loose from you that day on the beach.”

He laughed. “I am, too, but I’m also grateful you took her attempt to drown you and Toby in stride.”

Jules snorted. “I’m pretty easygoing.”

He nodded and moved closer to her. “Yes, you are. Remarkably so.”

She gazed up at him. “For the record, I’ve come to care about you, too. In a lot of ways. You’re an incredibly smart and capable guy. You make me laugh. And you’ve helped me out in a lot of ways.”

“Hey, you helped me, too.” He took her hands in his. “Filling in that night when my act couldn’t make it.”

“True, but I think you’ve more than paid me back for that by helping me with this demo.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

“I know you are. I wonder how you might feel about something else I’d like to ask you.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s up your sleeve, Jules?”

She smiled. “If this song blows up like you all seem to think it will, the inevitable next step is recording the album, then after that, going on tour. It’ll mean I’m gone for two or three months on the road. Maybe more. Long days, longer nights. It’s not the glamorous life most people think it is.”

“I understand.”

“You do?” She doubted that. She hadn’t even asked him about joining her yet.

“Sure,” he said. “You want me to watch Toby?”

She laughed. “No! I was going to ask you if you’d like to join me for some of that tour.”

His eyes widened. “You’re serious?”

She shrugged coyly. “I mean, if you’d rather stay here and watch Toby...”

He picked her up and twirled her around, making her shriek. “I would love to!”

“Put me down before I get seasick.” She barely got the words out, she was laughing so hard.

Her feet touched the floor again. He held her by the shoulders. “Jules, that would be amazing. I would love to go. You’re sure about this?”

She nodded. “Yep. And you can bring Shiloh. We’ll already have one dog on the bus and since her and Toby get along, it should be fine. Plus, Cash will be there. It’ll be fun. Although I intend to put you to work a bit, too. But we’ll still have fun.”

“I can’t wait. I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

“Well, it won’t be for a while yet, so you’ve got time to find whoever’s going to replace you while you’re gone. You think that’s doable?”

“I hope so. I have three people lined up to interview so far. And I’m also hiring a new booking agent, which is something I pretty much handle now.”

“Dividing your job into two jobs? Smart. Should make it easier to handle.”

“I hope so.”

“Listen, you won’t have to be on tour with us the whole time. You can fly back periodically to check on things. Shiloh can stay with us. It won’t be a

big deal.”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe what an opportunity this is. Thank you. This is like a dream come true for me.”

She leaned in, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. “It’ll be pretty nice for me, too.”

Chapter Nineteen

*K*at had spread the newspapers out, arranged her paints, then gone back inside for a paper plate to use as a palette and a plastic cup of water to clean her brushes in.

When she'd come out and added those things to her crafting area, she realized she wasn't entirely sure what she was going to paint on the surfboard. What colors, what designs, none of that.

She sat down at the table and took out her phone, Googling pictures of surfboards to find some design inspiration.

She already knew what the clock she was making for Alex was going to look like. She was going to paint it to match his existing board.

What she needed was inspiration for this first one. Too bad she hadn't bought her own board yet. She smiled thinking about it. Her own surfboard. Was she crazy? She wasn't a teenager anymore. She'd be twenty-nine this September. That wasn't too late to take up a new sport, was it?

She didn't think so. And it really didn't matter if it was. She wasn't going to quit now. She loved the idea of being able to surf with Alex. It seemed like such a fun, cool couples thing to do. And she'd seen people of all ages out in the water. It wasn't like surfing ended at any particular age.

Maybe she and Alex would grow old together and retire to a life of catching waves and lazy beach days. That wouldn't be so bad.

She found a couple of boards she liked. One was a solid aqua with a fat white stripe down the center. Another was white at the tip then gradually turned into a deep red. She liked the effect more than the color. Aqua was definitely becoming her color. Another board was pink with hibiscus flowers.

She decided to copy the first board with the stripe but add some white hibiscus flowers. If she could actually paint those. She practiced a few times on the newspaper. Her versions looked all right, but they weren't anything special.

Maybe she could do some other kind of flower. She went onto YouTube and looked for a tutorial on how to paint hibiscus flowers. She found one and watched it through, then tried out the technique.

Definitely better than what she had been doing.

The instructions on the kit said to lay down a base coat of paint. Kat went with white, covering the whole front of the board. Maybe she should let that dry and then put a strip of tape down the center. That would make the white stripe neater than if she tried to do it freehand.

She went inside to see if they had any tape that would work.

Her mom was at the island, juicing oranges. Between that and the cakes in the oven, the kitchen smelled so good Kat's mouth began to water.

"How's it going, Mom? Smells incredible in here."

"Thanks." Her mom glanced at the oven. "It's going well. I think. I'll know more when those cakes come out and cool down. How's the painting?"

"Sort of slow, but that's okay. I'm figuring it out as I go along. Do we have any tape? Not the clear stuff. Masking, maybe."

"Look in that drawer at the end of the breakfast bar."

Kat went over and pulled it open. It was full of junk. "Hmm. There's all kinds of stuff in here, but no tape."

Her mom stopped juicing oranges. "Maybe the laundry room? There's that bin of random stuff on the top shelf in there. Touch-up paint, a few tools...honestly, I have no idea what all is in there."

"I'll go look." Kat went in and turned the light on. The bin was one of those wire-framed ones covered in fabric, and she couldn't see into it. She pulled it down, surprised to find it was heavier than it looked. Probably because of the small paint cans it held.

There was a roll of wide, bright blue tape on top of them. She pulled a little off to test the sticky side. That would work. It was too wide, but she could cut it in half. She'd have to be precise, though. A wobbly line would

show and the whole point of using the tape was to keep things straight and tidy.

She took it back out to the kitchen. “Do we have a ruler?”

“Junk drawer again.”

Kat went over and opened it. Sure enough, there was a ruler along one side. There was a box cutter, too. “This is perfect.” She looked at her mom and held up the blade. “You think it’s okay if I cut on the glass table with this?”

Her mom stopped whisking whatever she was whisking. “Maybe? I’m not sure. Just be careful.” Then she shrugged. “Although that’s an old table. It’s probably already got some scratches. Just don’t cut yourself.”

“I’ll be careful.” Kat returned to the porch with the tape, box cutter, and ruler. She set it all down on the side that had no newspaper covering it. Her mom was right. The table did already have scratches, but Kat didn’t intend to add to them if she could help it.

She was about to unpeel a length of tape when she realized her phone, next to the surfboard she’d been painting, had a notification alert on it. She’d missed a call.

She didn’t recognize the number. Then a new voicemail alert showed up. She dialed in to listen, thinking it might be the rental truck company calling to confirm or possibly someone from Future Florida.

“Kat, it’s Miles. I’m at the hospital with Alex. Gulf Coast General. He got hurt on a call today. He’s all right, just some minor burns, sprained shoulder, and a concussion. Thought you’d want to know.”

Kat’s heart was racing before the message was over. She knew Miles had said Alex was okay, but that didn’t stop the rising sense of worry. He’d still been hurt. And she couldn’t help but wonder if Miles was playing things down so she didn’t freak out.

She ran inside. “Mom, Alex is in the hospital. He got hurt on a call. Some burns, a sprained shoulder, and a concussion. I’m going there now.”

Her mom nodded, eyes filled with concern. “Do you need me to go with you?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I’ll text you after I get to see him.”

“Okay. Let us know if there’s anything we can do.”

“I will.” She ran into her bedroom, grabbed her purse, stuck her feet in flipflops, and went straight to her car. She suddenly felt overcaffeinated, but it was just the adrenaline surging through her system. She kept telling herself

that Alex was all right, but it was hard to get past the burns and concussion. Those didn't seem like small things to her.

She programmed her GPS and was out of the driveway before it was barely done calculating. The hospital wasn't far, fifteen minutes, but the drive seemed like it took hours. Her heart thumped in her chest the whole way.

She parked in the visitors lot and ran inside. She went through security, then to the reception desk to get a visitor sticker.

The older woman working there gave her a slightly curious look. "Who are you here to see?"

"Alex Kelley. He's a firefighter. He was injured on duty."

The older woman looked on her computer screen, typing in his name. She nodded. "He's in Room 312." She filled out a sticker badge and gave it to Kat. "Here you go. Make sure you wear that at all times."

"Will do. Thanks." Kat stuck the badge to the upper corner of her T-shirt and headed for the elevators. One was letting people off as she approached. She got on as soon as it was vacant and pressed the number three. Her mind was still racing with thoughts of Alex when the elevator arrived at the third floor.

She got off, got her bearings, and quickly found his room.

Miles and the fire chief were in there already.

She hesitated at the door, unsure if she should go in.

Miles saw her. "Kat, you're here."

She nodded. "Is it okay for me to come in?"

The chief turned. "Come on in, young lady. Alex will be glad to see you. You must have stopped whatever you were doing to get over here so fast."

"I did." She rushed in. Alex was lying in the bed, arm in a sling, some bandaging on both hands. He smiled weakly, his eyes a little glassy. "Hey. You came."

She took a breath. "Of course I came."

The chief rested his hand on the end of the bed. "We're heading back to the station. You let us know if you need anything, Alex. But I think you're in good hands now."

Alex lifted the fingers of his free hand. "Thanks, Chief. Thanks, Miles."

Miles nodded. "Kat, text me later."

"I will," Kat said softly. She looked at Alex again. "Are you really all right?"

"I am. A little banged up, but I'll be okay."

“What happened?”

“Truss collapsed and I was under it. My gear did its job, though.” He grinned, clearly loopy on whatever they’d given him. “Could have been a lot worse.”

She exhaled, not wanting to think about that. “I’m glad it wasn’t. Very glad.”

“Me, too.” His eyes narrowed. “I know I’m on a lot of pain meds right now, but your face looks funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kinda...spotty,” Alex said.

“Spotty? Hang on.” She went into the bathroom and turned on the light. She had a bunch of white freckles she’d never seen before. She leaned in closer, squinting. Then she rolled her eyes. She was looking at speckles of white paint.

Chapter Twenty

“*I* like this a lot,” Willie said. She touched the cool, quartz countertop on display in one of the Dunes West model homes. She and Miguel were in one called The Carrington. The whole place seemed pretty high-end. All kinds of fancy finishes. “It sparkles.”

“That’s quartz for you,” Rob said. “Some people think it’s a little too sparkly, but—”

“No such thing,” Willie said. “I like bling.” She looked at Miguel. “I want this in our kitchen. You okay with that?”

“Sure,” Miguel said. He laughed. “She loves her bling.” He was sitting at the kitchen table while she looked around the kitchen, which was amusing to her, because Miguel was much more likely to do the cooking than she was. “Whatever makes her happy is fine with me.”

“I’ll make a note,” Rob said. “What do you think of the layout of this house, though? Would it suit your needs?”

Willie shrugged like she wasn’t sure, even though she loved the place more than she could say. “Can you give Miguel and I few minutes to talk alone?”

“Of course. I have a few phone calls to return anyway. I’ll just step outside.”

“Thanks.” Willie went over and sat with Miguel. Once she heard the front

door close, she spoke. “This could work for us, don’t you think? It’s completely livable on the first floor, meaning we wouldn’t have to deal with steps unless we wanted to.”

She also knew that the house was built with wide enough doors to be wheelchair accessible, if either of them happened to have that need someday. Which she sincerely hoped they didn’t.

He nodded. “Guest rooms upstairs are fine, because anyone who might come to see us will probably have better knees than us anyway.”

“We could always put in an elevator.”

“We could.” He peered out the kitchen windows, which overlooked a very unexciting backyard, but on their lot, it would be the waterway. Their pool would be back there, too.

She wanted a beautiful outdoor area. Pool, hot tub maybe. Lots of covered, shaded areas for entertaining. A summer kitchen, too. She wanted family here all the time, if possible. “It’ll really be something, won’t it? Sitting on our back deck, watching the dolphins go by as the sun sets. Won’t that be beautiful?”

“It will. I can’t wait.” He returned his attention to her. “The house is perfect. Good-sized rooms. Open plan. A little office for me to work in, if I need it.” He hesitated. “What about that big closet in the master? That was big enough for you?”

“More than enough.” She didn’t think her clothes would fill half of it. “Is the smaller closet going to work for you?”

“Absolutely.” He smiled. “Then is this our house?”

“I think it is.” She looked around. It was hard to believe she could be living in something this nice. She loved all the fancy details, the gleaming white trim, the spacious rooms, and the dazzling light fixtures. She inhaled. And the new house scent. It was one of the best perfumes she’d ever smelled. “I really love it. I can’t believe this could actually be ours. On that lot. It’s like a dream.”

Miguel smiled. “If it is, I don’t want to wake up.” He took her hand. “Are you comfortable with how much money we’re spending? It’s a lot.”

“I know, but we should have what we want at our age. And the house and land will become a valuable piece of real estate for our children to inherit. So, yes, I’m comfortable. Are you?”

He nodded. “I am. I think the same way about it that you do.”

“Then that’s it. This is our house.” She felt faint with the excitement of it

all. "I'll go get Rob and tell him we're ready to make our decision."

She got up and headed toward the front door. She opened it and looked for Rob. He was standing in front of the garage, where there was some shade, chatting on his phone.

She caught his eye and waved.

He nodded. "Carl, I'll have to call you back." He hung up. "Ready for me?"

"We are."

He walked back to the kitchen with her. "You know, we have two other models if this house is too big. Or we could scale things down by losing that bonus room over the garage."

Willie smiled at Miguel as she shook her head. "No, we like this just as it is."

Miguel moved his hands through the air. "This configuration is perfect."

"Excellent," Rob said. "In that case, we can head back to my office and write it all up for you."

Miguel got to his feet. "How long will it take to build this house? When will we be able to move in?"

"Construction takes time, as I'm sure you know," Rob said. "Right now, could be nine months. Depends on a few things, like weather, permits, inspections. How quickly you're able to make your color selections."

"Just like this," Willie said. "I love everything in here. White and bright with all the touches of blue. I even like that teal color the office is painted." She looked at Miguel. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful. I'd have no complaints with this."

Rob nodded. "If you're going to be that easy, we might shave a few weeks off the construction time." He laughed. "I wish all my clients were like you guys."

Willie had no doubt that was true. "There is one thing we're going to need help with."

"What's that?" Rob asked.

"We need a beautiful back deck and pool. I want a perfect area to enjoy that water and to entertain our family."

"We can do that," Rob said. "We've got some incredible folks on staff as well as some subcontractors we work with who specialize in design. I've seen them do all kinds of things you wouldn't believe. Like firepits and sitting areas that are part of the pool."

Willie nodded enthusiastically. “We have to have a firepit.”

“Yes,” Miguel said. He pointed at Rob’s clipboard. “Make a note of that.”

Rob laughed. “Writing it down right now.” He pulled out his pen and scribbled something on his paperwork. “Shall we head back to my office then?”

“Yes,” Willie said. Her stomach was grumbling. “Do you have any snacks over there? I think my blood sugar’s getting low.”

“I can do better than snacks,” Rob said. “I’ll send you two to the Gulf Café for lunch. On me. Just let the server know the bill goes on the Rob Downing account. The café is one of the five restaurants we have on property here. That will give me a chance to get your paperwork in order and you two can take a break to refuel.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Miguel said. “But we don’t have a car.”

“Not a problem,” Rob said. “You can use one of the club cars.”

“Club cars?” Miguel’s brow furrowed.

“He means the golf carts,” Willie said. “Right?”

“Right,” Rob answered. “One of our primary goals in building Dunes West was to make it completely golf cart accessible. From your lot in The Preserve, you’re probably not more than ten or twelve minutes to the Center Commons. You’ll find everything you need there, from shopping and groceries to dining, the community center, the recreation hall, and the movie theater. We’ve got a library, a bowling alley, a medical facility, two dentists, a chiropractor, and the health spa.”

Miguel nodded, clearly impressed. “Is any of that included?”

Rob held up his finger. “The health spa is when you buy in The Preserve.”

“Good to know,” Willie said. “I guess we’ll need to get a golf cart then.”

Miguel nodded. “Maybe two. One for each of us.”

“Not a bad idea,” Rob said. “Let me go grab a set of keys and a map, and you two can go explore. I was going to take you there myself so you could see all we had to offer, but we ended up going to look at the lot instead.”

“That’s all right,” Willie said. “We’ll go have a look around.” She liked the idea of being able to get to things by golf cart. She’d driven one once, several husbands ago. She remembered it being pretty easy.

As Rob went to get the keys, Miguel laughed softly.

“What?” Willie asked.

“I wasn’t so sure you’d like this place. Or that I’d like it after I saw it, but

the more I hear, the more I think I should have done this sooner.”

“Except you wouldn’t have met me, then.”

“True,” he said. “And I wouldn’t trade that for anything.” He kissed her cheek. “We’re going to have a good life here, don’t you think, my love?”

“I do.” A sense of anticipation went through her, knowing she’d be saying those words again to him very soon. Funny, she thought, how life had a way of giving you the best things when you least expected them.

Chapter Twenty-one

Claire couldn't help but be worried about Alex. He was such a nice young man and had made such a great impact on Kat. Claire said a prayer for him and kept an ear out for her phone in case Kat called or texted with news.

Until then, Claire had plenty to keep her busy. The cakes were out of the oven and on cooling racks. Her three pie crusts were in the oven and just about ready to come out. Her sour orange filling was made, ready to fill those crusts.

She topped up her glass of ice water and had a big drink before going to the sink to wash one of the many bowls she'd used. As soon as it was washed and on the drying rack, the oven timer went off.

She put the mitts on and got all the pie crusts out. They were golden and beautiful. She'd made the crusts from crushed Lorna Doone cookies instead of the more traditional graham crackers, because that was how her grandmother had always done it. Claire thought the buttery shortbread just made more sense with the sour tang of the oranges anyway. She wouldn't know for several hours if that had been the right decision or not, but she'd always loved the pie her grandmother had made, so she had faith it would work out.

It was possible, she figured, that more than just her grandmother's sour

orange pies had been made with Lorna Doone cookie crusts. The cookies had been around since 1912, something she'd had no idea about until she'd done some research.

She lined the pie crusts up on the counter, then spooned enough filling into each of them until it was evenly distributed and just shy of being level with the top. She smoothed them out, savoring the delicious limey, orangey aroma wafting up at her.

She moved on to the meringue, getting that whipped up quickly. She carefully divided that among the three pies as well, then went to work shaping it into something pretty. If she'd had her piping bag, she would have done rosettes or something fancy. If the pie made it onto the bakery's regular rotation, the meringue would definitely be piped on.

She got the pies covered, then put them back into the oven. The meringue would take about fifteen minutes to brown nicely, but she'd still have to keep an eye on it. No one liked overbaked meringue.

She set the timer then took more bowls to the sink. She washed them, dried them, and put them away. There was still a lot to clean up.

Her phone chimed. She checked the screen.

Alex seems to be doing pretty well. He's on a lot of pain meds and sleeping now. Might have a few scars, but that should be all.

Good, Claire typed back. Praying for him. Still scary.

Yes, Kat answered. A truss fell on him in a building fire. He was lucky not to be hurt worse.

Claire closed her eyes, trying not to imagine how much worse it could have been. *Will he have to stay overnight?*

Yes. They want to keep an eye on him.

Claire nodded. That made sense to her. *I guess it'll just be you and Cash tomorrow then. Unless you're not planning on going now?*

No, still going. We kind of have to. The truck is rented. And it needs to be done. I hate to leave Alex, but Miles already promised to pick him up and take him home.

That's good. Claire didn't like Kat and Cash having to do all of that work by themselves. She tried to think who back in Landry might be able to help them. Maybe she could call Pastor Freeman and see if there were any men from the church who might be available. Even if just for a few hours.

Kat sent another text. *I'll probably stay until visiting hours are over unless you need me.*

Stay as long as you like. I'm fine.

Okay. Love you.

Claire smiled. *Love you too. Tell Alex I'm praying for him.*

Kat sent a thumbs-up and a heart in reply.

Claire dialed the church in Landry.

"Good afternoon, Landry Community Church. Pastor Freeman speaking."

"Hi, Pastor Freeman. It's Claire Thompson."

"Claire, it's so good to hear from you. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing all right."

"You're at the beach house now, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right." She realized suddenly she was going to have to explain some of what was going on. "That's part of why I'm calling. My daughter and I, and my mother, have made the decision to stay here. We're moving to Diamond Beach."

"You are? I must say, I wasn't expecting that. We'll miss you, but I understand that sometimes a fresh start can be a very good thing."

"That's exactly what it is," Claire said. "A fresh start."

"So what can I do to help?"

"Kat's coming back tomorrow with a rental truck to bring some of our things here. She'll have her cousin, Cash, with her, but it's a lot of work for two people. They're actually hoping to clear out as much of the house as they can. Do you know anyone who might be around tomorrow and willing to help them move some things?"

"I'd be happy to make some calls and see what I can do."

"You would?" Claire exhaled in relief. "Thank you."

"For all the delicious cakes and cookies you've provided us with over the years, it's the least we can do."

"I appreciate this so much."

"You're welcome. Keep in touch, now."

"I will. Thanks again." She hung up, happy she'd made the call. She remembered the pies and went over to look at them.

The meringue was just starting to turn golden. Not quite there yet but it wouldn't be long.

As soon as the pies were out, she'd let them cool for a bit on the counter, then they'd need to be refrigerated.

Which meant she probably needed to make room for them. She opened the fridge doors and immediately started pulling things that were approaching

their expiration dates. She dumped a few items that were questionable. Then she moved others around, like putting the yogurt cups in one of the drawers instead of leaving them stacked on a shelf, and she had the space she needed in no time.

With that done, she checked the meringues again. They looked just about perfect. She gave them another sixty seconds, then took them out. They smelled heavenly. The meringue had toasted up beautifully. She had high hopes for these pies.

She was excited to take one over to Danny tonight and see what he thought. While she waited for the pies to cool, she took the rest of the dirty dishes to the sink. Some things went into the dishwasher, but the big stuff she handwashed.

While she did that, she thought about Alex again. She knew Kat liked him a lot. How serious was it, she wondered. Had Kat thought about what it would mean to be married to a firefighter?

It was a dangerous job. Obviously. Maybe Kat thought that was exciting, but the idea of her daughter falling in love with a man who might leave her a young widow sent a shiver of fear through Claire.

What if they had kids?

She exhaled. She was probably thinking about it more than she had a right. After all, it was Kat's life. And her decision to make.

But there was no off switch when it came to caring about your children, and Claire couldn't help but wonder if Kat had really considered what she was getting herself into.

Chapter Twenty-two

“Another chapter,” Margo said as she sat back. “I’m amazed at us.”

Conrad laughed. “I had a feeling doing that read-through would kick things back into gear.”

“You were right.” She shook her head. “I’m having one of those moments where I can’t believe how much we’ve accomplished. I know we aren’t even halfway through the book, but I’m still impressed by what we’ve been able to achieve.”

“It’s a good feeling, isn’t it?”

“It really is. Outside of my children, I’ve never done anything I’ve been so proud of.” She smiled with satisfaction. “I suppose you have your military career to look back on, but I never worked outside the home, except for a few months before I met my first husband.”

“Oh?” Conrad turned his chair to face her. “What did you do?”

“I was a secretary. I know that’s not the word they use these days. It’s administrative assistant or something like that, but trust me, in those days, we were secretaries.”

“A secretary, hmm?” He got that sly look on his face. “So why am I doing all the typing?”

She laughed and poked him in the arm. “Behave yourself. Frankly, I think you’re better at it than I ever was.”

He glanced at the screen and the words there. "Today was a good day."

"It was," she said.

"Does it have to end?"

She tipped her head. "What do you mean?"

"Stay for dinner. What do you say?"

"I don't know if I should. We have a lot of driving ahead of us tomorrow."

"I could do that with my eyes closed."

She pursed her lips. "I'd prefer you not."

"I'll be very glad when you're only a few houses away."

"I will be, too. Not just because I'll be close to you, but because it'll mean all of that work is behind me."

"I know you're not looking forward to it, but I don't think it's going to be as bad as you think."

She doubted that. Moving was not something anyone enjoyed, her especially. But for her, it also meant stirring up old memories. There was no way to avoid them. And she'd had a lot of pain in her life. You didn't bury two good men without leaving a permanent hole in your own heart. "It'll be nice to have my car back."

"I bet. Is there a lot at your house you want to bring with you?"

"Not too much. I don't have any place to put it even if I did." She'd decided to wait on the storage unit, since Claire hadn't been sure, either. Maybe she should have just rented one. She still could, she supposed.

He turned so he could lean forward a bit. "Have you thought any more about getting a storage unit? I know it's an added expense but once your house in Landry is empty, you can get it on the market."

She nodded. "I know. I've been thinking about that. Claire and I talked about. It's silly not to just go ahead and do it." She sighed. "I suppose I should look into that and just get it done."

"It's the end of a chapter, though, isn't it? Not to be punny."

She smiled at his joke. "It really is. There are a lot of memories in that house. Mostly good. Some that caused me a little pain. I'm thrilled about moving here, I really am. But there's a part of me that will be sad to say goodbye."

"I can understand that. But memories don't have to be attached to things or places, you know. They live in here." He tapped the side of his head.

"You're right. I need to remind myself of that." She chuckled. "I've never

thought of myself as the sentimental type, but I suppose age changes you.”

“Nothing wrong with being sentimental. So long as you don’t let it drag you away from the present. Life here is going to be great.”

“I know. It already is.” So much of that had to do with him.

“Oh, I completely forgot. My sister, Dinah, is coming into town. She’ll get here sometime Friday morning and stay through the weekend. I won’t be able to write then because she’ll want to go to the beach and out to lunch. You know, all the touristy things. I’d love for you to meet her. I was hoping we could do lunch on Friday. What do you think?”

“I’d love that. But are you still coming to the wedding with me on Saturday?”

“Of course. I told her I already had a commitment that evening. She’ll be fine home alone by herself.”

“All right. Do you think she’ll like me?” Margo said the words half-jokingly, but the look on Conrad’s face caught her short.

“I don’t know, to be honest. She’s pretty protective and a lot opinionated. She’s one of those people who are an acquired taste, if you know what I mean.”

Margo nodded. “I see. And you don’t think she’ll like me because...?”

“Because she knows we’re involved.” He sighed. “In fact, that’s the reason I think she’s coming. I casually mentioned you because I was telling her about writing the book and the next thing you know, she’s planning a visit.”

Margo lifted her chin. “I’m not worried. If she doesn’t like me, she doesn’t like me. I can only be who I am. And as long as you like me, I’ll manage.”

He grinned. “And I like you very much.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Maybe on the drive to Landry tomorrow you can tell me all about her and give me a little advantage.”

His eyes narrowed. “I like that. Very tactical. You would have made a good Marine.”

“I highly doubt that. Unless I was the one in charge.”

He laughed out loud. “I can see that.” He shook his head in amusement. “You never answered my question, you know that?”

“What question?” She honestly couldn’t remember.

“About staying for dinner.”

“Oh, right.” She tipped her head. “I don’t think I should. I don’t want my

family to think I'm abandoning them."

"I understand."

"You could come to dinner at the beach house. Although I must confess, I have no idea if there's anything planned or not." She pulled out her phone. "Maybe I should text my daughters and find out. Just a moment."

She sent a group text to Claire, Jules, and Kat. *Any dinner plans? Was thinking about inviting Conrad.*

Claire answered first. *Not a one. I just finished cleaning the kitchen after all the baking I did. I can't think about going back in there right now. Jules and Cash are at the studio rehearsing. I doubt they've thought that far ahead either. And Kat is at the hospital with Alex. He's fine. I can explain when you get home. Not sure when she'll be back.*

That was concerning, but if Claire said Kat's young man was fine, Margo chose to believe that was true.

Then Jules answered. *I'm not sure how long we'll be here. Don't count on us. Sorry.*

I understand, Margo typed back. Then she shook her head as she looked up at Conrad. "Jules and Cash probably won't be there, but Kat and Claire will be. Sorry about that, but there's a lot going on right now."

"That's all right," he said. She could practically see the wheels in his head turning. "Why don't we make dinner for your daughter and granddaughter then? They might appreciate not having to cook. I don't mind manning the grill. We could do some sirloins, a nice big salad, and some baked potatoes. Maybe a little ice cream for dessert. Would that suit them?"

"I'm sure it would. They'd probably eat anything and be grateful. I'll send them another text and let them know we're taking care of dinner."

"Fantastic. It can be my way of making up for taking their mother away from them." He pushed to his feet. "Grab your things, woman. We need to get to the grocery store."

Chapter Twenty-three

On the drive back to Diamond Beach, Trina did nothing but think about her mom. After finding the necklace, Roxie had barely said anything, despite Trina trying to engage her several times in conversation. All Roxie had done was give short answers, then returned to packing her things up.

Trina hurt for her mom. She'd been doing so well with Bryan's infidelity, but Paulina's arrival seemed to have short-circuited that. In fact, her mom hadn't reacted this badly to finding out about Claire. It was like Paulina's arrival had broken Roxie, in a way.

Or maybe it had been finding the necklace?

All Trina could hope was this new mood wasn't permanent. Maybe she should have taken the necklace like her mom wanted, but Trina had just said she'd put it in her mom's purse. Which she'd done. Keeping the necklace hadn't felt right to Trina. It seemed like something her mom should deal with.

Maybe she'd been wrong.

Sighing, Trina pulled under the beach house and parked, glad to be back. A few seconds later, her mom pulled alongside her.

Trina hopped out and went over to her mom's car. She stood by until her mom opened the door. "Good to be back, huh?"

Her mother got out and closed the car door, her gaze still as distant as it had been back in Port St. Rosa. "Hmm?"

“I was just saying it’s good to be back. Look, I know you’re upset. I’m really sorry. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?”

Her mom smiled, but it was a weak, brief movement that seemed more automatic than intentional. “You’re so good, Trina. But this is one of those things that no one can help me get over.” She looked away, a deep breath lifting her chest. “I don’t know why this is bothering me so much. But it is. And I’m just going to need some time.”

“That’s all right. You know I love you, right?”

Roxie nodded, but the sadness in her eyes remained. “I know you do, Trina. I love you, too. But your father...” She shook her head and swallowed.

“Do you want me to take the necklace?”

“No. It’s fine.” Roxie turned abruptly and headed for the back of her Ford Escape. “I’d better start hauling this stuff upstairs.”

“I’ll help.”

Her mom frowned. “You have a car full of your own stuff to carry up. Get that done first.”

Trina nodded, not wanting to argue. “Okay.”

She opened the back of her car and sorted through some things, mostly buying time while her mom grabbed a couple of bags of stuff and headed for the steps.

As soon as her mom was out of sight, Trina pulled out her phone and texted Ethan. *My mom could use some cheering up. You might be the only one who can do it.*

Thankfully, Ethan answered pretty quickly and didn’t ask for an explanation. *Is that right? OK! I’ll see what I can do.*

Thank you! Trina tucked her phone away, took a couple of bags and hustled after her mom.

Her mom was already inside and setting stuff on the couch in the reading nook when Trina came in. “Hey,” Trina said. “Why don’t we load a bunch of stuff into the elevator and then just haul it out in a big pile? Probably be quicker than all these little trips.”

“Good idea.” Roxie nodded. Then her phone chimed with an incoming message.

“Take your time,” Trina said. “I’ll load up the elevator and you can help me unload when I get up here.”

“Okay.” Roxie was reading her screen.

Trina turned to hide her smile and headed back down. She hoped Ethan

didn't say that she'd texted him, but he was a smart guy. He probably wouldn't. She hoped. Not that her mom would be mad, but she might think Trina was interfering. Or something.

All Trina wanted was for her mom to not look like Trina's dad had died all over again. And if Trina couldn't make that happen, she had a feeling Ethan could. She'd never seen her mom smile so much as she did when that man was by her side.

Trina grabbed three more garbage bags full of clothes from her mom's car and took them over to the elevator. She made two more trips, emptying her mom's car and calling the elevator down on the last one. As soon as the doors opened, she loaded everything in and pressed the button for the first floor.

Her mom was about to go out the front door, but she stopped when she saw Trina arrive. "Let me help."

"Thanks. This is Mimi's stuff and yours. Your car is empty. Just need to lock it up."

"This can't be all of it. I still have some stuff in the back seat. I'll help you get your car empty, too. Then I'm going over to Ethan's. He's going to make dinner."

Trina smiled. "Yeah? That's nice."

"It is." Roxie nodded. "I'm tired, but I'm glad he called. I could use the distraction right now."

"Good. You don't have to help me with the rest. Just go."

"I need to take a shower first."

Trina shrugged. "Then do that. I can handle the rest."

"That's not fair. There's a lot of stuff in your—"

"Ma. I'm serious. You've had a tough day. I don't need your help." Trina winked, to be sure her mom knew it was all meant with good intentions. "Go see Ethan. I'd much rather you do that."

Roxie smiled. Really smiled. She pulled the last bag out of the elevator, then gave Trina a hug. "Thanks, baby."

"You're welcome." Trina stepped back inside the elevator and pushed the ground floor button. As soon as the doors closed, she laughed softly.

Her plan had worked. It wasn't like her to go behind her mom's back, but this had been an exception.

Ethan was a good guy to step up like that. For all Trina knew, he'd already had plans for the evening. Maybe not, but he certainly hadn't

hesitated to do what Trina had asked.

Trina got off the elevator, then opened her mom's rear passenger doors to get the stuff off the back seats. She took out the last of the things from the Port St. Rosa house. Once again, she loaded the elevator, setting a bag in front of the doors to keep them from closing.

This time when she went back up, she heard the shower running.

She got everything out of the elevator and made another trip down. Three more trips and both cars were empty.

Trina was sweaty but felt good about getting it all done. Of course, there was now a mound of clothing-filled garbage bags on and in front of the couch in the reading nook. You couldn't even see the couch really.

Bag by bag, she opened them up, figured out whose stuff it was, then took that bag into the right bedroom. She did her best to put the bags where they'd be out of the way. The ones with the hangers exposed were easier. Those she just hung up in the right closet.

About the time she was done, her mom emerged from her bedroom, looking fresh and in a much better mood. She was in cute denim shorts, a top printed with yellow flowers, and white wedge sandals. Her earrings were yellow hoops.

"You look cute, Ma."

"Thanks, Trina."

"What do you say we do your hair tomorrow? I have everything I need."

"Are you sure?"

Trina nodded. "Why not? It'll be fun."

"Okay." Her mom hooked her purse over her shoulder. "Thanks."

"Sure. Go have fun."

"I'm going to do my best." Roxie hesitated. "What are you going to do? You did way too much work."

Trina looked around. "You know, I think I might put a suit on and go jump in the pool."

"That sounds nice. Maybe your grandmother will tell you what she's been up to all day, if she ever gets home."

"Hopefully. Unless she and Miguel ran off and eloped."

Roxie laughed. "They better not have! We've got food and flowers and dresses."

"If they did, we'll just use all of that stuff to have a great reception."

"Good thinking."

Trina made shooing motions. “Go on. Go have fun with Ethan. Tell him I said hi.”

“I will. Thanks again.” She kissed Trina on the cheek as she went past.

Trina grinned and watched her go. Today had been hard, but hopefully, her mom’s evening would make up for that.

Meanwhile, floating around in the pool sounded like the perfect way to relax after all the work she’d done.

Chapter Twenty-four

“Outstanding,” Jesse said through the intercom. “We’ve got the guitar tracks.”

Jules exhaled in relief. “That’s fantastic. I never thought we’d get that done today.”

“Neither did I,” Jesse said. “But you guys sounded great.”

“Cool,” Cash said. “That means you can concentrate on vocals, Mom. If you want. And Sierra and I can work on perfecting the backups.”

Jules shot her son a look. “Are you saying my voice needs work?”

He laughed. “No way, Mom. You sounded great. Hey, maybe we should run through *Folsom Prison Blues* a couple times, just to see how it feels.”

She nodded. “Probably not a bad idea.”

Jesse spoke to them through the intercom again. “We can definitely do that, but don’t forget, tomorrow we’ll have the rest of the band members here for practice.”

“Great.” Jules stood up and stretched. She’d been sitting for too long. “I’m happy to put in a few more hours, but I need a break.”

“You guys want to get something to eat?” Jesse asked. “I’m starving.”

She straightened to look at him through the glass that separated the studio from the control room. “You mean here at the club?”

He shook his head. “I want to take a real break and get out of here for a

bit. They can live without me for an hour. I was thinking we could go to that new place that just opened up. Baja Burger. My treat. They're supposed to be pretty good. I could murder a bacon cheeseburger right now."

She grinned. "All right, I'm in." She looked at Cash and Sierra. "You guys up for that?"

"Totally," Cash said.

"I'd love to," Sierra answered. "Thanks for including me."

"You earned it," Jules said.

Twenty minutes later, they were walking into Baja Burger. It was a pretty hip place with lots of orange and green and walls painted with chalkboard paint so that the menu was written right on them.

Jules pointed to the wall that held the enormous selection of milkshakes they offered. "Is that why we're here?"

Jesse just smiled innocently. "I cannot confirm or deny that."

"What happened to avoiding carbs and eating healthy?"

"We're celebrating."

"Are we? What exactly are we celebrating?"

He shrugged. "You inviting me to join you on tour. You starting to work on your demo. Sounding so good today. Getting some tracks down. Sierra working out as a background singer. Pick one." He nudged her. "One small milkshake isn't going to hurt."

Maybe not. And it had been a while since she'd had a milkshake. She couldn't remember the last time, actually. "Okay, but just a small one. And I'm getting a bunless burger." She pointed. "See? Says right there they can do any burger bunless upon request."

"Okay, bunless burgers for both of us. So what kind of burger and what kind of milkshake?"

"Tough question." Baja Burger only really did three things: burgers, fries, and milkshakes. But they had a lot of variations of those things.

Standing beside her and looking up at the menus, he nodded. "I know. I might do the banana cream pie milkshake with the hatch chili burger."

"Sweet and spicy."

He snorted. "Just like me."

She laughed. Jesse was definitely sweet, but spicy was not a word she'd use to describe him.

"Come on," he said. "What are you getting?"

"This is hard." She put her hands on her hips. "Okay, the Cali burger and

the peach cobbler milkshake. Or maybe the key lime pie milkshake. Which one would go better with guacamole?"

"Key lime," he answered. "There's already lime in guacamole."

She nodded. "Good point. I'm getting the peach."

He chuckled. "Then why did you ask?"

"Because I needed help making up my mind. But then I just realized I really want the peach."

A few feet away, Cash and Sierra were doing the same thing: staring up at the vast menu selections.

Jules called out to them. "Cash, Sierra. Do you know what you want?"

He glanced over. "Just about. Are you guys ready to order?"

She nodded.

"All right. We'll get in line. We'll know by the time we get up there."

Jesse and Jules led the way, with Sierra and Cash behind them. Jesse and Jules ordered, Jules getting a small shake while Jesse got the large.

Sierra went next. "All-American cheeseburger with a small black and white shake."

Cash finished up. "Mac-n-cheese burger with the large cookies and cream shake."

Jesse paid, then they got a number on a stand to take to wherever they ended up sitting. They grabbed a table near the window and settled in.

Cash stayed standing. "Anyone want water? There are cups over by the soda machine."

"Sure," Jules said. "Thanks."

"I'd like one, too," Sierra said.

"Can you handle four cups?" Jesse asked.

Cash nodded. "I got it. Be right back."

Jules looked at Sierra, who'd sat across from her. "You were a pleasant surprise today. Better than pleasant. You were very good."

"Thanks," Sierra said. "I'm thrilled to be included. I kind of can't believe it."

"I feel the same way," Jesse said.

Jules let out a little laugh. "Well, to be honest, it was definitely a combination of right place, right time, right talent. You earned your spot."

Sierra was all smiles. "I'm really grateful."

Jules understood. It was incredibly hard for new singers and musicians to break out and make a name for themselves. Being on Jules's new album

would go a long way toward giving Sierra some credentials. “Is music what you want to do with your life?”

She nodded. “A hundred percent. I lead the praise team at church sometimes, which I love, but I really want to do more. Make my own music. Write my own songs. You know?” Then she laughed. “You really do know. I basically want to be you.”

Cash came back, four plastic cups of water carefully held in his hands. “Here you go.” He put them all down on the table and let everyone take one for themselves.

Jules took a sip as a wild idea came into her head. “Maybe you and Cash should start your own band. Or just be a duo.”

For a moment, neither Cash nor Sierra said anything. Sierra glanced at Cash, smiling shyly. “I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Cash said. “We both sing, although you’re a lot better than me. We both play instruments. If we were going to be a band, we’d need a drummer, probably. Maybe another guitar.”

Jesse nodded. “I like that idea a lot. Sierra, why didn’t you ever tell me you had the kind of musical talent you do?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I didn’t feel ready.”

Jules snorted. “You felt ready enough to audition for me.”

Cash raised his hand. “That was my fault. I pushed her to do it after I heard her.”

Sierra smiled. “And I’m glad you did. It was a good lesson that I’ll probably never think I’m ready and I just need to put myself out there.”

Jesse tapped his finger on the table. “Why don’t you two work on something for the open mic night?”

“We could.” Sierra looked like she was warming up to the idea. “I have a couple of originals I’ve been playing around with.”

Jules put her hand on Jesse’s arm. “Are you trying to poach my new band members for the sake of your club?”

“No, sorry.” He was grinning, though. “I don’t see why they couldn’t do both.”

“I know,” Jules said. Then she leaned in. “But seriously, my demo comes first.”

“Totally, Mom,” Cash said, nodding. “But I’m willing to give it a shot if you are, Sierra.”

She nodded. “We won’t know until we try, right?”

Jules smiled. It was so exciting to watch her son, who'd basically been ready to swear off music when he'd arrived in Diamond Beach from L.A., rediscover his love for it.

A server arrived carrying a green tray laden with their food. The burgers, accompanied by fries, were served in large paper dishes lined with sheets of wax paper. The milkshakes were all finished with a fat swirl of whipped cream.

Jules's milkshake had a sprinkle of cinnamon, Jesse's had a Nilla wafer cookie stuck in the whipped cream, Sierra's had a drizzle of chocolate syrup, and Cash's had an Oreo.

Jules was impressed. It all looked so good. She took a sip of her shake through the wide straw provided. The flavors were so spot-on she looked at her drink in surprise. "Okay, that actually tastes like peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream. I think there might be pieces of pie crust in there."

Jesse, who was cutting into his bunless burger with a plastic knife and fork, nodded. "This place seems to be living up to the hype."

"Totally," Cash said.

Jules picked up her knife and fork, thinking about how that's what she hoped her new demo was going to do, too. It made her all the more eager to get back in the studio and practice some more.

Chapter Twenty-five

Visiting hours would be over in an hour and Kat wasn't leaving until then. Even if Alex stayed asleep. She just wanted to be with him. Didn't matter if he knew she was here or not. She knew. And that was enough.

She sat in the visitor's chair. She'd pulled it closer to the bed so she could see his face but also be able to reach out and touch him occasionally. She wondered if he was aware of her at all. Again, didn't matter. Being here did.

After he'd fallen asleep, she'd spent a couple of minutes in the bathroom getting the speckles of white paint off her face, then she'd just watched him for a while. She played games on her phone. She'd texted her mom just to say Alex was still sleeping. Then answered her grandmother about when she'd be home. Nice to know dinner would be waiting for her. She was hungry.

When her battery had gotten low, she'd set the phone aside. Now, she'd just been watching him again, hoping he wasn't in any pain.

"I hope you don't hurt too bad," she said softly.

She studied his bandaged hands. That's where most of his burns were. "I don't care if you end up with scars. They won't bother me. I just want you to be okay. I want us to go surfing again."

She pulled her chair a little closer and rested her hand on his leg. "They're going to kick me out soon, unfortunately. I won't be able to come

back tomorrow, either. I have to go to Landry and work on getting our stuff moved. But Miles will come for you when you're ready to go home. I'm sorry I can't be here."

"It's okay," he whispered.

She sat back. He hadn't opened his eyes. She'd had no idea he'd woken up. "Alex, are you awake?"

His lids lifted halfway. "A little. Pretty groggy."

She nodded. "I bet you are."

"I got hurt, right?"

"Yes. A concussion, a sprained shoulder, and some burns on your hands."

"I don't really remember."

"Probably because of the concussion. I'm sure it'll come back to you. Do you need anything?"

"Water."

"Okay, just a second." He had a pitcher with ice and water in it on his table. One of the nurses had brought it by. There was a cup, too, with a lid and a straw. Kat filled the cup about halfway, then made sure the lid was secure. She leaned in and held the straw close to his mouth. "There you go."

He took a long sip, finally releasing the straw to swallow. Then he took another one, drinking even more deeply this time. "Much better." He opened his eyes a little more. "How long have you been here?"

"A while. I'm not sure. Miles and the chief were here when I arrived."

"I can go home tomorrow?"

"That's my understanding. I guess they'll show you how to take care of those burns."

He shrugged his good shoulder. "I've been burned before."

"You have?" That was news to her.

"Sure. I know how to take care of them." He glanced toward the door. "Am I allowed to eat?"

"I don't see why not. You want me to get a nurse?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry."

"Okay." She got up. She was hungry, too, but that didn't matter. She would eat when she got home. She went out to the nurses station and found the nurse who'd been in to check on him earlier. An older woman with a kind smile named Francine. "Hi, Francine. Alex Kelley has just woken up and he's hungry."

Francine put down the chart that she was filling out, grabbed a piece of

paper, and handed it to Kat. “Here’s the menu. He can have anything he wants, since he’s not on any dietary restrictions.”

“Thanks. How late is the cafeteria here open?”

Francine’s eyes narrowed. “You think he’s going to want something that’s not on that menu?”

Kat smiled. “No. I was asking for myself. I haven’t eaten since I’ve been here, but I just need a little something to hold me over until I get home.”

“Oh, honey, just order yourself some food off there, too. It’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Go on,” she said.

“Thanks.” Kat went back to his room and waved the paper. “I have a menu. And the nurse said I could order something.”

“Cool. Get me one of everything.”

She laughed as she took her seat. She was so glad he was awake and in good spirits. “How about I read off what they have, and you tell me what you want. Meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans—”

“Okay.”

She shook her head. “That’s just the first thing.”

“It sounds good. I’m starving. What else is there?”

She read down the list. They had everything from spaghetti with meat sauce to burgers, salads, soups, and sandwiches. There were desserts, as well, which she also read off. “What do you think?”

“I still want meatloaf. And a vanilla shake. And a slice of apple pie.”

She picked up his in-room phone. “I’ll get that ordered.” She dialed the extension on the menu, ordered his food and then ordered a garden salad and a soda for herself. That should leave room for whatever Conrad and her grandmother were making.

When she hung up, Alex said, “Thanks.”

She nodded as she set the menu aside. “Of course. That’s what I’m here for. To take care of you.”

He smiled. “I’m glad about that.” His smile faded away. “Are you going to stay?”

She shook her head. “I can’t. Visiting hours are over in about an hour. I’ll have to go then.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Oh, sorry. What did you mean?” She’d missed something, obviously.

“I meant…” He took a few breaths before he spoke again. “Are you going

to stay with me?”

Maybe his pain meds were still making him loopy. “I’m still not sure I understand what you’re asking me.”

He sighed and sort of looked away for a moment before making eye contact again. Like whatever he was going to ask was hard. “Are you going to break up with me? Just tell me if you are. No point in dragging things out.”

“No, I’m not going to break up with you.” She stared at him. Whatever drugs he was on were doing more than making him groggy. “Why would you think I’d do that?”

“Because of the accident. Because it probably made you think about what a dangerous job I do. My last girlfriend...” He exhaled. “I just know it can be upsetting. She couldn’t handle it. Said it was the kind of thing that made a future with me impossible.”

“Wow. Harsh.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

She put her hand on his leg. “The accident was definitely upsetting but not enough to make me break up with you. I knew you were a firefighter from the beginning. Leaving now because of that would be a pretty crappy thing to do.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Well, I’m sorry you had that experience.” Then she laughed. “Okay, I am sorry, but I’m also kind of not, because otherwise you wouldn’t have been single when I met you.”

He grinned and slid his hand over hers. “True statement.”

“Knock-knock,” a voice called out. Then Francine came in. “Did you get your food ordered?”

“We did,” Kat said.

Francine went to the other side of Alex’s bed. She took his temperature then looked at the monitor beside the bed for a few seconds. “Doing pretty well so far. I’ve got some more pain meds for you.”

He held out one hand. Thankfully, just the backs had been burned and not his palms.

Francine put the little paper cup of pills into his hand. He tossed the meds back, then looked at Kat, who was already waiting with his water.

He took a sip and downed the pills. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Francine said. “I know you have food coming, so why don’t we put your bed up a little bit more?”

“Okay,” he said.

She reached for the attached control unit and made a few adjustments so that he was sitting up straighter. “That should help. If you want to lie back down after you eat and you need help, just push your call button.”

“I will.”

Francine gave him a smile. “Do you need anything else before I go?”

He looked at Kat. “Nah. I have everything I need.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Clare took one of the sour orange pies out of the fridge, covered it lightly with cling wrap so as not to crush any of the beautifully browned meringue peaks, then carried it over to Danny's house.

He opened the door as she came up the steps. "I saw you coming."

"How was your day?"

"Good. Busy. Better now." He stepped out of the way to let her in. "What is this you've brought me?"

"Remember how I asked you if you'd ever had sour orange pie?"

"I do."

She lifted the pie. "Well, that's what I've brought you. I'm really hoping, and I know this is a lot to ask, that maybe Mrs. Butter's Bakery could bring this pie back to the Florida consciousness. It used to be more popular than key lime."

"Really?"

She nodded as they walked into the kitchen together. "Yes. And these oranges, which are also known as Sevilles, were brought to Florida by the Spanish."

"Is that right? I haven't made a mojo in a while, but there's sour orange juice in that. Well, there is in some of the versions."

She nodded. "They do get used in some savory dishes, too. And they're

big in marmalade.” She put the pie on the counter. “Ready to taste?”

“I am. But first, do you want to stay for dinner?”

“I can’t. My mom and her boyfriend are cooking for us tonight.”

“Isn’t that nice.”

“Maybe.” Claire smiled. “I don’t know what they’re making yet. Just kidding—I’m sure it’ll be great.”

He laughed as he got a big knife out of the drawer and handed it over. “I’ll grab a plate, too.”

“And two forks. I haven’t tasted the finished product yet myself.”

“Will do.”

Claire cut him a slice, praying it held together and that the meringue wasn’t weepy and that it tasted even better than she’d built it up to taste. She used the flat of the knife to lift the slice out and place it on the plate he’d brought over.

It held together. The meringue was firm. And the aroma made her mouth water.

“That smells fantastic,” he said. “And the color is really eye-catching. You don’t see a lot of orange pies.”

“No, you don’t. None I can think of, really.”

“I like that,” he said. “It’ll make people stop and take a second look. Always a good thing.” He stuck his fork in and took off the pointed end. He put the bite in his mouth and chewed.

While he did that, she helped herself to a taste as well.

She knew instantly it was good. Smooth and creamy with more tartness than a key lime but enough sweetness to balance it out. The shortbread crust helped with that, too, providing those additional buttery notes that made it all come together. And the meringue offered a nice marshmallowy, chewy texture that was perfect.

“It’s delicious.” Danny shook his head. “Where has this pie been all my life? Why don’t people make this anymore?”

She grinned. “Probably because condensed milk manufacturers used to put the recipe for key lime pie on their labels to help sell the product, since it was one of the main ingredients. I picked that up in my research.” She pointed at the sour orange pie with her fork. “This is made with cornstarch. Always was traditionally. There are recipes that use condensed milk but they’re adaptations, not originals.”

His mouth bent in an amused smile. “Has anyone ever told you that

you're like a walking encyclopedia of baking knowledge?"

She laughed. "I just like to do my research. Knowing how a recipe began can really show you how to take it somewhere new. Although for this pie, I went with the recipe that was my grandmother's and didn't change a thing. Right down to the Lorna Doone crust."

"It's one of the best pies I've tasted." He took another bite, savoring it. "I might just eat this instead of the leftovers I was going to have for dinner. Are there really no other bakeries doing this pie?"

"None that I could find. And I did look. Couldn't find any restaurants serving it, either. I'd venture a guess that some places probably don't even know what it is. It's fallen that much by the wayside."

"You know," he said. "This is the kind of thing that could generate some publicity. Bringing back an old Florida tradition. I love that it has Spanish roots. Obviously, that's a win in my book."

"Well, Conrad writes for the *Gulf Gazette*. I can talk to him and see if anyone over there would be interested in doing a little story on it. I made him one of the pies, so he'll get to taste it."

Danny nodded. "Please do talk to him. I have some media contacts I can reach out to as well. This is brilliant. I love everything about it. You've done it again, Claire. I can't wait for my dad to taste this."

She couldn't help but smile. "Isn't he here?"

"No. He and Willie went to look at houses today in that fifty-five and over community, Dunes West." He looked at the clock. "They've been gone a while now. I guess that means they're having a good day."

"Must be." She took another small bite of the pie, which tasted even better after Danny's words of praise. "How do you feel about him getting married and moving out?"

Danny sighed. "I'm happy for him. But I'm going to miss him, too. My dad's been living with me for a while, and I like having him around. It's not that he can't take care of himself. He's very self-sufficient. But he's my dad. What can I say? It's been a rare treat to have him to myself."

Claire nodded. "That's so nice."

"Your mom is moving out, too, though. Isn't she?"

"She is, eventually. She's actually bought a house but it's going to need some work, so it'll be a few months before she's settled there."

"Won't you miss her?"

"I will. I'm not sure I would have said that a month ago, but since

Bryan's death our relationship has changed for the better. Really, it's changed since we've been here. We've talked more and she's put herself out into the world more than ever. Because of that, she's sort of come alive again. Gotten more active. It's really something."

"Do you think it has anything to do with her new boyfriend?"

Claire snorted softly. "Oh, definitely. By the way, I have some Bryan-related news."

Danny's brows rose. "How can that be when he's no longer around?"

"You'd think that, but death really didn't put an end to the surprises." She took a deep breath. "We just found out he had a third wife. And she just had a baby. A little boy. Kat and Trina have a brother."

Danny's mouth came open and he just stared at her. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. We met her the other night. She brought baby Nico here so he could meet his sisters."

Danny frowned. "So this other woman knew Bryan had daughters but not wives to go along with them?"

Claire's smile was tight and held no amusement. "She knew, but Bryan told her that we were his *ex-wives*. That he'd divorced both of us."

"Wow."

Claire nodded. "That was pretty much my reaction, too."

"Are you okay? Do you need to hit something?"

She laughed. "No, I don't need to hit anything. As far as being okay, I'm in a little bit of shock. At the same time, I basically mentally divorced myself from Bryan after I found out about Roxie, so I'm not all broken up about it. She, on the hand, doesn't seem to be taking it so easily."

Danny crossed his arms. "Where does this new woman fit in the timeline? When did he marry her?"

"Only a few years ago. She can't be any older than thirty or thirty-one. Very pretty," Claire added.

He nodded like that all made sense. "So, a younger woman and a recent marriage. Roxie is probably feeling a lot of what you did when you first found out about her. She's not the other woman now. This new wife is. I imagine that's a whole different level of betrayal."

"Huh." Claire hadn't thought about it that way. "That's quite the insight. Sounds fairly spot-on to me. I wonder if I should check in with her. See if she wants to talk. If anyone can relate, it's me."

“Sounds like this new wife has put you and Roxie on the same team.”

“You’re just full of observations, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “I think it’s that sour orange pie. It’s made me smarter.”

She chuckled. “Maybe it did but I don’t think we can use that as a selling point. I’m really glad you liked it. I’d better get back.” She touched the pie tin. “You keep this and share it with your dad. See what he thinks.”

“I will. And I more than like it. I love it. This is going to be a big deal. I have a feeling. Would you write up all that history you told me about it so I can use it as a cheat sheet when I talk to my media contacts?”

“Tomorrow morning soon enough?” She’d probably do it tonight. Tomorrow was going to be incredibly busy.

“Perfect.” He snagged her hand and pulled her in for a quick kiss. “How did I get so lucky, to have you in my life?”

She gazed up at him, the most blissful sense of contentment going through her. “You bought a house in the right neighborhood.”

He laughed. “That’s for sure. Listen, about tomorrow—”

“I’m not going to be here, remember? I’m headed to Landry to get my car and as much of my stuff as I can fit in it.”

He nodded. “I remember. I cleared my calendar. I’d like to go with you and help. If you want. I’d be happy to drive you and then you’ll have twice as much room to bring back whatever you’d like. Pack my car as full as you want. That SUV holds a lot.”

She blinked in surprise at his kind offer. Although that’s what Danny did. He made himself available when she needed him most. Even when she didn’t know she needed him. “Thank you. That would definitely be a help. A *big* one. Alex got hurt on the job, so he won’t be able to go tomorrow. In fact, Kat’s with him at the hospital right now.” She quickly explained what had happened.

Danny cringed as she described Alex’s injuries. “That’s awful,” Danny said. “But I’m glad he’s going to be all right. He’s a great young man. I’m happy to help Kat and Cash, too. What time would you like to leave tomorrow?”

“Early, if that’s okay. Like eight?”

He nodded. “I’ll be ready. I’ll text you when I’m in the car.”

She went up on her toes to kiss him again. “It’s a date.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Willie sighed with contentment as she finished the last bite of her meal. “That was some of the best grouper I’ve had.”

Miguel nodded. “It was. And the crab topping was superb.” He’d had the same meal. “The food here is excellent. I can see us coming here at least once a week.”

“Me, too,” Willie said. She looked around. The café was lovely. Very atmospheric, with its blue walls painted with under-the-sea scenes and the giant aquariums filled with marine life. One of them was so large it formed part of the back wall of the restaurant. “It’s like the kind of place you’d find at a high-end resort. But next time, I want to sit over there.” She pointed to the aquarium wall.

“We will,” Miguel said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Willie watched a school of narrow silvery fish go past the diners. “You think our kids are wondering what happened to us? We’ve been gone a long time.”

“Danny won’t be worried,” Miguel said. “He knows what we’re doing. He’ll know we found something we liked, though, because otherwise we would have returned by now. Buying land and a house takes time. Do you think your daughter is concerned?”

“If she is, I haven’t heard from her. Of course, Roxie and Trina were busy

today going back to Port St. Rosa to get Roxie's car and more of our things. They might not even be back yet. Also, they both know that when I set out to do something, I do it. And when it's something big, I don't like to talk about it until it's all taken care of. But they'll be full of questions when I get home, that's for sure."

"Danny will be, too." Miguel wiped his mouth with his napkin, then set it beside his plate. "Do you want dessert?"

"I'd better not. I've probably been eating too many sweets lately."

"And you're so sweet already."

Willie giggled. She adored him. "I suppose we should head back and see if Rob has papers for us to sign."

"Do you want to drive the golf cart this time?"

She shook her head. "Not until I've had a chance to practice."

"Come on," he said. "It's easy. And you can go slow. I'll be right beside you."

She thought about it. There wasn't anything to be afraid of. "All right, but you'd better help me navigate. I'm not sure I remember how to get back."

"I will." He signaled for the server, who came over. "I'm supposed to tell you our lunch is courtesy of Rob Downing."

"I'll take care of that. Let me just bring you your receipt."

"Thank you." Then he smiled at Willie. "Can you believe we are buying a house? And it is going to be on a beautiful piece of land."

"I know," Willie breathed the words out. "It feels like the best dream come true ever."

"I agree." Miguel's phone went off with a little chirp. He adjusted his reading glasses and looked at the screen. "Rob must have sensed we were thinking about returning. He apologizes for the delay but says he needs another twenty minutes." Miguel looked up at Willie. "Should we have that dessert after all?"

"No. I have a better idea. Let's go back to that beautiful piece of land and watch the sunset."

Miguel smiled. "I like that idea a lot." He pointed at her. "But you're driving. It'll be good practice."

"All right." She was going to go slow and be careful. She had a driver's license, but she hadn't driven in years. Roxie and Trina always took her wherever she wanted to go. Might be fun to be behind the wheel again, though.

“Good. Plus, we can see how long it takes to get from here to there. Something good to know for the future.”

The server returned with their receipt. He tucked it into his wallet, then they headed outside.

There were at least two rows of golf carts parked near the café and more throughout the shopping area. At least as many as there were cars. Some of the carts were plain, but some were highly personalized with custom paint and upholstery. Willie was already getting ideas.

They got into their borrowed cart and Willie started up the little motor.

“You know how to reverse?” Miguel asked.

She nodded. “I watched you do it.” She flipped the little switch that put the cart into reverse, then started the engine and slowly backed out of the space after making sure no other traffic was coming.

When she’d pulled completely out of the spot, she flipped the switch again, and started forward.

“Very good,” Miguel said.

She pattered along, not giving the thing much speed, as they were still in the parking lot. “Now, I want to go right when we come out of here, don’t I?”

“Yes. Then straight ahead until you see the sign for The Preserve.”

“That’s easy enough. And from there I should be able to find our lot without any trouble.”

“Should I point out if you’re going in the wrong direction or keep my mouth shut?”

She laughed and turned right. “You’d better tell me. I don’t want to end up in a bad part of town.”

“Do you think Dunes West has a bad part of town?”

She shook her head, loving the breeze going past, as they were now out on the main road. “Probably not. That’s one of the reasons people live in a place like this. To be safer. Or at least to feel safer.”

She found the gated entrance to The Preserve without any issues. She slowed as they approached the guard shack, but the little gate went right up.

Miguel pointed to a thick, rectangular sticker in the middle of the windshield, right near the roof. “I bet that has a code in it that opens the gate. We’ll probably get them when we officially become residents.”

She nodded. “I was thinking we’re going to have to get two golf carts. Maybe one this size and one of those bigger ones for when all the family is visiting.”

“I agree.” He smiled. “I like making plans like that.”

Their lot was just ahead. Instead of parking alongside the curb as Rob had done, she drove over the low curb and onto the lot. Just a little ways, but she did it so they could sit and watch the slowly sinking sun from the comfort of the padded front seats.

“It’s really pretty out here,” she said. “Maybe not quite the beach, but really pretty all the same.”

“If we miss the beach, we can go visit the kids.”

“That’s right,” Willie said. She didn’t think she’d miss it, though. Life with Miguel would be plenty interesting, and she had a feeling her girls would be over to visit often.

The sun drifted closer to the horizon and in a matter of minutes, slipped lower and lower. Miguel reached over and took her hand. The wispy, wandering clouds turned hot pink and electric orange and the sky became a fiery blaze of color that no picture could ever capture.

“Spectacular,” Miguel proclaimed. “And before too long, we’ll be able to watch as many sunsets as we want from our house.”

Willie looked over at him and smiled. She held tighter to his hand. Her heart was full with love for him, with the beauty of the moment, and with the peace that came with being so blessed. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

There weren't many grocery bags to bring up, but Margo carried one anyway. She liked to be helpful and there was no need for Conrad to take them all. Although he did have the rest of them. When they stepped out of the elevator, Claire was in the kitchen, taking dishes out of the dishwasher. Toby was sitting nearby, eager to see if anything like a snack might suddenly appear.

"Hello, there," Margo said. "We're about to take over the kitchen."

"That's all right," Claire said. "Because I'm about to be done in here. Did you get a lot of writing done?"

"We did," Margo answered. She liked being asked that. And being able to answer honestly.

Claire carried some plates to the cabinet and put them away. "So what are we having for dinner?"

"Sirloin," Conrad announced as he set his grocery bags on the island. "With a nice green salad, steamed broccoli, and instead of baked potatoes, which your mom said would take too long, we're doing mashed potatoes."

"Sounds great," Claire said. "I'm happy to provide dessert."

Margo unpacked the bags. "Sour orange pie?"

Claire nodded, smiling. "Yes. And there's one for Conrad to take home.

"How did it come out? Did you use your grandmother's recipe?"

“I did and Danny loved it. Grandma’s recipe was a hit. He thinks we can even get some publicity out of it. The whole bringing-back-a-Florida-classic angle.”

“What’s this now?” Conrad asked. He was unwrapping the steaks. “Sour pie?”

Margo gathered up the shopping bags to put them away in a storage bin. “Sour orange pie. It’s a very old traditional recipe that’s sort of fallen out of favor with a lot of bakers. Most people make key lime and think that’s what Florida is all about, but once upon a time, it was sour orange pie.”

Claire nodded. “It’s been in our family for a long time. Mom used to make it a lot.”

Conrad used the salt grinder that was on the island to season the steaks. “I’ve lived here my whole life and I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.”

“That’s pretty typical,” Claire said. “But tonight, you’ll get to taste it. And like I said, I made an extra, so you can take one home.”

“You did?” Conrad smiled. “That was very thoughtful of you. Just in time for my sister’s visit, too. Thank you, Claire.”

Margo beamed, proud of her daughter and pleased by her generosity.

“You’re welcome,” Claire said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a little bakery work to do before dinner. Kat should be home in a few minutes.”

Margo took out a bowl for the salad and a big platter for the steaks, which she handed to Conrad. “Wait. You said you’d explain about Alex. What happened?”

“He was injured in an accident at a call they went to. A truss collapsed and fell on him. I guess it burned through maybe? Anyway, he has a concussion, a sprained shoulder, and some minor burns.”

“That poor boy. Kat must be beside herself.”

Claire lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know. She seems to be handling it all right. Of course, that means it’ll just be her and Cash tomorrow to do the big move. But I called Pastor Freeman to see about getting some help and he said he’d do his best to round up some men. He texted a bit ago to say a couple had agreed to help.”

“That’s good,” Margo said. She didn’t want her grandchildren having to do all of that by themselves.

“Also, Danny’s going tomorrow, too, so you don’t have to wait on me. Although I do appreciate the offer to take me,” Claire said. “He’s going to drive me over and help the kids, as well. Plus, he said I can pack his car as

full as I like.”

Conrad put his hands on the counter. “After your mom and I get her car and whatever else she wants to bring back, we can certainly come to your house afterwards and help. If you want us. I might be a few years older than Danny but I’m still capable of pitching in.”

Claire smiled. “I know how capable you are, Conrad. If you want to stop by, that’s up to you, but you might have your hands full at my mom’s.”

Margo approved of Conrad’s offer. He was very generous that way. “How about we play it by ear? Not that I don’t want to help, but like Claire said, it could take us longer at my place than we anticipate.”

“That’s fine,” Conrad said. “Now, if you can direct me toward a potato peeler, I should get started on these spuds.”

Claire opened the drawer beside him and got one out. “There you go. I’m off to do my bakery work.”

“We’ll keep it down,” Margo said. “Don’t want to disturb you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Margo leaned toward Conrad, so proud of him for not only offering to help with the move but for his suggestion of making dinner. “I’ll get the salad taken care of, then I’ll prep the broccoli. What else do you need me to do?”

“I could use a big pot to boil these potatoes in.”

“Of course.” Margo went to one of the tall cabinets that had pullout drawers and found the exact pot they used for that sort of thing. “Here you go. I’ll even fill it with water and add some salt.”

“Perfect,” Conrad said. He grinned. “This is fun.”

“What is?” She put the pot in the sink and turned on the tap.

“Making dinner together. We should do it more often.”

“Maybe we’ll do it a lot more often after I move in.” She suddenly realized what that sounded like. “I mean to the neighborhood.” She brought the pot to the stove and set the burner on high before adding salt.

He laughed. “I knew what you meant. But the other’s not a bad idea, either. Eventually.”

“*Conrad.*” She smiled despite his bold suggestion.

The elevator doors opened, and Kat got off. She looked tired, but happy. “Hey, there.”

Toby went right over to her, wagging his tail.

“How are you?” Margo asked. “And how is Alex?”

Kat stooped to give Toby a good scratch. “I’m all right. Alex is doing

pretty good. He finally woke up right before I had to leave.” She shook her head as she stood up. “He thought I was going to break up with him because I couldn’t handle him getting hurt.”

Conrad nodded, eyes full of understanding. He brought a few peeled potatoes over to the cutting board. “I wasn’t a firefighter, obviously, but I had a girl break up with me when she thought I was going to be sent overseas to a particularly dangerous area. Some women can’t handle the idea of the man they care about being in danger.”

Kat gave him a quick smile. “I’m sorry that happened to you. I can’t imagine breaking up with someone for that reason. I know it happens, but it doesn’t seem like a very nice thing to do.”

“It’s not,” Margo said. “But it’s certainly something you have to think about going forward. Alex’s job, I mean. The day might come when you’ll be more than girlfriend and boyfriend. When there are children involved.”

Kat nodded. “I get that. I don’t like knowing he could be hurt again. Or worse. I don’t like it at all. But I’m not breaking up with him.” She dragged her finger along the granite top. “That would mean breaking my own heart at this point.”

Conrad smiled but said nothing. He busied himself adding the potatoes he was cubing to the water.

Margo understood perfectly. Kat was already in love with the young man. “Dinner will be about half an hour or so. Your mom is in her room doing some work.”

Kat looked up. “I think I’ll get a shower. Unless you need help?” She pointed at Toby. “Or you-know-who needs to go you-know-where?”

Margo shook her head. “We’ve got it handled. But someone else might need a potty break.”

“Okay, I’ll take him.” Kat went off to the laundry room for Toby’s leash, then took him down in the elevator.

Margo waited until doors shut. “I hope nothing else happens to that boy. Losing someone you love is a terrible thing to endure.”

“I’m sure she knows that. She’s lost her father, after all.”

“True,” Margo said. “But he wasn’t exactly a shining example of manhood, either.”

Conrad lifted his chin, showing off his square jawline beautifully. “Who do you consider to be a shining example of manhood, then?”

She laughed. “Are you fishing for compliments?”

“Who? Me? Never.” He winked at her.

“You are pretty perfect. You cook. You write. You read books.” She moved closer to him, lowering her voice. “You take very good care of me.”

His grin went ear to ear. “I enjoy all of those things very much. Some more than others.”

She leaned in to kiss his cheek, but he turned his head at the last moment and her mouth landed on his.

She indulged him. He was also a very good kisser.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Roxie hadn't said anything to Trina, because it wasn't Trina's business, but Roxie had snuck a bikini into her purse before heading to Ethan's.

Now she sat side by side with him in his hot tub, staring up at the stars and thoroughly enjoying her evening.

"Feeling better?" Ethan asked.

"I am." All she'd told him was that she'd had a long day. No details. He already knew she and Trina had gone to Port St. Rosa to get her car. That was it.

"Do you want to talk about what happened today? Just offering. Not trying to pry."

She looked at him. "How do you know something happened today?"

"I don't. I was just assuming, since you said you had a long day. I thought maybe the memories of being in your old house got to you. Or something like that."

She sighed. "It was something like that." She pulled her knees up to her chest, which put the tops of them just out of the water. "I was going through some of Bryan's stuff, and I found a necklace with a diamond initial. The letter 'P'."

"He forgot your name?"

She laughed. She hadn't told him about Paulina. "Nothing that simple, I'm afraid." She explained about the third wife, the new baby, the woman's belief that Bryan had been divorced, all of it.

Ethan blinked a few times when she was done. "That is...a lot."

"It really is." She stared at the water, watching the bubbles rise and pop. It was sort of mesmerizing.

"I'm surprised you haven't taken to your bed. Except that you're an incredibly strong, resilient woman. But even people who are strong eventually break. We're not made to bear the weight of the world. Not alone, anyway."

For reasons she couldn't name, his words made her weepy. She sniffed and shook her head. "No, we're not."

"Hey," he said softly. "Are you okay? If you're not, that's all right, too. You want to cry, you cry."

"I'll ruin my makeup."

He laughed. "Can I tell you something?"

She sniffed again and nodded.

"You'd be just as beautiful without it."

"You don't know that. You haven't seen me without it."

He shrugged and tapped his chest. "I've seen what's in here and that's what makes someone beautiful. Not their face. Although yours helps, because it's pretty cute."

She laughed, the feeling she might cry quickly dissolving. "You're so good for me, you know that? How on Earth did you even know how much I needed this?"

"Can I just say a little bird told me and leave it at that?"

Roxie narrowed her eyes. "Trina."

Ethan pulled his pinched fingers across his closed mouth. "My lips are sealed."

"I love that kid."

"So do I. She's going to be great in that salon. I think she's going to have more business than she can handle once word starts to get out."

"Me, too." She leaned into him again. "I don't know if you care or not, but I'm going to change my hair color."

"Yeah? To purple like your mom?"

She laughed again. "No, nothing that drastic. To strawberry blond. Sorry, rose gold is what they call it now."

“So...pink?”

A little giggle bubbled up out of her. “Pink? Is that what you think rose gold is?”

“I’m a guy. What do I know?” He was smiling, though.

“You’re teasing me.”

“I think pink hair might be fun.”

“Maybe. But not this time.” She glanced at his head. “Unless you were talking about for yourself.”

“I think my kids might have something to say about that. Speaking of, if you go to church with me this Sunday, you’ll get to meet them. And my parents.”

“Yeah? Do they know about me already?”

He nodded. “They do. And they’re interested in meeting you.”

“I bet.” She blew out a breath. “No pressure, right?”

“I know, it’s kind of a stressful thing to meet someone’s family. But they’re good kids and they’re going to love you just like I do.”

She stared at him. “You love me?”

“I meant...” He swallowed. And then he cleared his throat. If he’d had a shirt on, he probably would have pulled at the collar. “Yeah, maybe I do. I shouldn’t say a thing like that so early in our relationship, because that’s not how you’re supposed to do this stuff, but I told you I was out of practice.”

“So *maybe* you do?”

“Roxie, if you don’t know how much I like you already then I’m doing something wrong. Yes, I am probably, most definitely, falling in love with you. If that’s too much or it freaks you out, then I’m sorry. About upsetting you. Not about the way I feel. I can’t help that part.”

She rolled her lips in to keep from laughing at how worked up he’d gotten. Like he was ready to fight about it. “I am probably, most definitely, falling in love with you, too.”

He went still. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “But we should keep that to ourselves for a while, don’t you think? My mom is already about to get married. I don’t want us to get the reputation that the Pasternak women are easy.”

He snorted. “Right. And I don’t want people to think I’m desperate and pathetic because of my wife leaving me for my brother.” He stuck his hand out. “We’ll just keep quiet about our feelings then.”

“Deal.” She took his hand to shake it, but he pulled her onto his lap,

sending a small wave of water over the edge of the hot tub and making her laugh. “Hey!”

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the side of her head. “You make me happy, Roxanne.”

No one ever called her by her full name. It felt very adult and very serious. And a little sexy. “You make me happy, too.”

They sat that way for a while without saying anything else. Just letting the water bubble around them as the stars twinkled overhead.

But there was a lingering thought she couldn’t get rid of. She finally decided to ask his advice. “What should I do with that necklace?”

He stayed quiet a few more moments. “The way I see it, you have a couple of choices. You could give it to her.”

“Which means I’d have to talk to her. I don’t really want to do that.”

“You could pretend you never found it.”

“Which would be dishonest.”

“Or you could give it to Trina to give to her.”

Roxie nodded. “I thought about that. Trina suggested it. Even offered to deliver it. But that feels like taking the easy way out. I’m the one who found it for a reason. What that reason is, I don’t know. Maybe because I’m supposed to talk to her?”

“Maybe.”

“But I really don’t want to. I know Bryan lied to her, told her that he was divorced from me and Claire, but just thinking about Paulina gets me upset.”

“Why do you think that is? What is it about her that bothers you the most?”

Roxie thought before she answered, trying to find the true answer to those questions. When she did, it wasn’t the most flattering. “She’s younger than me. Prettier than me. And those things make me feel like I wasn’t enough. Like I lost to her in some way.”

“Nothing you can do about a number, but prettier is subjective. And you’re probably wrong.”

She leaned back to see him better. “You might be in love with me, so you’re not capable of commenting on my looks objectively.”

He grinned at her. “No, I’m not.” He gave her a quick wink. “But what you’re saying is that you feel threatened by her in some way? Like she’s competition?”

“Sort of. But not that she’s competition. It’s like Bryan choosing her

makes me feel like I was no longer what he wanted or needed. It hurts to think how easily he replaced me. And it hurts to know that I made Claire feel that way when she found out about me. It's just stirred up all of these feelings and, frankly, it's made the happy memories I have of him seemed tainted."

Ethan nodded. "All valid feelings. Do you feel guilty in a way because you now think less of him?"

She frowned and moved off his lap to see him better. "Yeah, I do. I feel bad that I'm kind of not in love with him the way I once was. That I don't feel the same kind of grief I did just a few days ago."

"Also valid. You can feel whatever you want to without guilt, though. You're allowed. What he did to you, and to Claire, was not good behavior. He betrayed you both. And now you've found out he's done it again. So it's okay to be mad."

She blinked at him, trying to process what he was saying. "How did you get to be so smart about this kind of stuff?"

"Because I went through a lot of my own stuff when my wife left. I did some therapy, too. It helped me see that I was blaming myself for all kinds of things I had no control over. Her choices were just that. *Her* choices. Not things I made her do. Which is sort of what I think you're going through now."

She nodded. "Yeah, I think I am." She sighed, realizing what she needed to do. "I have to give Paulina that necklace."

Chapter Thirty

After her swim, a long, hot shower, and a quick dinner of grilled cheese and tomato soup, Trina sprawled on the couch and put on one of her favorite reality TV shows, *Bachelor in Paradise*. It was kind of cringey, but in the way that was also highly entertaining.

Miles texted, too, to ask her about her trip and to tell her about Alex and let her know that he was all right. In turn, Trina checked in with Kat to see how she was doing. She assured Trina that she was fine, although bothered that she had no choice but to go to Landry tomorrow, instead of staying with Alex like she would have preferred.

Trina totally got that. It would be rough to leave Miles knowing he was hurt. She was glad they were spending time together tomorrow, and glad she'd be able to help him with Alex, too.

The show was just about halfway through when the elevator doors opened, and her grandmother strolled out.

Trina hit Pause, then jumped up to greet her grandmother with a hug as she came into the living room. "Mimi! I thought you'd run away from home."

Her grandmother laughed and patted Trina's arm, hugging her back. "No, my girl. But I did *buy* a home."

"You did? Mimi, that is so exciting. Come sit and tell me all about it."

"I will. Just as soon as I change into my nightgown. It's been a long day

and I need to relax. Did everything go all right in Port St. Rosa? Did you get your mother's car? I didn't see it downstairs."

"We got it. She drove it over to Ethan's." Trina didn't bring up the necklace. That could wait.

"Good. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be out."

"Do you want me to make you a gin and tonic?"

"That sounds like the bee's knees," Willie called over her shoulder as she went to her bedroom to change.

Trina grinned and returned to the living room. She went into the kitchen and fixed the drink for her grandmother, just the way she liked it. Then Trina set the drink on the little table beside her grandmother's chair.

She watched a few more minutes of the show before her grandmother joined her. "Your drink is ready and waiting."

"Fantastic. I am definitely putting you in my will." She was in her purple nightgown patterned with martini glasses and her purple fuzzy slippers that Trina knew had orthopedic inserts.

Trina laughed. "Mimi, you are in a mood."

"I'm about as happy as a person can be." She sat in her recliner, kicked up the footrest, then took a long sip of her drink and let out a contented sigh. "That's the stuff right there. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Trina crossed her legs under her. "All right, let's go. Give me all the details about this new house."

Her grandmother laughed. "To start with, we bought a beautiful lot. Nice and big. Sits right on the water that leads out to the Gulf, so you can have a boat and everything. And get this—there were dolphins in the canal. Real ones."

Trina's mouth came open. "That's amazing. I love dolphins."

"I know you do. I hope that means you come to visit us a lot."

"I will, I promise. But you said you bought a house."

"We did. Sort of. We signed a contract for the lot and for a house to be built on the lot. We already picked out the house. The model is called The Carrington. Very fancy. You can go to the Dunes West website and look at the floorplan if you want. They gave us a folder with one in it, but Miguel took that with him. We still have to meet with the landscape people and the waterscape people, but it's all coming together."

"What are waterscape people?"

"The people who design the pool." Her grandmother waved her hand.

“They have snazzy names for everybody these days. Anyway, we need to get all of that taken care of, but it’s a done deal. We’ll be moving over there once the house is built.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“Maybe eight or nine months.” Her grandmother shrugged. “Depending on how things go.”

“Sure,” Trina said. “And Miguel liked it all, too?”

“He did. We even went and watched the sunset from our new lot. It was beautiful.” Her grandmother took a deep breath, her smile going all dreamy. “I never thought this would be my life again. To be in love and be married again. And to have a brand-new house. It’s really something, my girl. I feel so blessed.”

“I’m so happy for you, Mimi. I never thought you’d get married again, either, but Miguel is really special.”

Her grandmother nodded. “Yes, he is.” She let out another happy sigh, took a sip of her drink, then wiggled a bit to get comfortable. “So, what did I miss today? Anything new at the salon? How was everything back in Port St. Rosa?”

“Nothing new at the salon that I know about. But Mom found something at the house that upset her.” Trina made a face. “A necklace hidden way back in Dad’s dresser drawer with a diamond initial ‘P’ on it.”

Her grandmother frowned. “That would have upset me, too. I hope she threw the stupid thing away.”

Trina rolled her eyes. “No, Mimi. It was gold and diamonds! But I also don’t know what she’s going to do with it. I offered to take it to Paulina, but Mom held on to it, so who knows.”

Her grandmother snorted. “That man had a lot of nerve marrying a woman the same age as his daughters. He had a lot of nerve in general. The bum.”

“Mimi, it’s not Paulina’s fault. I know you and Mom don’t like her, and I get it. Dad really did a bad thing by hooking up with her, but I can’t overlook the fact that I have a brother now. That sweet little baby is certainly not to blame.”

“I know all that, Trina, and you’re right, the baby is innocent. But my loyalties are always going to lie with my blood family. That’s you and your mom. You can’t expect me to ignore what your father did.”

“I don’t expect that. But he did the same thing to Claire with Mom, and

she's been pretty understanding."

Her grandmother shot her a sharp look. "Not at first."

"No, not at first. Which is why I'm just trying to give Mom some space and let her deal with this however she needs to."

"Smart. How upset was she? On a scale of one to ten?"

"Maybe a nine. She kind of shut down. And, of course, I couldn't talk to her on the way home because we were in separate cars. But she perked up a bit when Ethan invited her over. Not sure what she'll be like when she gets home. I'm hoping he can lift her mood."

"I'm sure he will." Her grandmother picked up her glass again. "How's that man of yours?"

"He's great, but Alex isn't." Trina explained what had happened.

Her grandmother put her hand to her mouth, then shook her head. "We need to keep that boy in our prayers. Miles, too. That's an awful tough job they do."

Trina nodded. "It is. Miles isn't in the same kind of danger that Alex is, but it's definitely something I think about."

"Maybe I'll ask Miguel if there's a saint for firefighters. Those Catholics have a saint for everything."

Trina laughed. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

"You think you'll end up marrying that boy?"

"Mimi, how do I know? We only just started dating."

Her grandmother shrugged. "I always had a feeling about the men in my life. I knew right away if they were the one or not."

"That's because they were *all* the one."

Her grandmother laughed. "Don't get sassy." She gestured at Trina with her glass. "We still need to meet him, too."

"I know. I promise I'll get him over here soon."

"You'd better. I don't like the idea of you going out with a boy I haven't approved of yet. I'm sure I'll like him, but all the same, I want to meet him."

Trina nodded. "It'll happen. And you'll love him."

That much was a foregone conclusion for Trina. Miles was easy to like. He was kind and polite and had a worthwhile job.

But her grandmother's question about marriage got Trina thinking. Could she see herself married to Miles?

She leaned back on the couch and smiled. She could. Especially now that she knew he wanted kids just as much as she did.

Chapter Thirty-one

The day had been extremely long, and the rest of the house had been in bed when Jules and Cash returned, but she was thrilled with how much they'd gotten done. They'd sounded really good, too, even with only a day's practice. The next couple of days would just make them that much better.

She couldn't wait to hear the song with a full band. Tomorrow was going to be fun even though Cash wouldn't be there, since he'd be off helping Kat with the move.

Regardless of how this demo did, it was at least going to sound great. That made her happy. She'd been a little worried that rushing the demo would result in an inferior product, something she wouldn't even want to put her name on, but that worry was gone.

Again, she had Jesse to thank. He'd stepped up when she'd needed him, and he showed no signs of stopping.

As she lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, Toby curled into a little circle near her feet, her mind drifted to what the future might hold.

Having him on tour with her would be great fun, but it would also be a test of their newly minted relationship.

If things soured between them during the tour, it could mean the end of them for good. She didn't want that to happen for several reasons. She liked

Jesse a lot, not just as someone who shared her love and appreciation for music, but as a friend, and even more so as a romantic companion.

Her two failed marriages had made her gun-shy about getting too involved too soon. Although it wasn't entirely fair to say her marriage to Lars had failed. The two of them had failed mostly because of his addictions and womanizing, but the marriage *had* given her Cash and Fender, her sons.

That had absolutely been the greatest win of her life.

Having Cash here with her now was such an unexpected pleasure. It made this whole process richer and more enjoyable. Every day they were making new memories. She valued his input and his insight. She'd never had anyone his age working alongside her on an album before and it made her wonder if he might not be some sort of secret ingredient.

Jules's mom, in her bed on the other side of the room, snored very lightly. Almost too lightly to really be snoring. In fact, if Jules closed her eyes and used her imagination, it nearly sounded like the distant waves.

She fell asleep to that sound and was woken some hours later by the low hum and bustle of the rest of the house's occupants.

She knew the second her eyes opened what it was all about. Cash, Kat, and Claire were headed to Landry today. Her mom and Conrad, too. Jules jumped out of bed and pulled on her robe. Her mom was already up. Toby wasn't in the bedroom, either. She wondered if someone had taken him out yet.

She opened the door and went into the living room. Kat and Claire were in the kitchen, both drinking from mugs, but there seemed to be some coffee left. She was glad about that. "Morning. Did anyone take Toby out?"

Kat looked over. "Cash is down with him now."

"Cash is already up?" Wonders never ceased.

Claire nodded. "Mom already left. Conrad picked her up about ten minutes ago."

Jules squinted at the time. It was barely seven thirty. "Wow, they left early."

"They did," Claire said. "They're going to do as much as they can at her house, then come to mine and help."

Jules went toward the coffeemaker. "I feel bad that I'm not coming to help. I should be. I'm sorry."

"Don't be silly," Claire said. "You've got to get this song done. We need someone really famous in this family so we can all ride on their coattails."

Jules laughed as she filled a cup. "I'll do my best. But Mom might end up being that person, depending on how this book thing goes."

Kat snorted. "Wouldn't that be something."

"It would." Jules fixed her coffee, then took a very welcome sip. She sighed and leaned against the counter. "What time are you guys leaving?"

"Soon," Claire said. "I'm actually going with Danny. He's coming over to help, too."

"Wow." Jules hadn't been expecting that. "How nice of him!"

"Tell me about it."

Kat laughed. "He just wants to make sure his prize baker doesn't change her mind about moving here."

"That," Claire said. "Is not about to happen." She looked at Jules. "You missed a great dinner last night. Conrad and Mom made a wonderful meal."

Kat nodded. "Plus, we got to have sour orange pie, which is now my new favorite."

Claire smiled. "There's plenty left over. If you're going to the studio today, take a piece for yourself and for Jesse."

"Okay," Jules said. "I will. Thanks."

The elevator doors opened, and Cash came out. "Hey, Mom. Toby did his thing. Very successfully, I might add."

Jules laughed. "Thanks for that information."

He looked at Kat. "You about ready?"

She nodded. "Let me just go brush my teeth. I want to take a travel mug of coffee with me."

"Yeah, good idea. Me, too." He got two of them down from the same cabinet that held the coffee cups, but the shelf that held the travel mugs was the highest one. No one but Cash could have gotten them without a stepstool.

Claire poured the remains of her coffee in the sink. "I should go brush, too."

Jules stood nearby while Cash emptied the rest of the coffee pot into the two travel mugs. "I hope you have an easy day of things."

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks. I'm kind of envious you get to play with all the musicians today."

She smiled. "You will be missed."

"I'm not so sure about that, but thanks for saying so."

"Hey," she said. "I don't know if I've told you this enough, but you being here and being a part of this is really special for me. Having kids is a

blessing. Getting to hang out with them when they're adults and them actually wanting to be around you is a whole other level of amazing. I'm really grateful for this time."

He smiled. Then came over and hugged her. "It's pretty cool for me, too."

"You be safe today."

"You, too." He grinned. "Musicians are crazy."

"Yes," Jules said, snickering. "Your father is proof of that. Have you talked to him lately? Does he know you're here?"

Cash shrugged. "We've texted a few times. I guess he knows I'm here."

Kat came out. "All right. Let me fix my coffee and I'm ready to roll."

"Mug is full," Cash said. "You just need to put stuff in it."

"Thanks."

Claire returned with her purse, the strap slung over her shoulder. "Danny's downstairs. I'll see you two at the house."

"Okay, Mom," Kat said.

"Drive safe, Aunt Claire."

"Thanks, Cash. Thanks for coming today, too."

"Thanks for baking all those delicious snacks."

She laughed as she got on the elevator. "Anytime."

Jules's coffee seemed to be doing the job of waking her up finally. "I guess I'll take advantage of being up early and head out for a walk on the beach."

"What are you going to do with Toby all day?" Cash asked. "If you're as late tonight as we were last night, I don't think he'll be able to hold it."

"Good point," Jules said. "I don't think Jesse would mind if I brought him to the club. He could hang out in the control room, I guess. But I'd better ask first. At least if he walks on the beach with me, that'll wear him out some. Otherwise, I'll just have to take a break and run home."

Cash glanced toward the stairs that led to the first floor. "Couldn't you ask one of the people downstairs?"

Jules nodded. "Maybe. That's another possibility." She hated to impose on them. She knew they had a lot going on, too. Although Trina *had* offered to look after Toby if Jules ever needed her to.

Kat put the lid on her travel mug. "All right, I'm ready. Let's hit it."

Jules waited until they were on the elevator. "Bye. Have a good day."

"Thanks," Kat said.

Cash gave a little nod. "Make some good music today."

“I’m going to try.” Jules went to the bedroom to change into shorts and a T-shirt. Toby had gotten himself up on the bed and looked like he was about to settle in. “Don’t go to sleep, Toby. We’re going walking.”

That got him down off the bed and doing his happy dance.

In a matter of minutes, she was changed, had him on his leash again, and was pushing the button to call the elevator. She was barefoot, having decided to get her feet into the sand and really feel it.

The house was oddly still and not just because it was early. This level of silence wasn’t something that happened often.

She liked it. She liked being around family, too, but after the day in the studio yesterday and the day she was about to have, she bathed herself in the quiet. She used it to center herself and find a rare moment of peace that was all her own.

The beach, she soon found out, was almost as empty. There were far fewer folks out than at around ten or so when she normally got to walk. Even the gulls and the waves seemed subdued. She walked at a leisurely pace, less concerned about burning calories than she was with just absorbing the new day.

Her mind rambled while she walked, bouncing from one topic to the next and back again. Jesse, the upcoming tour, the demo, new songs for the album, open mic night, moving day for Claire and Kat, Bryan’s new wife, Roxie and her family, Margo’s new house...there was a lot to think about.

One thing that her mind kept coming back to was that she still needed at least three more songs to complete her album.

Nothing came to her. Nothing.

She stopped and stood at the edge of the water, letting the waves lap at her toes. The ocean was supposed to be a very inspiring place. “Okay,” she whispered. “Give me my next idea. Show me my next song. I only need a few more.”

But the ocean was as quiet as the empty beach house and her ideas seemed to be gone.

Chapter Thirty-two

*K*at drove. They were in her car, so it just made sense. It meant she'd be driving back, too, but she didn't care. It wasn't that long of a trip. About two and a half hours. Nothing she couldn't handle.

Although she'd be pretty worn out by the time they made the return trip. Again, not a big deal. She'd get through it. Then she could spend all of tomorrow laying by the pool or napping if she wanted. After she spent some time with Alex, of course.

Maybe she'd spend the whole day with him. If he was up to it. He might just want to rest. Then again, he might need someone to help him. Having one arm in a sling didn't make it easy to take care of yourself. Whatever he needed, she'd be there for him.

At some point, though, she'd have to deal with the stuff she brought back. Finding places for it. Sorting through it. Getting rid of some of it. Whatever needed to be done. But she didn't plan on bringing everything she owned. There was no way that was going to happen. Her intentions were to be brutally honest about what she needed and what she didn't.

What was that method of decluttering she'd heard about? You only kept the things that sparked joy? Right now, what sparked joy was her new career path, time with Alex, time with her family, and surfing.

She imagined working at Future Florida would soon be one of those

things. She was eager to start, but not so eager that she wasn't glad she still had some days to herself. Once she began working, she'd only have weekends completely free.

She went through what was in her room back in Landry, mentally sorting it all into take and leave piles.

There wasn't a single piece of furniture in her room outside of her small desk that she planned to bring back. Certainly not the bed where she'd found Ray and Heidi.

Everything in her room at the beach house was nicer or newer or both. Her clothes, which she didn't have a ton of anyway, she'd just bag up and sort through once she got back to Diamond Beach.

Her shoes, jewelry, and books would come back with her. Some of her mementos and framed photos. The afghan her late Grandma Thompson had crocheted for her. The teddy bear her father had given her on her tenth birthday she wasn't so sure about.

There were a lot of little things like that which had been gifts from him over the years. Her jewelry box. A Mickey Mouse watch. Last year, he'd given her a glass paperweight that looked like it was filled with tiny flowers. It was beautiful but she wasn't sure it meant that much to her anymore. There was a taint to all of his gifts now. Sad but, unfortunately, true.

And she didn't want to keep anything that made her sad.

"What was that all about?" Cash asked.

Kat looked over. "What was what?"

"You just sighed pretty loud."

"I did?" Kat laughed. "Sorry. I was just thinking. I didn't even realize I'd done it."

"Are you regretting the trip back?"

"No, nothing like that. I was just thinking about what I want to keep and what I don't. Stuff that used to mean a lot to me has lost some of that meaning. You know, with everything that's happened with my dad."

"Right," he said. "I can understand that. It's got to be so weird trying to make sense of what he did."

"There is no making sense of it. Unless you come to the conclusion that he was an awful person who didn't think lying to his three families was a big deal." She made a face. "Not much of a legacy to leave behind."

"You know my dad cheated on my mom. Many times. She never really talks about it, but when your dad is Lars Harrison, you can pretty much find

out anything you want to about him just by typing his name into a search engine.” He shook his head. “I’ve seen pictures of him with women he claimed not to know.” Cash sighed. “There’s no escaping social media when you’re famous.”

Just thinking about that made Kat suck in a breath. Seeing pictures of a parent like that had to have been a little traumatic. “I can’t imagine how hard that was. Your dad was never around that often, so my memories of him are pretty slim.”

“Mine, too, from when I was a kid. He was always on tour. My memories of him from when I was growing up are mostly of him bringing us presents. He always brought us presents when he showed up.”

Kat laughed, the sound slightly bitter. “Yeah, my dad, too. I guess we have more in common than I realized.” She glanced over. “You like Jesse? This guy Aunt Jules is seeing?”

“Yeah, I like him a lot. The dude is cool. He’s super into music, obviously, and he’s been totally involved in helping my mom make this demo happen. He seems pretty into her, too.” Cash shrugged. “That’s sort of weird, but at the same time, she deserves to be happy, you know?”

“I do know. I feel the same way about my mom and Danny. Not something I would have felt a couple weeks ago, but in light of everything my dad did, I feel like she should go for it. Find her happiness wherever and however. Life is too short.”

Cash was quiet for a second. “How, uh, how’s Alex? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

“No, it’s fine to ask. He’s doing all right. I haven’t texted him yet today. I told him before I left the hospital last night that he should text me when he wakes up. I didn’t want to be the one to do that.” She reached for her travel mug and took a drink of her coffee. She’d definitely use up the caffeine today.

“I think it’s cool he’s teaching you to surf.”

She smiled. “Me, too. I can’t believe how much I like it. As soon as I get a couple of paychecks under my belt, I’m going to buy my own board.”

“Now *that* is cool. I had to sell my board before I came here. Too much to travel with and I needed the money.”

“Maybe when you get some saved up, you can buy another one.”

“Maybe. But I have a feeling it’s going to be a while before I have the time to really spend some time in the water like I’d want to. Especially if the tour happens, which I’m sure it will. This new song of my mom’s is going to

blow up. I'm telling you, it's going to be big."

"Yeah?" Kat grinned. "That's awesome."

"I'm not the only one who thinks so. Her agent and Jesse agree with me. So does Sierra. Everybody who hears it, loves it."

"I'd love to hear it sometime."

He pulled out his phone. "How about right now?"

"Seriously?"

"It's just a rough version she and I recorded together so I could learn the song, but it'll give you the idea."

"Play it. I'm dying to hear it."

"Let me see if I can connect my phone to your car's Bluetooth." He fiddled around with the touchscreen control panel, then his phone for a minute. "Okay, let's see if this works."

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then guitar music filled the car.

Kat started tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. It was already catchy. Her aunt's voice followed and by the second round of the chorus, Kat was mouthing the words along with her. "Dixie's got her boots on and she's headed into town. By the way she's walking, trouble's about to go down."

When the song finished, she was smiling and nodding. "That was amazing. I already want to hear it again. It's the kind of song you put on repeat."

Cash grinning. "I know! That's what I was saying. It could be the new country summer jam."

"Definitely."

"That was me singing with her on the bridge."

"Yeah?" Kat glanced over at him. "I don't know what a bridge is, but I'm assuming you mean that softer, deeper part."

"Yep. And me playing rhythm guitar. I wish you could hear how it sounded yesterday with Sierra on keyboards and helping with backup vocals. When the whole thing comes together it's going to rock."

"It already rocks," Kat said.

"Well, it'll rock harder. And I think it's bigger than just country. It's going to get all kinds of play. I hope so, anyway."

"We'll call the biggest radio stations and request it."

He laughed. "Not a bad idea. But I'm hoping we can do a video and get that to go viral."

"Now *that* would be cool. You have any ideas for it?"

“A few things, but nothing’s really gelled yet. Why? Do you have one?”

“Why don’t you play that song a few more times and let me think about it.”

He smiled. “You got it.”

Chapter Thirty-three

Claire liked riding with Danny. He was a good driver, and they had the same taste in music, although she was discovering some new Latin tunes, thanks to him.

They had a lot to discuss anyway, all bakery related. Well, most of it was bakery related. She imagined other topics would come up. The drive would take over two hours. They were bound to talk about some unexpected things.

“Thanks again for doing this,” she said. “I really appreciate it.”

“I’m happy to help.” He adjusted the vent nearest him. “But I should have brought some coffee. Should we stop? Would you drink some?”

“Sure. I think we’ll need the caffeine today.”

“All right. Next place I see.” The next place he saw happened to be a Dunkin’ Donuts. He pointed at the sign. “Drive-through okay?”

“Works for me,” Claire said. “Are you getting a doughnut?”

He grinned as he took the exit toward the store. “I was thinking about it. Granted, I know it won’t compare to anything you might make, but a doughnut and coffee on an early morning road trip is kind of a ritual for me. What do you say? You want one?”

“I’d better not.”

He got in the drive-through lane, then looked her up and down. “Why not?”

“Because I eat enough sugar as it is. I’m trying to lose weight, not gain it.”

“You know I think you look perfect just the way you are.”

“That’s very kind of you to say. But I’ll be fine with just coffee.” She smiled. “Too bad they don’t have a low-carb, sugar-free, high-protein doughnut.”

He frowned. “Is that a thing?”

“No, but it should be.” She laughed. “That’s a million-dollar idea right there. But it would have to taste good, too. Not sure that’s actually possible.”

“Should we offer sugar-free options at the bakery? I know it’s kind of a big deal for some people.”

“I’ve thought about it. It’s not too hard to make a sugar-free, lower-carb option using some of the plant-based sweeteners and nut flours, but those things make the costs go up.” She shrugged. “We can certainly test a few things out.”

“Do you have something specific in mind? What kinds of things would you do?”

They inched forward as the car ahead of them moved.

“I’d probably keep it simple to begin with. A chocolate chip cookie. Maybe a vanilla cupcake. Those are pretty basic and if they sold, we could expand the offerings. The thing is, if you get known for carrying the low-carb, sugar-free stuff, you have to keep it up or you risk disappointing customers.”

“You don’t sound like you want to do it.” He rolled down his window as they approached the intercom for ordering.

“I’m willing to try anything.”

“Up to you.” He glanced at her. “Last chance. Are you sure you don’t want a doughnut? You could get a blueberry cake doughnut. Blueberries are healthy.”

She laughed. “Okay, fine. You talked me into it.” There was nothing healthy about a doughnut, even with blueberries, but she was in a good mood and was about to burn a lot of calories. “Two creamers and an artificial sweetener.”

He ordered, getting a blueberry doughnut for her, a vanilla-glazed cream-filled for himself, and coffees for both of them. When the car in front moved, he drove to the window and gave the young man working there some cash.

He got his change, then the two coffees. He handed one to Claire and put

the other in the center console cupholder. He got a bag next. “Doughnuts and coffee fixings.”

“Make sure they give us napkins,” Claire said.

“Can we have some extra napkins?” he asked the server.

They got everything they needed and were off again.

Claire opened the bag with the coffee fixings and doughnuts. “Oh, they smell so good. I’m glad I got one now. I would have been sad otherwise.”

He chuckled. “Can’t have you being sad.”

She took his doughnut out, holding it by the wax paper partially wrapped around it, and handed it to him. “I’ll fix your coffee for you. How do you want it?”

“Thanks. Two sugars, two creamers.”

She got it taken care of, putting the lid back on so it wouldn’t spill, then put it in the cup holder closest to him. She put a napkin on his leg, too. “Just in case.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I’ll need it.”

She fixed her coffee next. When that was done, she took a bite of her doughnut. “Mmm. Not bad for a mass-produced thing.”

He nodded, his mouth too full to answer. Finally, he rested his doughnut on the napkin she’d given him and took a sip of coffee. “Should we offer doughnuts?”

“No. Too much work and there’s already a doughnut place in town. But for the early morning crowd, we’ll have muffins and some assorted pastries. We’ll do the standard filled Danish in a variety of flavors. Probably cheese, guava, strawberry, pineapple, lemon, maybe an orange marmalade, maybe a key lime curd.”

“How about that sour orange? That would wake you up in the morning.”

She smiled. “That’s not a bad idea at all. Then we can do a few other types of pastries like apple fritters, cinnamon rolls, bear claws. Things like that.”

He nodded, picking up his doughnut again. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“I have lists of everything I want to make.” She sipped her coffee. It wasn’t bad. “A lot of lists. I’ve broken them down by product type, then the flavors I want to use. I want to have a great selection, but I don’t want to duplicate so much of what’s out there already. We need to be special. Interesting. Different. The sour orange pie and Puerto Rican flavors and treats

will help a lot with that.” That’s how they’d make a name and reputation for themselves—by standing out.

“I couldn’t agree more. You seem to really have a handle on it. And I love how much you’ve embraced our Puerto Rican heritage when it comes to the flavors and recipes. Thank you for that. Means a lot to me and my family.”

“Means a lot to me, too. If it’s important to you, it’s important to me. And I’ve really enjoyed adding to my repertoire.”

He popped the last of his doughnut into his mouth. She took another bite of hers as well. They drove in silence, finishing up their food, sipping their coffee, and just enjoying the moment.

He took a sip of coffee then returned his cup to the holder. “Do you think being back in your house will stir up a lot of memories?”

She nodded. “I’m sure it will. But I don’t think they’ll bother me. They might have at one time, but I have so much going on in my life right now, so much good, exciting stuff, that I don’t have the time for bad energy.” She laughed. “Did that sound a little New Age? I just mean that I’m moving forward.”

“I get it,” he said. “It’s a great attitude, too.”

“You’re such a big part of helping me get there. Not just the bakery, which is huge, of course, but your friendship and the way things are developing between us. It’s really made me see how I was limiting myself. Unnecessarily.”

“There’s a lot of life out there to be lived.”

“And I know that now.” She sighed and looked out the window. “I lived such a small life for so long. Way too concerned with what someone else might think.”

“That’s a hard way to go through life.”

“It really was.” She glanced over at him. “I’m not glad Bryan did what he did. But, boy, did it wake me up. If I’m happy about anything, it’s that it all exploded when it did. If I hadn’t found out about any of this for another twenty or so years, I would feel like I’d wasted my entire life. At least now, I feel like I’m getting an amazing second chance.”

Danny smiled. “I’m so glad I get to be a part of that.”

Chapter Thirty-four

Margo had a legal pad on her lap and a pen in her hand. As Conrad drove, they talked through the next few scenes of the book, and she took notes. She put down as much detail as they could come up with, even adding some lines of dialogue when possible.

She was glad to do it and even gladder that they were making some headway. She didn't like the thought of giving up an entire day of writing. They'd been on such a nice streak.

She'd filled two and a half pages when their ideas seemed to peter out. "Is that all we have?"

After a moment, Conrad nodded. "Maybe. If we go too much further, we might find none of it's useful. You know how it is when you actually start putting the words down in the manuscript. Things change. New ideas emerge. We could end up going in a completely different direction. Although what we have so far seems pretty solid. Do you think we should try for more?"

"No, that's fine. We can stop there." She clicked the pen to retract the ballpoint, then tucked it away in her purse. "You are supposed to be educating me about Dinah anyway."

He smiled. "Right. Where to begin..."

"Why won't she like me?"

He groaned softly. "There are a variety of reasons. She'll think you aren't

good enough for me. That you're after my money. That—"

"After your money? Are you secretly a millionaire and you haven't told me?"

He laughed. "There are a lot of women who'd think my military pension and benefits make me a pretty good catch."

"I guess they would. And they do. But you're a pretty good catch even without those things. I'm not such a bad catch myself, you know."

"No, you're not." He grinned. "That's the right attitude to have around Dinah. You won't win her over, but you might soften her up a little. The thing is, in her eyes, there is no one worthy of her brother."

"Is that why you never married?"

"I hate to say Dinah was the reason, but she's scared off quite a few of my girlfriends."

"And you let her get away with this?"

"I don't *let* her do anything." He sighed and she sensed this was a difficult subject for him. "Dinah is a force of nature. Our mother died when we were young, and our father worked a lot. Our grandmother helped raise us, but she had some health issues and couldn't do everything our mother had. By the time Dinah was fourteen, she was running the house."

"That must have been very hard on both of you." Margo knew she was blessed to have had both her parents for so long. "Losing your mother so young."

"It was," Conrad said. "Dinah became my mother and my sister. She's five years older than me and always seemed so capable. But I'll tell you something I've never told her. I never will tell her, so you can't, either."

"Understood." Margo nodded. She'd never betray his confidence.

"I went into the military because I thought it might be my only chance to get away from her. Dinah kept pushing me to become a mechanic like my father. To help him run the shop." Conrad shook his head. "I didn't want that. Even as a kid, books were my escape. I wanted to see some of the world I'd read about."

"And the Marines made that seem possible."

"They did. And they made good on it. I saw places I never dreamed I'd visit. But I'm not sure Dinah ever forgave me for taking that route. Not that she wasn't proud of me. She was. But she ended up staying at home with our father and taking care of him."

"Did she ever marry?"

“No. She had a few suitors. But after I left, our father became her focus.”

“Was your father unable to care for himself?”

“I’m sure he could have. But she cooked and cleaned and did his laundry, so he never had a chance to try. He didn’t complain about it. He probably liked the help. But she lived with him until his death. She still lives in the house to this day.”

“Do you think she’s happy?”

“I don’t know. She keeps busy, helping out with church functions and a couple of women’s groups. In fact, she never seems to sit still. You’ll see when she’s here. She’s always doing something. If she’s sitting down to watch television, she’s knitting or crocheting something. Last visit, it was hats for cancer patients.”

“That’s a nice thing to do.”

He nodded. “Everything she does is nice. Everything she does is for someone else. That’s been her entire life. Service to others.”

A lightbulb went off in Margo’s head. “Which is why she gets away with interfering in your life. You feel guilty about saying anything.”

He cut his eyes at her and exhaled. “How can I? All she’s ever done in her life is take care of me.”

“But if she’s kept you from having a wife, that’s not exactly taking care of you, either.”

“No, it’s not. I’ve just always told myself I’ve yet to meet the right woman.”

“You mean one capable of standing up to Dinah.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you think I’m the right woman?”

His mouth lifted in a lopsided smile. “For me or for Dinah?”

“For you. Pardon my French, but I don’t give a flying fig what your sister thinks, no matter how much of a saint you believe her to be.”

He laughed. “Yes, I think you’re very much the right woman for me. You’re probably the only one I’ve ever known who is capable of standing up to her. But I don’t want there to be trouble. Dinah’s not a bad person.”

“I’m sure she’s not. But it seems to me no one’s ever given her any boundaries. You in particular.” Margo couldn’t say there wouldn’t be trouble, because that might be a lie. She wasn’t about to let this woman push her around. Or Conrad. Not while Margo was there to do something about it. “You deserve to live the life you want, Conrad.”

“I know. And I understand what you’re saying about giving Dinah boundaries. I’m not so sure they’d mean anything to her. She does what she wants.”

“Because she’s been allowed to. Running roughshod over people isn’t any way to behave.” Margo could feel herself getting worked up. She took a few breaths. “Look, I like you very much. What we have is clearly something special. I will be kind and civilized to your sister, without question. But her opinions about your life don’t matter to me. Only your opinions do, because you’re the one I’m involved with.”

“I appreciate that.”

She hesitated before saying anything, because it seemed like he wasn’t done. “Sounded to me like you had more to say.”

“Just that...” He shook his head. “I wish she wasn’t coming.”

Margo had to ask her next question, if for no other reason than her own peace of mind. “And if she tells you that I’m not right for you or tries to run me off, what are you going to do then?”

He took his eyes off the road for a second to look at her. “I’m not giving up that easy. I am a Marine, after all.”

“Good,” Margo said. Call it women’s intuition, but she didn’t think it was going to be quite that simple.

Chapter Thirty-five

Willie and Miguel were back at Dunes West and sitting in one of the big conference rooms. They'd been given drinks. Willie had asked for and received a mocha latte, which wasn't as good as Java Jams', but was still pretty tasty, so she was impressed. Miguel had a regular coffee. And a plate of cookies, mostly nice ones, had been brought in.

Willie had eaten two of them so far. A little powdered sugar-covered one that was barely more than a bite. It was buttery and melted in her mouth. Very nice. And a small chocolate chip cookie that, unfortunately, contained walnuts. Not so nice.

They were meeting with the exterior people. Landscaping, hardscaping, waterscaping. So much 'scaping.

Miguel, who seemed to know a lot more about landscaping than Willie had ever imagined, was pointing to the survey of their lot, and talking about plants and trees and how the driveway should be.

None of that really mattered to Willie, so long as it looked nice and was easy enough to maintain. Something that would be done by a yard company, not her or Miguel. Her days of working outside were over. If Miguel wanted to putter, that was fine, but the bulk of the work would be hired out.

What she would say something about was the backyard living space. She wanted a good pool, a nice hot tub, plenty of shaded space, a summer

kitchen, a firepit, maybe even a swinging seat, and plenty of the right kind of lighting.

She liked those fancy bulbs that people strung around in long strands. They were romantic and not too bright. The best romantic lighting never was. Everyone looked better in candlelight and that was the opposite of bright.

She popped half of another cookie into her mouth. This one was sort of long and covered in white chocolate with multicolored sprinkles. Not bad.

“What do you think?” Miguel asked her.

She shrugged and pointed at her mouth, then held up one finger while she chewed. She took a drink of her mocha latte to wash down the crumbs. “I think you know a lot more than I do about landscaping. If you’re happy, I’m happy. When do we talk about the pool and the backyard?”

He smiled. “Next. But do you want flowering things? Or more green? Or variegated plants?”

“I like color,” she said. “Flowers are nice, but they only last so long. I like something that’s easy to maintain. And like I said, if it makes you happy, I know I’ll like it.”

“Okay.” He looked at the man jotting down notes. “Put in some of those variegated crotons in the front and I’d definitely like some nice palms lining the driveway. I’d like some hedges at the property lines for privacy, too.”

The man, who Willie thought was named Peter or Paul or something else that sounded like an Apostle, nodded. “For the driveway, we can do some fishtail palms. Those have beautiful, fringed branches that will give you a lot of visual interest.”

“Sounds good,” Miguel said. “I like those. Very pretty.”

“For the property lines, there’s a lot to choose from. When we get closer to that point, you’re welcome to meet me at the nursery and hand-select what you like.”

“Really?” Miguel’s eyes lit up. “I would like that very much.”

“I’ll call you to do that, then.” The man stuck his hand out. “Pleasure doing business with you, Miguel.”

“You, too, Parker.”

Eh. She’d been close.

As Parker left, a new person came in. A woman about Roxie’s age and a slightly younger man. They were in aquamarine blue polo shirts and tan trousers. Supreme Waterscapes was embroidered over the upper chest of their shirts.

“Time to talk about the pool?” Willie asked.

The woman nodded and extended her hand. “That’s exactly right. I’m Ginny Mortimer and this is my brother, Trip. Our family business is Supreme Waterscapes and we can create anything you can dream up.”

Trip leaned in, a big smile on his face. “And a few things you probably never would have imagined.”

Willie grinned as Trip and Ginny sat. The spiel was cute and clearly their standard opener, but she loved it. “Fantastic. I want a big pool with a nice shallow end. The kind you can put chairs in.”

“A Baja shelf,” Ginny said. “You want something that’s only about ankle deep where you set lounge chairs, right?”

“Yes,” Willie said. “I know you can make it so an umbrella can be added, too.”

Trip nodded. “That’s right. We can put an umbrella receptacle right in the middle. Or wherever you like. We can do umbrella inserts at the edges of the pool, also. With a cantilevered umbrella, those work beautifully. For the Baja shelf, though, there’s also a table insert that will fit the same hole. It’s a nice addition if you have chairs there and you don’t need the umbrella.”

“That would be nice.” Willie thought about what else she’d like.

Ginny opened up the tablet case she’d brought with her. “I have a quick video I can show you of some of the high-end custom pools we’ve done. Might give you some inspiration.”

“Okay.” Willie glanced at Miguel. He nodded.

The video took about four minutes and probably added fifty thousand dollars to the bill. Willie wasn’t sure what it would really cost to add everything she’d seen that she liked, but she was going to find out. “I like those little water fountains. Three on each side, so they make a nice arch like that.”

“The jets are pretty, aren’t they?” Ginny jotted that down on her notepad. “What else?”

“The way the pool changed color at night? I need that,” Willie said.

“LED lights allow you to set any kind of mood you like,” Trip said. “And they can be controlled from an app on your phone or tablet.”

“Even better,” Willie said. She’d let Trina handle that when she came over.

Miguel cleared his throat a little. “That grotto, is that expensive?”

“All depends on what features are built into it,” Ginny answered. “If you

just want a waterfall, it's not as much as if you want one with a slide or one you can swim through with lights, seating—”

“We just built one that had a television inside,” Trip said. “The possibilities are endless.”

Miguel laughed. “I don't think we'll need a television.”

“What do you think about a beach entry?” Ginny asked. “A lot of our Dunes West clients like the zero-entry option. It means no steps, just a gradual sloped entrance. Really gives the pool a natural, organic feel.”

“And, I imagine, it accommodates those who aren't great with steps,” Miguel added. “Or in wheelchairs.”

“True,” Trip said. “But what's the point of having a beautiful pool if you can't use it?”

Miguel nodded and looked at Willie. “I think it's a good idea. Just in case.”

He was right of course. She looked at Ginny. “Can you still do the Baja shelf thing?”

“Absolutely. We'll just slope right into that.”

“Okay, then add the beach entry, too.”

Ginny made a note of that before looking up again. “Now, how about a firepit?”

Willie grinned. “Oh, yes, we definitely want one of those.”

“We can do one as part of the pool, next to the pool, or as a sunken pit within the pool itself.” She opened up a brochure she'd brought. “You can see examples of those here.”

Willie liked them all, but she knew what she wanted. “I want to be able to use the firepit without getting wet. Next to the pool is close enough, I think.” She turned to Miguel. “Do you agree?”

“Yes.” He looked at Trip and Ginny. “We like to sit out there at night. It's very romantic.”

Ginny smiled. “How long have you two been married?”

Miguel grinned and Willie laughed. She answered, “We're not. But we will be after the weekend.”

Ginny's whole face lit up. “That's so amazing. Congratulations to the both of you.”

Trip gave Miguel a nod. “Well done, sir.”

“Thank you.” But Miguel was looking at Willie. “We are very happy.”

“What about an initial on the bottom of the pool?” Ginny said. “Or a

design? Something that's special to both of you? Something to commemorate this new love? We can do some amazing designs with our tile."

Willie smiled, her focus on Miguel. "How about a star?"

His eyebrows rose. "Like on the flag of Puerto Rico?"

"Yes," she said. "Exactly like that. But also because you make me feel like a star."

Eyes shining with happiness, Miguel nodded at Ginny. "Whatever my bride wants."

Chapter Thirty-six

“*Y*ou’re sure he won’t mind that I’m here?” Trina asked.
“No way,” Miles said. “He’ll be happy to see you.”
“Okay.”

Miles took her hand as they walked through the parking lot toward the visitors entrance of the hospital. “I’m glad you came. I know this isn’t the most exciting way to spend the day, but Alex will appreciate that you took the time to help out and I do, too.”

“I’m not sure how much help I’ll be,” Trina said. “You’re the paramedic.”

Miles laughed. “Yeah, but you’re a lot prettier to look at.”

She grinned. He was so sweet.

They went inside, went through security, then registered at the front desk to get visitor badges. They stuck those on their clothes. Miles knew exactly where they were going, so Trina just followed along.

They got on the elevator. She watched the floors light up on the panel as they rose. “Is he in a lot of pain, d’you think?”

“I’m sure the burns are what hurt the most. But he’s not a complainer, so you probably won’t hear him say anything about them. Or his shoulder, which will be sore for a few days. He’s in a sling.” They stepped out of the elevator and started down the hall. “Not sure how long that will last though.

Should be two weeks, but he's probably frustrated with it already."

"Poor Alex."

Miles nodded. "Yeah, he got beat up a little, that's for sure." He pointed. "Right there. That's his room: 312."

Miles pushed open the door. "You decent, buddy? I've got Trina with me."

Laughter answered him. "I'm in a hospital gown but I'm also still in bed, so there's nothing exciting to see."

Miles snorted and they walked in.

"Hi," Trina said. Alex looked tired but happy. "How are you doing?"

"I'm all right," Alex said. "I didn't know you were coming. That was nice of you."

"It was a good excuse to see Miles," Trina said. "I'm going to give him a haircut later anyway."

"Yeah?" Alex said. He touched his forehead. "I could use one of those."

"My stuff is in the car," Trina said. "I'd be happy to give you one when we get to your place."

"Cool, thanks," Alex said. "Have you heard from Kat? I'm supposed to text her, but I know she's probably swamped with the moving stuff. I kind of didn't want to bother her."

Trina shook her head. "There's no way she'd think a text from you was a bother but I'm sure they're super busy. You should still text her or she might worry."

"Yeah, good point." He took his phone off the side table, tapped the screen a few times, then held it up to his mouth. "Getting out soon Miles and Trina are here to pick me up hope your day is going good." He tapped the keyboard again. "Speech-to-text has been a real lifesaver."

"I bet," Trina said.

"How long before they let you out of here?" Miles asked.

"I'm waiting on the doctor now. Hopefully not too much longer. I like being home better."

"Yeah, no doubt," Miles said.

A nurse came in. "Ready to go home?"

"Totally," Alex said.

"The doctor is making his rounds. He should be here in the next twenty minutes. Anything I can do for you before then?"

"Nope, all good," Alex said.

“All right. You take care of yourself.”

“Thanks.” As she left, Alex looked at them. “Do you think we could get some breakfast? I am dying for some pancakes.”

“Of course,” Miles said. “Digger’s?”

“Yes.”

It actually took thirty minutes to get Alex released. Trina stepped outside while Miles helped him dress. When he was ready to go, he had to be wheeled out in a wheelchair, per the hospital’s policy, so Miles went ahead of them and pulled the car around. Trina let Alex sit up front, since that was easier.

A few minutes after that, they were settling into a booth at Digger’s, glasses of water already in front of them. Trina ordered coffee plus cheesy scrambled eggs with bacon and hashbrowns, Miles got coffee and the breakfast burrito, and Alex got a large orange juice and a giant stack of pancakes with a side of bacon.

“Miles said you have to wear that sling for two weeks,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s what the doc said.” He sighed and rolled his eyes. “But that’s a long time.”

“Hopefully, it’ll fly by,” she said. “Will you be off work that whole time?”

“I have no choice until I’m medically cleared.” He was frowning now, looking miserable. “I can’t do anything with this sling. And I’m not supposed to be moving my arm.”

Miles nodded. “No surfing, either.”

“No. Nothing,” Alex said. “I’m bummed, man.”

“I guess you can catch up on all the TV you’ve missed,” Trina said. “Maybe do some reading?”

“Yeah.” Alex nodded. “It’ll be all right. I’m just not used to being inactive.”

“You can spend time with Kat,” Trina added.

He smiled. “That’s one really good thing. Although I know she starts her new job soon.”

“You’ll be able to come to my grandmother’s wedding with Kat, too.”

Miles nodded. “You’ve got to come to that. I already switched shifts with Chad so I can be there.”

Trina was thrilled about that.

Alex looked at her. “Your grandmother’s getting married?”

“Yep,” Trina said. “To the father of the guy who lives next door to us.”

Alex blinked like he was trying to process what she was telling him. “You mean Danny’s dad?”

“You know Danny?”

“Sure,” Alex said. “He and I removed Kat’s ex, Ray, from the property a few nights back. He’s a cool dude. Didn’t meet his dad.”

“Well, Miguel is a very nice man, too. He and my Mimi just hit it off and decided there was no reason to wait, so they’re getting married this weekend.”

“Do I have to dress up?” He tipped his head toward his shoulder. “That’s not the easiest thing to do.”

Trina smiled and shook her head. “My mom and I will be dressed up a little, but you can wear whatever you want. It’s a beach wedding, so pretty casual.”

“Cool.” He grinned. “I haven’t been to a wedding since Tully got married.” He laughed. “Remember that, Miles?”

“How could I forget?” Miles leaned toward Trina. “Tully got married at the firehouse. He was a member of the crew who’s since retired, but that was a fun, crazy day.”

“I bet.” Trina couldn’t imagine getting married at the firehouse, but she supposed any place could be the right place if it meant enough to you.

Their food arrived. Once the server put all the plates on the table, she went to get the pot of coffee and refilled Trina’s and Miles’s cups. “Anything else you guys need?”

They all shook their heads.

Alex immediately went for the little pitcher of syrup, drizzling it all over his pancakes.

“Hey,” Trina said. “You want me to cut those up for you?”

Alex’s mouth bunched to one side. “No one’s had to cut up my food for a long time, but yeah, that would help. Thanks.”

She smiled and grabbed the edge of his plate to pull it closer, then used her own clean knife and fork to slice the pancakes into bite-sized pieces. “How are you going to manage at home? Do you need groceries? Miles and I can run to the store for you.”

“Maybe.” Alex shook his head. “This is turning into more work for you guys than I had anticipated.”

“It’s no big deal,” Miles said. “You’d do it for me, wouldn’t you?”

Alex smiled. "Yeah."

Trina slid his plate back over. "There you go. And listen, whatever you need, we'll take care of it. That's why we're here."

Alex picked up his fork and speared a big bite of pancakes. Golden brown syrup dripped off them as he lifted it. "I really appreciate it."

"That's what friends are for," Trina said. And she meant it. She enjoyed helping people in whatever way she could. Then her thoughts drifted to her mom and the uncomfortable task she was about to do.

Trina could have handled it, but Roxie said she felt like she should do it herself. Trina hoped she was right and didn't end up more upset than she already was.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Roxie was so happy to have her own car in Diamond Beach. She was a lot less happy to be visiting Paulina, but she'd purposely made it her first stop of the day. That way she could use the excuse of her other errands as a reason to leave quickly.

She'd texted Paulina to ask if she could stop by. Paulina had said yes and sent Roxie the address. Roxie got the sense that Paulina had wanted to know what the visit was about, but Roxie hadn't said anything else.

Roxie had plugged the address into her GPS and been surprised when it had taken her to the Sea Breeze condominium complex. She'd had to show her license to the guard at the front gate to get in, after he'd called to confirm with Paulina that Roxie was indeed an expected guest.

It was a nice place with two pools, tennis courts, and a pavilion. She had no idea what a home in here might cost, but she was definitely going to look it up. Certainly nicer than her house in Port St. Rosa.

That comparison didn't help how Roxie was feeling, but she pushed on. She needed to do this. She needed to get rid of this stupid necklace and, hopefully, most of her hurt feelings along with it. Although that was starting to feel like less of a possibility.

Paulina lived on the fourth floor in Building B, Unit 5. Roxie parked and rode the elevator up. The necklace was in her purse. When she stepped out of

the elevator, everything was marble and chrome and very sleek. She would have described it as beach modern, if that was a thing.

She walked over to the windows. The gorgeous blue of the Gulf and the sparkling white sands of Diamond Beach were easily visible. Which probably meant Paulina had those same views from her condo.

Roxie got her bearings and started toward Unit 5.

Paulina opened the door as she approached. She gave Roxie a tight smile and spoke softly. “Nico is sleeping. I didn’t want the knocking to wake him up.”

“I understand.”

Paulina stepped back. “Please, come in.”

Roxie hesitated. This was what she was here for. She took a breath and walked inside. The condo was beautifully furnished. Nothing showy, but there was definitely no secondhand furniture. As she followed Paulina in, she saw an older woman in the living room, a woman more like Claire’s age. A baby monitor sat on the coffee table along with a small basket of laundry, which looked to be mostly onesies. Those were the only indications there was a baby in the house.

Paulina held her hand out. “This is my mother, Elena. She doesn’t speak much English. She’s come from Mexico to help with Nico.”

Roxie nodded at her. “Hello.”

“*Hola*,” Elena said. “Welcome.”

Roxie smiled. “Thank you.” She turned toward Paulina. “I didn’t really come for a social visit. I have other errands to run. But I was back at my home in Port St. Rosa yesterday and found something I thought you should have.”

“Oh?”

Roxie dug the jewelry box out of her purse and handed it over. “I don’t have any use for it and, as you’ll see, it was obviously meant for you.”

Paulina opened the box, her lower lip quivering as she stared at the pendant. Then she started to cry. “Thank you.”

Her mother said something in Spanish and came over to comfort her daughter.

Roxie didn’t feel the relief she’d expected. Instead, she felt a little pity for Paulina, and was reminded of her own initial grief. “I should go.”

“I’m sorry,” Paulina said. “I still miss him very much.”

Roxie nodded. “I’m sure you do.”

Paulina closed the box and wiped at her face. “Do you hate him because of me?”

Roxie swallowed. She wasn’t sure how to answer that. “I’m not sure I’d say I hate him. But I’m certainly not grieving him like I was.”

Paulina nodded. “I understand. As much as I can. I’m sorry for what he did to you. And to Claire. That was not something a man of good principles would do. It shames me to say that of my husband, but my tears are partly because I miss him and partly because I mourn for the man I thought he was.”

Roxie exhaled, the words piercing through her with their truth. “Yeah, I feel a lot of that, too. That’s a pretty good description.” She shook her head. “Finding out about you was pretty hard for me. Well, you and the fact that Bryan told you we were divorced. That hurt. A lot.”

“I’m sure,” Paulina said.

“Finding out about you made me realize how Claire must have felt when she found out about me.”

“You didn’t know about each other?”

“No, not at all. Not until we ended up at the beach house at the same time and it all sort of came out.” Roxie pinched the bridge of her nose. “The amount of lying and manipulating that Bryan did is just staggering.”

“I can only imagine.”

Roxie frowned. “You know both of our daughters are named Katrina. That was something he pushed for. Probably because he didn’t want to accidentally call one of them by the wrong name.”

Paulina’s brow bent. “All I knew was that one was Kat, and one was Trina. I never realized they were the same until you told me that night I came to the beach house. Bryan never said a word about how they were only a day apart.”

“Why would he? That would have unraveled his lies. Did you know when he was coming to stay with one of us? Or did he tell you it was a business trip? I’m curious.”

“He often went away on business. Sometimes he would mention that he’d be seeing one of his daughters. But I never thought anything of it. I knew he traveled a lot. His traveling was how I met him.”

“Right. Well, I guess we all got lied to in different ways.”

Paulina chewed her bottom lip. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Roxie would have to hear the question before she knew if she’d

answer or not.

“Are you going to let your daughter see Nico?”

“She’s an adult. She can make her own choices. I won’t stand in her way. He is her brother, after all.”

“Thank you,” Paulina said. “Can I ask you something else?”

“I suppose.” Once again, Roxie wasn’t sure she’d answer.

“Are you upset that Nico and I got some of Bryan’s insurance money?”

Roxie narrowed her eyes slightly. “I am. Some. But I’m not upset that he provided for you. He should have done that. I guess...maybe I don’t think it’s fair you got so much when Claire and I were both with him for so much longer. Six hundred thousand is a lot of money.” She crossed her arms. “He wouldn’t even pay for Trina’s college.”

“I’m sorry,” Paulina said. “I seem to be saying that a lot.”

“We all have been. That’s Bryan’s real legacy. Leaving us to clean up his mess.” Roxie sighed. The beach and Gulf were beautiful through the windows. “Listen, Claire and I thought we’d be getting the whole thing split in two. When that didn’t happen, we knew something was up.” Roxie snorted. “We never figured on you, though.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. I also got this condo, which is where we’ve lived since we were married. Did you get your house as well?”

“Yes. I got my house in Port St. Rosa, Claire got hers in Landry, and our daughters each got fifty percent of the beach house. We’re making that our permanent residence now. My daughter is opening a hair salon in Diamond Beach.” Roxie didn’t know why she was sharing so much but she couldn’t stop herself. Maybe she needed Paulina to know that her daughter was managing just fine.

Paulina smiled. “Then she will be around to visit with her brother. I’m glad for that.”

“So you’re going to stay? Not going back to Mexico?”

“No, we are staying. Nico was born here, and I am working on my citizenship. My mother, too, although it will take her longer. We both have work visas. She cleans part-time for the Tidewater Inn. I can’t work right now.”

“No, of course not.”

“Eventually, I will.”

“What will you do?”

Paulina shrugged. “I worked in hospitality and conference planning at the

resort in Mexico. I'm sure I can find something like that here."

Roxie remembered what it had been like raising Trina with Bryan gone all the time. Willie had been married to Zippy then and not really been around, although she had come to stay for two weeks. "I'm, uh...I'm glad you got that insurance money."

Paulina nodded. "Thank you. Without it, I don't know what we'd do."

Roxie swallowed. "If you need anything, you can reach out to me. I don't know how available I'll be, but I know how hard it is to raise a baby without your partner to help. So..." She shrugged.

"Thank you again," Paulina said. "That is very kind."

In another room, Nico started to cry.

"Go get him," Roxie said. "I can let myself out."

Paulina gave her a quick smile, then dashed off to take care of her son. Roxie waved at Elena, who waved back, then followed after her daughter.

Roxie left, replaying the whole conversation in her mind all the way down to her car.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Jesse opened the door to the Dolphin Club with a big smile on his face. “Morning, superstar.”

Jules smiled back. “Morning. Thanks for not minding that I had to bring Toby with me.” She’d called Trina, but she’d been out for the day already. She was with Miles and Alex, which to Jules meant she had more than enough on her plate.

Jesse took Toby’s leash. “No problem. You think he’ll be all right to chill in my office? I thought that might be more comfortable for him than the control room.”

“It will be. We had a good long walk on the beach this morning. Chances are he’ll be asleep on your couch most of the day.”

“Which is exactly what Shiloh would do.”

Now free of Toby, she walked in with an insulated cooler bag and her purse over one shoulder, and her guitar over the other. She liked being in the club before it was really open. It was quiet and seemed a little like seeing behind the curtain.

Jesse gave her a quick kiss. “Did you pack a lunch? Or is that for Toby?”

She laughed. “I do have bowls for him in there and a bag of kibble, but the bag is really because I brought two slices of pie that my sister made. She wanted you to try it, so I figured I’d bring it for our dessert. Have you ever

had sour orange pie? It's amazing. If you like key lime, which I know you do, you'll like this."

"That was nice of her. Never heard of it, but always willing to try something new. Speaking of something new, only two of the musicians are here. Bobby Perkins, the fiddle player, and Rita Dean, the slide guitarist."

Jules stopped walking. "You mean Sierra's not here, either?"

"No, she's here. Sorry, didn't mean to imply she wasn't." Jesse stopped next to her. Toby seemed pretty content to sit, too. "But Nina Donovan, the drummer, is running late, and she's Arlo Ritter's ride. He plays banjo."

Jules sighed. "It is what it is. We'll just rehearse as best we can. We're already out Cash today."

"I know."

They started walking again.

"Can Bobby or Rita sing?" Jules asked. "Sierra will be the only one on backup vocals today."

"Rita can. And I think Arlo can."

"That would be great. I'm happy to work with whoever we've got."

"True." He paused by his office door. "All right, Toby. This is your domain for the day."

He unlocked the door, flicked on the lights, then led Toby in.

Jules unzipped the lunch bag and took out the two bowls she'd brought and set them up against one wall. One she poured some kibble into, the other she picked up. "I'll run to the bathroom and get him some water."

"Not sure if that bathroom water is the best for drinking," Jesse said. He opened the small fridge in his office and took out a bottle of water. "Use this."

"Fancy," Jules said. She handed him the lunch bag. "Want to put the pie in there?"

"Sure."

She filled the water bowl with about half the bottle, then took Toby's leash off of him, wound it up and set it on the corner of Jesse's desk.

Toby promptly hopped up onto the couch, turned around three times, and laid down.

Jules smiled as she looked at Jesse. "Is it really all right if he sleeps up there?"

"It really is."

"Thanks."

From there they went straight to the studio. Jesse opened the door to the control room. Through the glass window, Jules could see Sierra, Bobby, and Rita. They were all fiddling around with their instruments, tuning up, and getting ready.

Jules tucked her purse onto a shelf near the control panel where she knew Jesse would be able to keep an eye on it.

Jesse opened the studio door, and all eyes were on her. He introduced her. “Ladies and gentleman, I give you Julia Bloom.”

Sierra gave a little wave from where she was standing at the keyboard, but Bobby and Rita got up. Bobby stuck his hand out first. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am. Big fan.”

“Thank you. It’s my pleasure to meet you and, please, call me Jules.”

“And you can call me Bobby.”

Rita was next. “It’s a real honor to be here.”

“It’s a real honor to have you *both* be a part of this. As I’m sure Jesse explained, my son Cash will be playing rhythm guitar and also singing background but he’s helping his cousin move today. He’ll be back tomorrow. The day after that, we’re hoping to record the demo of *Dixie’s Got Her Boots On*, so we have a lot of work to do.”

Bobby nodded. “We’re ready to do it.”

“All right, then. Let’s get started.” Jules sat down, got herself and her guitar situated, then glanced at her fellow musicians. “Sierra, if you’re ready, I was thinking you and I could play the song through one time in full, then we’ll teach it to Bobby and Rita.”

“Okay,” Sierra said. “You still want me on the bridge?”

“You bet I do.” Jules began to play, the song coming to her as naturally as any of her other tunes now.

At the end of the performance, Rita clapped. “I can’t believe I get to play on this song. I already love it!” She looked at Bobby. “Holy crap, we’re going to be a hit.”

Jules laughed.

Bobby already had his fiddle on his shoulder. “I’m ready to go. Might take me a run through or two, but I’ll get it.”

“I have every faith in you.”

He did get it, too. So did Rita. On the third rendition, they sounded pretty close to perfect to Jules. Having the extra musicians was already bringing the song to life in new ways.

Half an hour later, Nina and Arlo showed up. Nina quickly explained she'd had to have her car towed, then they'd gotten an Uber. "It won't happen again."

"No one can predict car trouble," Jules said. "You're here now. That's what matters."

Nina and Arlo picked up the song just as quickly, and Arlo's tenor was a welcome addition to the background vocals on the bridge. When Cash rejoined them, Jules had every faith it was going to be incredible.

An hour after their arrival and Jules was thrilled with the results. She stood up to stretch. "You guys are as good as Jesse said you were." That got her all kinds of smiles. "Let's take a lunch break and be back here in an hour or so. If that works?"

Jesse spoke through the intercom. "I had one of the chefs come in early, so there's lunch available here today. Any sandwich or salad on the menu is available. Just let him know what you want, because there aren't any servers."

"Thanks, boss," Jules said with a wink that was just for him.

He grinned. "Jules, I've ordered lunch for us in my office so we can discuss a few other things."

She put her guitar aside, not entirely sure what he wanted to discuss but ready for the break. "I'm on my way." She looked at the musicians around her. "You guys were incredible. I mean that. This demo means a lot and I am thrilled to have such a great-sounding group backing me up."

The response was lots of nods and thank yous and appreciative smiles. She made her way out to the control room, grabbed her purse off the shelf, then walked with Jesse to his office. "Did you really order lunch? Because if it's already been delivered, Toby may have eaten it."

Jesse laughed. "I did, but I told him not to bring it until I phoned, which I'll do when I get in there."

He unlocked the door. Toby was asleep on the couch in the same spot. One ear was flipped over backwards.

Jules snorted. "That dog can sleep anywhere."

Jesse picked up the house phone. "Hey, Leroy. The band's headed to eat but we're ready for lunch, too. Thanks."

"What did you get us?"

"Two large green salads with grilled shrimp and our island vinaigrette."

"That sounds perfect." She sat beside Toby.

“You sounded perfect.”

A big smile bent her mouth. “I am so pleased with how good they all sound. I mean that. I had my reservations but no more. That is a great group. You know what you’re doing, Jesse.”

He beamed, obviously pleased by her praise. “Thank you. I’m glad you’re happy. That’s all that matters.”

A knock at the door announced their lunch had arrived. The chef himself brought the tray in and set it up on the coffee table. “You need anything else, boss?”

Jesse shook his head. “Nope, that’s perfect. Thanks, Leroy.”

As he left, Jules looked at Jesse. “Did you really want to talk about something or was that a ruse to get me all to yourself?”

“Can I say both?” He took the metal cover off his plate. “I really did want to talk to you about making a video for your song.”

“I know you think I should, but it’s going to be expensive. And I’m not really sure who I can get to do it.” The salad looked great. It was loaded with veggies and the shrimp were huge. She wasn’t sure she could finish it all.

“I might know someone. But I want your permission to pursue it. I don’t want to do it unless you’re on board. It will be a minimum of ten thousand dollars, but obviously, there’s no limit to how much you can spend. It all depends on what you do.”

Jules took a small bite of salad. The dressing was delicious. She swallowed the food before answering. “This could be my one chance to really get out there.” She nodded. “I think I have to give it a shot.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

*F*or a moment, Kat wasn't sure she was at the right house. There were cars parked on either side of the curb and three men sitting on the porch. One of the cars was Danny's and he and Claire were on the porch talking to the men.

Kat parked along the curb, too, so that Cash could back the rental truck in.

As he did, he shot her a look through the windshield. She shrugged, not sure who the men were. She walked across the yard toward them. As she got closer, she realized one of the men was Pastor Freeman. "Pastor! I didn't expect to see you here. My mom said she'd called you for help, but this is more than I expected."

The other two men were from the church also. Kat recognized one as James Bennett but couldn't remember the man in the red ballcap's name. Pastor Freeman got to his feet as he nodded. "I said I'd get some men together and I did."

"You sure did," Claire said. "I'm so grateful, too."

As Cash hopped out of the truck and came around to open the big roll-up door on the back, Kat filled him in. "They're from our church. They came to help us move."

"That's great," he said. "I was thinking we were going to be worn out

before the day was over. They're going to be a lot of help."

"For sure." One of the things she'd done at the truck rental place was buy bundles of boxes, including some tall wardrobe boxes for herself and her mom. Kat had bought a lot of them, even though they had probably been a slightly unnecessary expense, but she had her signing bonus coming and anything that would make today easier was worth it.

She and Cash hauled the box bundles to the porch. Her mom was already unlocking the door. Mr. Bennett and the man in the red hat went to the truck and got the rest of the bundles. "We've got packing tape in the kitchen, so we can use that to put the boxes together and seal them when they're full."

Pastor Freeman took the bundle of flat boxes from her. "We'll get that done. Then you and your mom can focus on sorting through things and telling us what to move."

Kat gestured toward Cash. "Pastor, this is my cousin, Cash."

The pastor put his hand out. "Nice to meet you, son."

"You, too. Thanks for showing up. And bringing more help with you."

Pastor Freeman smiled. "We're sad to see the Thompsons go, but after all the delicious things your aunt's baked for us over the years, we had to show up and say thanks."

Cash nodded. "Have you had her kitchen-sink bars?"

The two men started into the house together, comparing notes on their favorite Claire Thompson delicacies.

Kat laughed to herself. Was there a man who wasn't motivated by food? She headed upstairs to her room.

She hesitated at the door. The last time she'd been here, she'd caught Ray cheating on her. She stared at the bed. The sheets were still in disarray.

Those could get burned for all she cared. She'd never sleep on them again. She stepped into the room, telling herself she did not smell Ray's cologne, except that she did. Despite the warm day, she opened the window to let some fresh air in.

She opened her closet doors next. Time for an honest assessment of what was in there. She started going through it, piece by piece. It really wasn't as hard as she'd thought it would be. In the brief time she'd been away, she'd changed a lot.

So much of what was in here was firmly entrenched in the old Kat. The woman who'd been fine with good enough. The woman who'd been settling because she didn't believe in herself enough to want more. Or think she could

achieve more.

That Kat was gone. There was no point in keeping her boring clothing.

By the time Cash came up with a wardrobe box, Kat had sorted out what she was going to keep and what would be left behind to be donated.

He hauled the tall box in, and she started to fill it. “What furniture in here are you keeping?”

She looked around. “Just that desk. I need to empty it out, though.”

“That’s it?”

She nodded. “The stuff at the beach house is nicer. Why should I take any of this with me? Might as well let the veterans charity have it. Besides,” she said. “There are some less than stellar memories here now.”

“Yeah,” he said with a solemn nod. “I know.”

He’d been with her when she’d caught Ray in her bed with one of his nurses. “I know you do. So you can see why I’m not eager to bring any of that to Diamond Beach.”

“Totally. What about your books and stuff? If you’re taking them, you might want one of these bookcases.”

She stepped back to look at it and reassess. “It could go right next to the desk. Probably not a bad idea.”

“I’ll bring you some more boxes up.” He started out the door, then stopped. “By the way, one of the guys downstairs could probably use some money for helping out. If you have any. I heard him say one of the reasons he’s here is because he’s out of work.”

“Oh, no, really?” She thought about what was in her wallet. “I don’t think I have more than fifty bucks on me. Do you have any money I can borrow?”

“I’ve got a twenty, which was going to buy my lunch.”

“We can put that on a credit card.” Kat thought a little harder. “I wonder if he could use any of our stuff for his family. Furniture, clothes, whatever. I’d just as soon let him have first pick, since it’s all going to be donated anyway.”

“You should ask him. Guy with the red hat.”

“How about you send him up with the next load of boxes?”

Cash smiled. “I can do that.”

“Thanks.” Kat knew not everything was hers to give away, but she didn’t think her mom would mind. “Wait. Maybe I should talk to my mom first. See what she thinks. I’ll come down with you.”

She followed him to the first floor where her mom was in the dining

room, sorting through the things that were stored in the antique buffet. That piece was a keeper, having been Kat's great-grandmother's. "Hey, can I talk to you a sec?"

"Sure, honey. What's up?"

Kat took her mom aside. "The guy in the red hat. Who is he? I can't remember his name."

"Paul Massey."

Kat remembered him now. He had two kids in high school and his wife worked at the pharmacy. "Okay, right. Did you know he just lost his job? That's why he could be here today."

"That's awful," Claire said.

"It is, but I was thinking maybe we could see if there's anything he needs. Furniture, household stuff, clothing." Kat shrugged. "We could give him some money, too. Up to you, but I'm happy to pass on anything we aren't keeping. Whatever's left over can go to the veterans charity."

Her mom nodded. "Great idea. I'll talk to him. I'm happy to give them all some money for helping. We can figure that out later."

"I have fifty dollars to throw in."

Her mom smiled. "You really have changed, you know that?" She gave Kat's arm a quick squeeze. "Very proud of you."

"Thanks. I'm proud of both of us. Just call me when you're ready for me to help. I'll be working in my room until then."

"Sounds good. Once I get done in here, I'm going to do a quick sweep of the living room, then I'll call you down to show you what's what. After that, I'll be working in the master bedroom so I can get my own things packed up."

"Okay." Kat gathered some more boxes and took them upstairs. Her first task was clearing out her desk. That only took about half a box, but her books, even though she sorted through them and was able to put some in the donate pile, took the rest of her boxes.

She stood back, hands on her hips, and surveyed what was left to be done. Despite having plenty of help downstairs, there was still a tremendous amount of work.

She grabbed a box of books, which was heavier than it looked, and carried it downstairs to be taped and marked as books.

Cash helped her bring more boxes up and then took her desk downstairs, promising to come back for the chair and whatever other boxes she'd filled.

She was two hours in and pretty much done when her mom finally called for her. She had one final look around, then picked up the last box of books and carried it with her.

There was the faintest bit of sadness in her at leaving this house, but more than anything, Kat was happy. Happy to be moving on, happy to be in a better place, and happy to be starting over in such a wonderful new way.

This, she thought, was how she always wanted to feel. Excited for the future. And at peace with keeping the past where it belonged: firmly behind her.

Chapter Forty

Claire showed Kat what she'd marked for keeping, what she'd marked to donate, and what Paul had asked for so far. She'd put pieces of masking tape on all of the big stuff, then written either a K, D, or P on it. "If there's something marked for donation or for Paul that you wanted for yourself, just change the tape."

"It all looks fine so far," Kat said.

"Pastor Freeman is going to take the bench that's in the foyer to use in the choir room."

Kat nodded. "What about the art and anything on the walls? Did you mark all of that, too?"

"Yes. I tried to put the tape on the edges of the frames so it wouldn't do any damage. See?" Claire pointed out an oil painting of an old ship, something Bryan had picked out years ago. It had never been to her taste.

"Okay, good. What about your baking stuff?"

Claire smiled. "That was the first thing I did. Danny's boxing it all up and packing it in his car."

Kat grinned. "That was really nice of him to come. And really nice of Pastor Freeman and the other men. We actually might be able to do this in a day. Which is what I'm counting on."

"Me, too. When is the truck from the veterans charity coming?"

Kat looked at her watch. “They told me at four. I know it’s going to be tight, but I’m hoping we can make it. I do not want to use up one of my weekends coming back here.”

“I can always do it. I’m sure Danny would come with me again.” Claire shook her head. “You’re doing a great job but I don’t see how we can avoid another trip back here at some point. I’ll have to meet with the realtor.”

“I do have that guy Nick Walker coming by today, too. To give us an appraisal. But I’m sure we’ll need the carpets cleaned and maybe a fresh coat of paint.”

“And a good cleaning.” Claire dragged her finger across the top of the coffee table. There was definitely dust on things.

“You realize none of this furniture will be here when people come to look at the house.”

“True,” Claire said. “But the house should still be cleaned. The bathrooms especially. You don’t want to show people a house that looks *too* lived in.”

“Good point.” Kat rubbed her hands together. “All right, back to work. I’m going to let Paul and Cash use the truck to take whatever he wants back to his house. Then we can load it with everything going to the beach house.”

“Perfect.” Claire went off to the kitchen to see how Danny was doing, but he wasn’t in there.

He turned up a few moments later. “Looking for me?”

“I was. Just wanted to see how things were coming along.”

“All of the baking cabinets are cleaned out, packed up, and in the car.”

“Already?” She’d never have done it with such speed. “Did you break anything?”

He laughed. “No, I promise. What’s next?”

“I need to sort through the rest of the cabinets and decide what I want to keep and what can be donated.”

“How about you put the keepers on the table, and I’ll pack them up.” He held up a finger. “Right after I go see if there’s anything else I can help carry out to the truck. It’ll take you a few minutes to fill that table, won’t it?”

“Sure, but you’re not overdoing it, are you?”

“I know I’m not in my thirties, but I can hold my own.”

She smiled. “I know that. All right. I’ll have a full table for you in a bit.”

“Back as soon as I can.”

He left and she started opening cabinets. Her pots and pans were nothing

great, except for the crepe pan she had gotten from her mom on her birthday. And her big sauté pan. Those two went on the table. She went through her plates and dishes, the glassware, and the utensils without any real snags.

It wasn't until she got to the coffee mugs that she slowed down. Most of them were strictly functional, but there were a good handful that were sentimental. Gifts from friends, or souvenirs. Funnily enough, there was one from Diamond Beach.

She put a lot of those mugs on the table. Most of her glass and ceramic bowls ended up there, too. A couple of big wooden spoons she'd bought at a farmers market years ago. Her grandmother's rolling pin. An old set of measuring spoons that might have belonged to Bryan's grandmother.

By the time Danny returned, the table was full, and she was more than halfway through the kitchen. While he boxed those things up, she went to work on the pantry and spice cabinet. No sense in wasting food if it was still good.

She filled three boxes, which sent Danny out for more.

Her next big project was the fridge and freezer. She stood in front of it, leaving the doors closed, and sighed.

Danny approached. "Do you have a cooler? We can use it to take any of the food you want to save. But that should be the last thing we do, so it's not in there for too long."

She nodded. "There are two good-size coolers in the garage, which just made me realize that's another thing I need to clean out. What am I going to do with all that stuff? There's no garage at the Double Diamond and the storage closet under the house is already filled with beach stuff, garden tools, and outdoor furniture."

She put her hands on her head, starting to feel overwhelmed. "We are never going to get this all done. Not in one day."

"You want me to go out to the garage and have a look?"

"Okay." She wasn't sure how much help that would be, but she was hoping for a miracle. She pointed. "Right through that door."

He went out, flipping the light on as he pulled the door shut behind him.

She went back to opening cabinets and pulling anything she wanted to save. There wasn't much left. She was taking magnets off the fridge when he came back in. "Well?"

"There's not as much out there as I thought there'd be. Some decent yard tools. Shop rags, old cans of paint, a toolbox, an extension ladder, all the

usual stuff. I bet between myself and the other men, we could divvy most of that up and take it off your hands. After you decide what you want to keep, that is.”

“What’s out there that you think I should keep?”

“Probably the yard tools. Some of the cleaning stuff. The toolbox. I’m sure you could find a place for that back at the beach house. What about that tall stepstool?”

“I forgot that was out there. That would be good to have.”

“I’ll go put it in my car right now, along with the toolbox. While I do that, you see what else matters to you out there.”

“I’m coming.” She followed him out.

He pushed the button to open the garage door, letting in lots of light.

There was shelving along one wall that was mostly filled with Bryan’s golf equipment. “I should sell that stuff. It’s probably worth some money.”

“Or you could donate it to the church and let them sell it. There’s got to be a golf shop that would take some of it on consignment.”

“You think? Because that’s a great idea.” Her gaze went higher up the shelves. “Oh, all the Christmas stuff. I’d totally forgotten about that. We’ll need a tree, and that’s a decent one. Plus all the ornaments. Some of those Kat made when she was in elementary school.”

Danny smiled. “All of that can go in the rental truck. I’ll make sure the guys know. What else?”

She looked around. She didn’t care about any of the car stuff. Or the camping equipment that had only ever been used a handful of times when Kat was very young. The coolers would come in handy. She shrugged. “Other than the yard tools, the toolbox, the Christmas decorations, and that stepstool, I don’t want anything in here.”

“All right, that’s easy enough.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “And what about that?”

She finally paid attention to the elephant in the room. Bryan’s car. “It needs to be sold. Or donated.”

“Church?”

She put her hands on her hips as she stared at the car. Then she looked at Danny. “Why not? It would be the easiest thing to do. I know where the title is, too. It’s in the safe on his side of the closet.”

With a gentle smile, he nodded. “Donating it would be easiest. Why don’t I get Pastor Freeman out here so you can let him know what’s what?”

“Thanks.” She went back to staring at the car. She wondered if she ought to go through it for any of Bryan’s personal effects.

Danny hadn’t gone anywhere yet. He tipped his head. “You okay? You seem to be handling this like a champ, but at the same time, I can’t help but think how I’d be doing in a situation like this.”

“I’m...okay enough. That might change when I start working in the master bedroom, but right now, I’m fine.”

“The way you were looking at his car, I just thought...”

“I was thinking I should go through it.” She shrugged. “Make sure there’s nothing personal left behind.”

“Good idea. Why don’t I put the stuff you want from the garage in my car while you do that?”

“I’ll get to work.” She got Bryan’s keys off the hook by the door and unlocked the car. As soon as she opened the door, the scent of his aftershave hit her.

For a moment, she thought she might break down. Then she reminded herself of all the lies Bryan had told her. All the ways he’d betrayed her trust. And Kat’s. How much of herself she’d sacrificed to make their life work, all so he could do whatever he pleased. With whomever he pleased.

And just like that, she was okay.

Chapter Forty-one

Margo put the last pile of folded clothing into the box sitting on the bed. “That’s it. That’s all of it.”

“You don’t want anything else?” Conrad asked. He was sitting in the white wicker chair in the corner of the room, which was where she usually sat to put her shoes on.

She shook her head. “I can live with what I’ve got now. With the addition of these things, I’ll be in great shape. The rest can wait until the moving company comes to pack it up and bring it to the storage unit.”

“All right. If you’re sure.”

She took one more look around the room, thinking it through. “I’ve got my jewelry box, packed my good purses and shoes, taken the clothes and books I wanted...I suppose there are a few sentimental items I could take. But then I’d have to store them in my room at the beach house. And I’m already sharing that with my daughter.”

“You take whatever you want. I have room in my garage for some boxes.”

“That’s awfully kind of you, but I hate to impose.”

“We’re talking, what, a couple of months? It’s no imposition, really. You’ve seen my garage. There’s room.”

There was. He kept a very neat and tidy garage, unlike some men. She’d

admired it, actually. She smiled. “You’ve talked me into it. There isn’t much, I promise.”

“Do your worst. I’ll carry the boxes you’ve already filled out to your car.”

“Thank you.” She went around the house gathering up some framed photos, mostly of Jules and Claire when they were younger, and the grandchildren. A few knickknacks, like the Irish crystal bell that had once belonged to her mother, and a pair of porcelain candlesticks that sat on her dining room table, a wedding present from an aunt long gone.

Margo wrapped the breakables in dishtowels to keep them safe. From the kitchen, she took her oldest cookbook, mostly because she thought Claire might like to have it. She slowly walked through the rest of her house, taking pride in the fact that there was very little nonsense in it.

She didn’t like clutter and, as result, had nearly zero. Although perhaps the magazines could use sorting. Most of them were never going to get read, so they might as well go into the recycling. That, however, would require taking the bin out and as she wouldn’t be here to return it to her garage, it couldn’t happen. The magazines would just have to stay where they were.

She stopped in front of a group of framed photos on the wall. One of them was a wedding picture of Bryan and Claire.

The wedding had been nice enough, but her strongest memory of the day was the speech Bryan’s best man had given, in which he’d said he hoped “everything worked out.” What sort of a thing was that to say at a wedding?

Unless he’d known Bryan was incapable of being faithful.

With a frustrated *hmp*, she frowned at the picture, wondering how her daughter was getting on being back in that house. She hoped Claire was doing all right. Margo imagined that having Danny and Kat there was a big help. They would steer her in a different direction if she started to go down a bad path.

Conrad came back into the house, rubbing his hands together. “Boxes are in the car. What else have you got for me?”

“Not much. Just one more box.”

He made a face. “Seriously?”

She shrugged. “I am not an overly sentimental person, Conrad. I don’t keep every little thing that comes my way.”

“Well, I hope you keep me.”

She laughed. “You’re not a little thing, though, are you?”

He grinned. “No, I am not.” He looked around. “No photo albums? No

folders full of the kids' artwork?"

"I have some of those things, but I don't need to bring them with me."

He gave her a look that said she was being foolish. "And what if the house burns down? Or the movers lose them? Or there's a flood?"

"Are you going to name every possible worst-case scenario that could happen?"

"Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. That's the military way. I'm just saying, wouldn't you rather have them with you?"

"What makes you think your garage couldn't be the site of some natural disaster just as easily?"

"True. It could happen. But the chances are better there that I'd be home and able to get to them in time to save them."

Smirking lightly, she acquiesced. He had an answer for everything. She supposed that was one of the reasons she enjoyed his company so much. "All right. I'll pack up a couple more things."

In the end, she only managed two more boxes, but that seemed to satisfy Conrad. After he put them in his car, she closed up the house and they drove off to Claire's to see what they could help with there. It was nice to be behind the wheel of her own vehicle again, but she missed Conrad's company.

Not surprisingly, Claire's house was a hub of activity, with cars parked along the street in both directions. They each found a spot, got out, and walked to the house together.

Conrad shook his head. "I don't think they're going to need us."

"They might not. In fact, we might just be in the way. But I promised we'd come, so we at least need to check in."

"Agreed. Who knows? Maybe we could take a few boxes with us. Although they do have that rental truck."

"Whatever they need," Margo said.

The garage door was up, so they went in that way. Danny was on the top rungs of a ladder, taking boxes off the highest shelf.

"Hello," Margo called out.

He looked down, smiling. "Hey, there. Claire's in her bedroom if you're looking for her."

"Thank you." Margo gestured to Conrad and introduced him. "This is Conrad, my boyfriend. I don't think you've met him yet." She smiled at Conrad. "This is Danny Rojas, our next-door neighbor. He and Claire are starting the bakery together."

“Outstanding.” Conrad gave Danny a wave. “Need a hand with that box there?”

Danny nodded. “It’s the Christmas tree. Not that heavy, but a little awkward for one person. If you’re willing, we can take it right to the truck.”

“You got it,” Conrad said.

Margo left the men and went in search of her daughter. She found Claire in her bedroom, just as Danny said. “This place is a whirlwind.”

Claire turned from facing her closet. “Isn’t it? Pastor Freeman really came through on the help. With those men, plus Danny and Cash, we’re making decent progress.”

“Conrad’s helping Danny move some things in the garage.”

Claire nodded. “The Christmas stuff probably. How’d you do at your house? I guess pretty well if you’re here already.”

“It wasn’t too hard. I’ll have movers come shortly to pack up the entire house and bring it to the storage unit. Then I can get the place cleaned and sold, and concentrate on remodeling the new one.”

“That’s pretty exciting.”

Margo realized her daughter was holding a large white garment bag. “Is that your wedding dress?”

Claire nodded. “Yes. And it’s going in the donate pile.”

“Your wedding picture is on my wall.”

“You can donate that, too,” Claire said.

Margo laughed. “That’s about what I thought you’d say. How are you doing? Being back here, I mean.”

“All right. I cleaned out Bryan’s car, which I’m going to donate to the church. Sitting in it gave me a couple moments of...I don’t know what you’d call them. Memories? Flashbacks? Reminders? But all it really did was help me understand that I have definitely moved on. Which I’m glad about.”

“So am I. I know it can’t have been easy. Any of this.” Margo lifted her chin slightly. “But I’m proud of you. I know that’s something I probably haven’t said often enough, but I’m saying it now. You’ve made the best of an awful situation. Lesser women would have allowed it to destroy them.”

Claire smiled. “Thanks, Mom.”

Margo nodded. “You’re welcome. And I mean it. You seem more in charge of your life than you ever have been. If there was something good that came out of all of this, it’s the way you’ve forged ahead.”

“You know, that’s one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me.”

Disappointment filled Margo. “I’m sorry about that. I know I’m not the most demonstrative person when it comes to affection and praise, but it doesn’t mean I’m not thinking those things.”

“I like them better when you say them. Or act on them.”

Margo impulsively held out her arms. “Would you like a hug?”

Claire laughed. “I’d like one very much.” She tossed the garment bag on the bed and embraced Margo.

She held her daughter close, hugging her in the way she’d never been hugged much herself, not growing up, anyway. “We should be better about things like this.”

“We should,” Claire said as she let her mom go. “Nothing wrong with showing each other how much we care.”

“Not at all. But it’ll take some getting used to.”

“Baby steps,” Claire said.

Margo nodded at the second closet, the doors still closed. “What are you doing with Bryan’s things?”

“I’ve already told the men from church they can have anything they want., but the rest is going to the veterans charity. I’m going to empty out his top dresser drawer in a bit. It’s nothing but junk anyway, but I think there’s a pair of gold and diamond cufflinks in there that were his dad’s. Whatever. I’ll sort through the box some night when I’m back home.”

She laughed suddenly. “I think that’s the first time I’ve called Diamond Beach home without thinking about it.”

“Seems more and more like that every day, doesn’t it?” Margo said.

“It really does. Especially after spending time here.”

Margo couldn’t agree more. Being in her old house had only made her realize how much she’d needed a new start. And how blessed she was to get that new start with her family and a man like Conrad.

Chapter Forty-two

Miguel glanced at his watch, then at Willie. “How are you holding up?”

Willie was happy with how much they’d gotten done but exhausted by all the decision-making. In fact, her brain felt tired, and she was definitely hungry, despite the cookies she’d eaten. “I don’t think I can do any more. Not until I have a little break and refill the tank with some actual food.”

Miguel nodded. “I agree. I feel the same.” He looked at Rob, who sat on the other side of the table, organizing copies of all their new paperwork for them. “Could we borrow one of the golf carts again so that we can get some lunch?”

“Absolutely,” Rob said. “I’ll have everything ready for you when you get back.”

Willie knew Rob would say yes to Miguel’s request. Buying an estate lot in one of the exclusive sections of Dunes West came with a lot of perks. Being treated like a VIP was pretty sweet, and she was enjoying every minute of it.

“Very kind of you,” Miguel said. He looked at Willie. “Shall we?”

“Sure. Where are we going? Back to the café?”

He shook his head. “Today I thought we’d try the Bistro. I believe it’s a little fancier.” He glanced at Rob. “Isn’t that right?”

“It is. It’s designed to give you the feeling of a quaint French restaurant. It’s only open for lunch Thursday through Sunday, but dinner all week long. You’ll enjoy it. The food is phenomenal. I highly recommend the steak frites. Or just about anything, really. You can’t go wrong.”

“Sounds good,” Willie said.

Rob gave them the keys to number seven and they were off, Miguel once again behind the wheel.

He smiled as he drove. “I’m really getting the hang of these things. We will definitely be getting a pair for ourselves. One for you and one for me.”

“We’ll have to,” Willie said. “If our kids visit at the same time, one cart won’t hold us all.”

“Good point.”

She held onto one of the side bars, but she had her seatbelt on, too. They might not be going that fast, but she didn’t want to tumble out at any speed. It didn’t have anything to do with Miguel’s driving. He was very careful.

More so than she was when she was behind the wheel. But going fast was half the fun—when you were the driver.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the breeze in her hair. This really was the life. Soon, it would be an everyday thing.

They arrived at the Bistro not long after. It was at the other end of the big shopping area, the very last spot in one of the rows of shops.

There were a lot of cars and even more golf carts in the parking lot.

She frowned. “I’m not so sure we’re going to get in. Looks busy.”

“We’ll get in,” Miguel said.

She didn’t know how he could sound so confident. “Well, if we don’t, I’d be happy to eat at that little pizza place. I’m not picky.”

“After all we’ve done today, we deserve to sit down and be waited on, don’t you think?”

“No argument from me but look at the people.” She could see them through the windows, standing in the foyer of the Bistro.

Miguel took her hand. “They have French onion soup. And chocolate mousse for dessert.”

Willie laughed. He didn’t seem to grasp that they probably weren’t going to get a table. “You think that’s why people are lined up?”

“Maybe.” Miguel shrugged. “Rob said the food is very good.”

“I don’t doubt that it is.” Just that they’d actually get seated.

Miguel held the door for her, and they went inside. People sat on padded

benches along the walls in the foyer. She could only assume they were waiting for tables. The place smelled great. Hard to say exactly what the smell was. Sort of the savory aroma that food on a grill gave off, mixed with the yeasty goodness of fresh bread.

Whatever it was, Willie's mouth was watering. She really hoped they didn't have to wait too long.

Miguel went right up to the hostess stand. "Rojas, party of two."

The woman behind the stand glanced at her computer screen, smiled, and nodded. "Miguel?"

"That is me."

She pulled two menus from under the stand. "Right this way."

Willie looked at her sly fiancé. "You made a reservation?"

He grinned. "I like to be prepared."

Willie loved him a tiny bit more for it. "Nicely done, my darling. I am very impressed with you right now."

He grinned as they followed the hostess to a little table near one of the windows.

He held her chair out for her, then took his own seat. The hostess handed them their menus. "Roger will be your server today. Enjoy your meal."

"Thank you," Willie said. The place was enchanting. Lots of sparkling crystal and dark wood and real candles in antique mercury glass cups on the tables, which had white tablecloths and gleaming silverware.

Soft, happy violin music played in the background and potted ferns filled small niches between the tables. It was very charming.

Roger arrived, bringing them goblets of ice water. "Our special today is trout almondine. Our soup today is crab bisque. Unless you have any questions for me, I'll give you a few moments to have a look at your menus."

Miguel nodded. "Thank you."

As Roger left them, Willie leaned in toward Miguel. "I like this place. It's very romantic."

He looked around, nodding. "It's quite beautiful. And it does feel very French. I'm glad we came here."

"I'm glad you made a reservation." How long had he been planning this?

He tapped his cheek. "Maybe I earned a little something for that?"

With a laugh, she gave him a kiss. "You're so good to me."

"It's my new happiness."

She let out a delighted sigh, as full of contentment as a person could be.

There wasn't a place inside her, not a nook or cranny, that could have held more joy than what she was feeling in the moment. "I could cry, I'm so happy."

Miguel's brows bent. "Don't cry, my love."

She smiled, even though she could feel herself getting weepy. "I can't help it. I'm so happy my body doesn't know how else to express itself."

She picked up her napkin, also cloth, and dabbed at her eyes. "I never thought I'd live a life like this. Certainly not at this age. And now look at me. In love with a wonderful man. Building an incredible new house."

"Having lunch in a place that could almost be France."

She laughed. "That, too."

"I know how you feel," he said. "It's all a little overwhelming in the best possible way. I hope it's not too much for you."

"No. It's perfect. I wouldn't change a thing."

"Good," he said. "Because I have something I can't wait another second to give you."

"What?"

He leaned to one side, dug in his pants pocket, and pulled out a small, burgundy leather box. He put it on the table between them. "I hope this meets with your approval."

She let out a soft gasp. "Is that...what I think it is?"

He smiled. "What do you think it is?"

"A ring."

"You are a very perceptive woman. Open it."

She picked up the box. It had a little metal lock on the front that swung to the side to unlatch. She pushed it away then lifted the top.

There was absolutely a ring inside. A gold ring, just like she'd asked for. At the center was a fat sapphire in the shape of a cushion. The gem was the color of deep ocean water, a tranquil, mesmerizing blue that made you feel as if you could see through it for miles.

Surrounding the sapphire were round diamonds that were not too small, but also not too big, and plenty sparkly, even in the Bistro's soft lighting. The ring was regal and would be impossible not to notice on any woman's hand.

He took it out of the box and slipped it onto her ring finger. "What do you think?"

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she whispered as she stared at the gem. "I feel like a queen."

Miguel beamed. “That is how you should always feel, because that is what you are to me.”

She sniffed. “Our wedding can’t come soon enough.”

Chapter Forty-three

T rina never would have imagined grocery shopping with Miles was something she'd enjoy so much, but she liked the domestic vibe it was giving her. She realized, as they wandered the aisles and filled their cart, that you could learn a lot from how a person shopped and by the choices they made.

For example, when it came to produce, Miles liked to look at each thing he was buying. He didn't just fill a bag with apples. He inspected each one to make sure it looked nice, didn't have bad spots or anything like that.

She appreciated that the little things mattered to him. She had no doubt that kind of attitude made him so good at his job. He cared. About everything. She'd never seen him at work, actually dealing with an injured person, but she was sure he must be kind and caring and attentive.

"I don't know how to make a lot of things," she told Miles. "But I know how to make tater tot casserole. I could make one for Alex and then he could have it on hand for a couple of days. Pretty easy thing for him to heat up when he's hungry. I could even store it in individual servings if we bought some containers."

"That would be good. I was just going to grab some frozen meals, but homemade wins. What do you need?"

"Tater tots." She grinned. "Obviously. I'll need a casserole dish to make

it in. Do you think he has one of those?”

“Probably not. How about one of those big foil pans?”

“That would work. I’ll need some ground beef, a bag of frozen peas—does Alex like peas?”

Miles nodded. “I think so. Larry’s served peas before and I’ve never seen Alex complain.”

“Okay, good. I’ll also need an onion, a can of cream of mushroom soup, and a bag of shredded cheese.”

“Good thing we’re still in produce.” He grabbed an onion. “Any kind okay?”

“Get a sweet one. They’re less bitey.”

He checked to see what he’d picked up, then switched the one in his hand for the kind she’d requested. “Done. Let’s go get the rest of the stuff.”

“You can still get him some frozen meals. He might get sick of tater tot casserole.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll freeze a few of the portions after I get it divided up.”

“Maybe you’ll make me some tater tot casserole sometime.”

She smiled. “Whenever you want me to.”

They went through produce, then turned the corner into the meat department.

“What kind of ground beef?” Miles asked. He glanced ahead of them and his smile vanished.

Trina looked in the same direction and saw why. Liz, his ex, was standing by the chicken section. She hadn’t seen them yet.

Then she looked up and made eye contact with Miles. “Hello, there.” She shifted her gaze slightly and saw Trina. Her smile stayed in place, but something changed in her eyes. “Hello to you, too.”

“Liz,” Miles said. Wasn’t much of a greeting, but Trina was okay with that.

She just nodded. “Hello.”

Liz put a package of chicken breasts in her basket and strolled over. “Aren’t you two the happy couple?” Again, her attention went to Trina. “Any news on the job front? I thought I might have heard from you.”

“I still have interviews to do. And we’ve been a little busy. Alex got injured.”

Liz put her hand to her throat. “I hope nothing serious.”

“He’ll be fine,” Miles said. “We should get going. We’re just here

picking up some food for him.”

“Give him my love.” She wiggled her fingers at them. “Toodles.”

Trina quickly grabbed a pound of lean ground beef.

“What did she mean about the job front? Why would she have heard from you?” Miles asked.

Trina sighed as she put the package of meat into the cart. “She came in for an interview for the receptionist position at the salon. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I just didn’t think it mattered.”

He looked confused. “That’s all right, but why would she be looking for a job? She lives off her parents’ money. She gets an allowance.”

Trina shrugged. “Maybe they cut her off? Or maybe she’s trying to be more independent?”

“The first one I’d buy. Not the second.” Miles glanced in the direction Liz had gone. “You’re not going to actually hire her, are you? Not telling you what to do, but I’m not sure she’s the most trustworthy person.”

“Between us, I can’t see offering her the job. But that has nothing to do with who she is or your past with her. Her work experience is really thin. And her attitude? Not the kind of thing I want around salon clients.” Despite all of that, Trina felt for Liz, even if she wasn’t the nicest person. It was going to be tough for her to find a job doing anything.

He smiled. “For a second, I thought you might give it to her. You’re so nice. But you obviously know when to be nice and when to protect your business.”

“I’m trying,” Trina said. “But what if her parents really have cut her off? She’ll have to get some kind of job.”

He nodded. “She will. And I know you love to help people, but she’s not someone you want to get tangled up with.”

“I know. I feel that way, too. I just can’t help also feeling sorry for her. The whole act she puts on is kind of sad and desperate, you know?”

He smiled, kindness in his eyes. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you picked up on that, but you’re very perceptive. I agree. It is sad and desperate, which does make it easier to feel sorry for her. But my gut says she’s nothing but a great big red flag.”

“Agreed.” Trina looked at the signs at the end of the aisles and pointed at the one they’d just passed. “Soup is right there. Let me get the can I need and I’ll meet you in frozen foods.”

“You got it. I’ll find the tater tots and peas.”

“Perfect. Just regular-sized bags of each.”

“Okay.”

She headed down the soup aisle and slowly scanned the labels for the cream of mushroom.

“Hey, sorry to bother you again, but—”

Trina turned and found herself face to face with Liz. She jumped. “You startled me, sneaking up like that.”

Liz laughed like that was hilarious. “I didn’t sneak up on you, silly. I’m just naturally quiet. All those years of ballet, I suppose. You can’t unlearn that gracefulness.”

Trina grabbed the can of soup she needed, clutching it in her hand like it might save her from any further interaction. “I should go find Miles.”

“Absolutely. I just wanted to say again that I would *really* love that receptionist job. I think I’d be perfect for it. And I can start immediately, which I know must be important to you. When do you think you’ll be open?”

For a moment, Trina was at a loss for words. “Soon. That’s the best I can do right now. Someone will call you in a few weeks to let you know about the position.” She made up her mind right there that her mom would be the one to call Liz. Trina didn’t want to have any further interaction with her.

“A few weeks?” Liz’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t wait that long.”

“I’m sorry, that’s the best I can do. As I said, I still have other people to interview.”

“Why can’t you just give me the job now?”

“Because it doesn’t work that way.” Trina took a step back. “Bye now.”

Liz went after her. “I need that job.”

“There are lots of places hiring. Maybe you should apply at a few more.” Trina’s heart was starting to beat a little faster.

“You don’t understand. Being a receptionist is about all I can do. I don’t have the skills to do anything else.”

“You could be a server. I’m sure you could learn to do that.”

Liz scowled. “And wait on people? Bringing them their food? No, thanks.”

Trina had had enough. “I’m sorry, but you’re not qualified to be a receptionist, either. You don’t have any experience, or the right kind of attitude or personality. Let’s just consider the interview good practice for your next one, okay?”

Liz’s face went blank. Then her eyes narrowed. “You sure are uppity for

white trash.”

Trina felt like she'd been slapped across the face. “I'm leaving. Don't ever speak to me again.”

She turned and went as fast as she could toward the frozen foods. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything about Liz not getting the job, but she thought it would put an end to things. Now all she could think about was that if Liz was really connected, she might start a campaign against the salon, badmouthing the place before it even got open.

By the time she found Miles, she was nearly in tears.

“What's wrong?”

Trina sniffed but a sob clogged her throat. All she could get out was, “Liz.”

Miles looked angry, but he pulled Trina into a hug. “Are you okay?”

Trina exhaled and did her best not to make a scene in the middle of the freezer cases. “I'm all right. She just sort of ambushed me.”

“You want to get out of here?” His words came out almost like a growl.

“N-no.” Trina made herself breathe through the bad feelings. “But let's get what we need as soon as we can.”

“Stay here,” Miles said. “No one upsets you like this and gets away with it.”

He took off, leaving the cart with her. She put the can of soup in it. The frozen peas and tater tots were already in there.

She took another breath, feeling better already. She didn't like that Liz had upset her so much. Trina shook her head. She could not let anyone get to her that way again. It wouldn't do for her to break down in the salon over a confrontation.

It was sweet that Miles wanted to protect her. She smiled. She'd never really had a hero in her life before. And now she was dating one.

Chapter Forty-four

When Roxie got back to the beach house, she made herself a salad and sat on the back porch to eat, her thoughts still filled with her visit to Paulina's.

She was glad that she'd gone. She'd certainly gotten a better understanding of Paulina's side of things.

It hadn't done anything to change her feelings about Bryan, though. She was still mad at him. Still very much over what he'd done and any lingering feelings of grief she'd had. How had she been so wrong about the man she'd married?

But if she was really honest with herself, maybe there had been signs of his true nature all along. Signs she ignored.

Signs she definitely didn't see in Ethan. Thank heavens.

When she finished her salad, she called Ethan.

"Hey, there," he answered.

"Hi. I went to see Paulina."

He sucked in a breath. "How did that go? Or shouldn't I ask?"

She laughed. "It went fine. I'm glad I went, which isn't something I thought I'd be saying. But it was the right thing to do. Thanks for helping me see that."

"Sure. You do sound less like you want to kill someone."

She chuckled. "I'm definitely in a better place. I relate to her more than I realized. She's basically become a single mother, which is how I pretty much raised Trina. Bryan was so rarely around that I might as well have been."

"I'm glad you found some peace."

"I did. Thanks for being a part of that."

"Anytime."

"How's your day going?"

"Good. I'm working at the shopping center. A woman stopped by looking to get information about rents. She's looking to open up an insurance office."

"Kind of boring, but rent is rent."

"I gave her your mom's number. Did she call yet? I couldn't tell if she was serious or just a tire kicker."

"I don't know if she called or not. My mom is over at Dunes West with Miguel doing more house stuff today. They bought a lot yesterday and picked out a house to be built on it."

"Wow, good for them! Well, I'd love to know if the woman actually calls and rents the place. The store next to the bakery is probably the one I could have ready the quickest."

"I'll tell Willie that when she gets home."

"Thanks." He hesitated. "You doing anything tonight? There's a free concert at Carlton Fisk Park tonight. Light jazz. Under the stars. I thought we could bring a blanket and a bottle of wine. Maybe some cheese and crackers."

She smiled. "Wow, look at you getting all romantic."

"Well, if you'd rather go to a monster truck rally..."

She snickered. "No, the concert sounds nice. The whole evening does. What time?"

"Concert starts at eight o'clock, but we should probably get there early to make sure we have a decent spot. Like leave my place at seven. I'll bring the wine and the blanket if you bring the cheese and crackers."

"I can do that. See you at your place then."

After she hung up, she took her salad dish inside and looked through the fridge and cabinets to see what she had in the way of cheese and crackers. She had cheddar and pepper jack, plus Ritz and some wheat crackers. She made up containers of each and put them into a lunch bag.

She was about to tuck that away in the fridge to keep it cold, but first she added a bag of grapes that she'd washed and dried, a small can of mixed nuts, and a handful of squares of individually wrapped chocolate she kept around

for emergencies.

That seemed like a much more rounded-out picnic to her. Especially if they were going to have wine.

In the side pocket of the lunch bag, she put some paper plates and folded paper towels to use as napkins. She wondered if Ethan would remember to bring a corkscrew and glasses. Probably. He was pretty thorough like that. She stuck a corkscrew in the bag anyway.

She put the whole lunch bag in the fridge, then wondered if she should text Trina. They were supposed to do her hair today when Trina got back, but now Roxie was wondering if there'd be time.

Willie came home before Roxie could text. "I'm home," she called out as she walked into the living room.

"Hi, Mom. How was your day?"

Willie held up her hand, practically covering her face. "Pretty good."

Roxie stared at the ring on her mom's finger. "What is that gorgeous thing?"

"My engagement ring." Willie stuck her hand out for Roxie's inspection. "He's got great taste, don't you think?"

"I'll say. He picked you." Roxie winked at her. "But, yes, that's beautiful. Biggest sapphire I've ever seen in person. It's spectacular."

Willie grinned as she went to her chair and sat with a big sigh. She studied the ring. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. That man spoils me rotten."

"You were already rotten," Roxie teased.

Willie laughed. "Thankfully, he likes me that way."

"Congratulations. That really is some ring. Did you get a lot done on your house?"

"We did everything we could do until things move along a bit. I'm glad about that. They're nice people and I'm happy to get everything done that needs doing so the building can start. I like seeing more of the community, too, but I'm worn out. That was two days of real work."

"Well, you can sit and relax now. The only big thing you need to do now is get married this weekend."

Willie smiled. "How's that coming? Everything going to work out?"

"Yes. It's all coming together." Although Roxie realized she needed to double check with the photographer to make sure he was confirmed. She found him in her list of contacts and sent him a text along those lines.

Willie put the TV on, quickly finding a game show.

Roxie messaged Trina next. *I have a date with Ethan tonight at seven. Will that be enough time to do my hair? If not, no worries, it can wait.*

Trina answered pretty quickly. *I've got a casserole in the oven and I'm about to cut Miles's hair. Already did Alex's. I should be home in 45 minutes or so. We can still do it.*

All right, sounds good. Thanks!

Roxie looked up, about to tell her mom about the jazz concert, when she realized Willie was asleep. With a smile, Roxie went off to her room to look through her wedding notes and make sure there weren't other calls or texts she needed to send.

Everything seemed well in hand. She still needed to pick up their dresses from the Lady M boutique, but those weren't going to be ready until tomorrow afternoon. Maybe she'd go down and lay by the pool for a bit.

Then the photographer answered. *I can do the wedding, yes. Sorry for being so late with my response. Been trying to find a new location for my studio and it's not going well.*

Roxie read the message again. Then decided to call, because she had too much to say to put it all in a text.

The phone rang once before being picked up. "Hello, Plummer Photography, Thomas Plummer speaking. Is this Roxanne Thompson?"

"It is. I'm sorry to call when we were just texting, but you said you were looking for a new studio location?"

He sighed. "Yes. My lease is up in a month and the landlord's raising the rent. My shop is very close to the beach and he knows he can get more. I can't swing the increase, but someone will. Don't worry, though, it won't affect my ability to take care of your mom's wedding. I promise."

"How much space do you need?"

"Hmm. Well, I need to be able to set up an area for portraits. I do a good business in headshots and that sort of thing. Plus an area for an office, which would need to be a decent size. I don't need anything massive, though. Why? Do you know of something?"

"I do. And if you want to look at it today, you can."

"Really? Sure, I'll have a look."

"Give me one second to send a text and make sure someone's still there to show you around, then I'll text you the address."

"Okay. Great. Thanks!"

“You’re welcome. In the interest of full disclosure, the shopping center where the available storefront is located belongs to my mother, so...”

“That explains how you know about it.” He laughed. “Could it be ready in a month’s time?”

“I think so. But I’ll ask Ethan, our project manager, to be sure. He’ll be the one to show you around, too.”

“I’ll wait to hear from you.”

She called Ethan, made sure he was there and that one of the storefronts could be turned into what Thomas needed in the allotted time.

“A photography studio should be pretty easy. If all he needs is an office built, and the rest is cosmetics, it should be no problem.”

“Perfect. I’m going to text him the address and send him your way.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Thank you. See you tonight.” Roxie hung up and smiled as she texted Thomas the information. If he rented one of the storefronts, she’d really feel good about contributing toward the family business. As much as she planned to help Trina, that was still in the future.

Helping now was even better.

Chapter Forty-five

“Great day, everyone,” Jesse said through the intercom. “Really fantastic. I think we could be ready to record by tomorrow afternoon.”

Jules nodded as she looked around the studio. “So do I. This has really come together.”

Everyone smiled.

“Why don’t we call it a day?” she said. “I need to walk my dog and I’d like to get home before the sun goes down.”

They all laughed.

“You’re the boss,” Rita said.

“Try telling my dog that,” Jules said with a laugh. She put her guitar on the stand and soon met Jesse in the control room as the rest of the band filtered out, saying their goodbyes.

“You want to grab some dinner?” Jesse said.

“I really should get home. I don’t know what time they’re all getting back from Landry, but I want to be there to help unload.”

“That’s really kind of you. Do you want me to come over and help?”

She shook her head. “Thank you, but I know you have a lot going on here already. Today was really good, wasn’t it?”

“It was. We’re about ninety percent there and tomorrow, with Cash back

in the studio, we'll be complete. This song is going to be life-changing, Jules. You saw how the band responded to it."

She nodded. "I did and that was really encouraging. I just...I don't want to say I need to see it to believe it, but I've had songs before that people talked up and while they were hits, they weren't mega hits, the way you all seem to think this one will be."

"Time will show you."

Together, they walked out after she grabbed her purse. He locked up. "Hey, speaking of family, I can't stop thinking about that pie your sister made."

"The sour orange?"

"Yep. It was so good. I can't believe I've never even heard of it before. She's quite the baker, huh?"

She laughed. "She is, but I have to tell you, if you're thinking about asking her out, she's already got a man in her life."

Jesse snickered. "Settle down. You're the only woman I'm interested in. But that pie...I really can't stop thinking about it."

"I don't know what to do with that information."

Still grinning, he shook his head. "I'm not explaining myself very well. I'm thinking I'd like to talk to her about making them for the club. Or me buying them from her through the bakery. However she wants to work it."

"Yeah?"

He nodded. "The key lime we have is all right, but that sour orange is so different, and yet, if you like key lime, you'd like that, too. I feel like it could be the signature dessert we've been looking for."

"I didn't know you were in need of a signature dessert."

"I didn't, either, but Leroy says we do. He's been after me for a while about it. And while I know they're going to sell them at the bakery, do you think she'd give me an exclusive on the pie as far as restaurant sales go? Maybe?"

"I have no idea. I'd have to ask her. How many pies do you think you'd need?"

"Leroy could answer that more definitively, but based on our last key lime order, I'd say probably three...maybe four?"

"A week?"

"A day. We sell a good number of desserts."

"I had no idea. So twenty-one pies a week minimum. That's a lot of pie."

I'll talk to her."

"Thanks." He unlocked his office door.

Toby wagged his tail and stretched as they came in.

"Lazybones," Jules said. "Have you missed Mama?"

He got up and gave her a little woof.

"I missed you, too." She crouched down to give him a cuddle. "Let's get your leash on, Tobs. Time to go home."

"I'll take him and walk you both out," Jesse said.

"Thanks."

He clipped Toby's leash on, then grabbed the bag she'd brought the slices of pie in. As soon as they got outside, Toby found a patch of grass to christen. Jesse just stood by. "I figured he'd have to pee."

"He likes to pee on anything he hasn't already peed on."

Jesse snorted. "Shiloh's the same way. That reminds me—you're welcome to bring him with you again tomorrow, but if you think he'd have more fun at my place with Shiloh, you could always drop him off there. He could spend the day with Shiloh and my dog walker could take them both out."

"That's very kind of you. I think there will be enough people home tomorrow to look after him. Aren't you worried that he and Shiloh might destroy your beautiful home with their nonsense? You know how crazy they get." When they were on the beach they acted like twin Tasmanian Devils straight out of the cartoons, chasing each other and rolling around until they looked like cinnamon-covered doggy doughnuts.

He nodded. "True, but if Shiloh didn't destroy it as a puppy, I don't think the two of them together could do much worse. Anyway, if the situation ever comes up, you're welcome to bring him over."

"Thanks." Toby danced at her feet, ready to get in the car.

"Anything for my favorite girl."

Jules smiled as she put her purse on the front passenger seat of her Jeep. "You're awfully sweet to me."

"Am I?" He pushed a strand of hair off her face. "Just seems to come naturally when I'm around you. I'm crazy about you, in case you didn't know."

"I'm crazy about you, too."

He leaned in and gave her a kiss, but a moment later, the kiss ended as they both started laughing. Toby had wound himself around their ankles,

meaning the leash was now circling them like a restraint.

“Toby!” Jules shook her head. “You silly thing.”

“I don’t know,” Jesse said. “I think he’s got the right idea. We belong together.”

She smiled up at Jesse. “No argument from me.”

“Don’t work too hard tonight. You need your sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be one for the music history books.”

She loved his enthusiasm. “I promise I’ll be as fresh as a daisy. Speaking of working too hard, don’t you have someone coming in to interview?”

“In about an hour, yes. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“I hope well.”

“Me, too.” He gave her another quick kiss before stooping to free them from Toby’s antics. He helped load Toby in, clipping him into his seat restraint. “Have a good night.”

“You, too. See you tomorrow.” She closed her door and pulled out of the lot. “Today was a good day, Toby. If this song really does what everyone seems to think it’s going to do, we’re going on the road again.”

She glanced over at him. His eyes were squinted against the sun and his tongue was hanging out of his open mouth. He loved car rides.

“The good news is, this time your girlfriend will be coming with us.” Jules smiled at the road ahead. “And so will your Mama’s boyfriend.” Her grin got a little bigger. “Won’t that be fun?”

Chapter Forty-six

*K*at stood on the front porch to sign the paperwork that Peter, the man from the veterans charity, had just given her. She scrawled her name on the appropriate line, then gave the form back to him on the clipboard it was attached to. “There you go.”

He tore off the yellow copy and handed it to her. “Thank you again. We really do appreciate this.”

“Thank *you*. I can’t believe how fast you guys work.” It had helped that he’d come with a team of six people.

They’d gone through the house like a well-oiled machine, making short work of packing up and moving out whatever was left. She supposed most of them were former military, which probably explained their speed and efficiency.

While that had been going on, the realtor had come by. He’d agreed with Kat that a good cleaning, some fresh paint, and shampooed carpets would go a long way. He’d also given them an appraisal that had made her mom very happy.

After that, her mom and Danny had stayed around until the last of the main rooms were cleared out, then they’d gotten back on the road.

Pastor Freeman and the men who’d come with him had just gone, too. It was just her and Cash now. The whirlwind of a day was over.

He came up beside her. "That was a lot of work."

"Yes, it was. And it's not over yet."

"You mean the drive home?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but that's the easy part, although you have to deal with that truck. It's the unpacking when we get there I'm not looking forward to."

"We'll get it knocked out. There's a lot less stuff in that truck than I thought there'd be. Anything else that needs to be done here?"

She shook her head. "Nope." She'd gotten her mom's key to give to the realtor so he'd be able to show the place. He was going to arrange for carpet cleaners, painters, and then a general cleaning, too, all of which he'd promised could be deducted at the closing.

She opened the front door, took one more look inside, then closed it and locked the door one final time. "Let's go."

"Can we grab something to eat first? Fast food is fine, but that pizza didn't hold me."

"Sure. There's a Fry Shack just up the road. Plenty of parking for that truck, too."

"Works for me. I'll follow you, since I don't know where I'm going until we get back on the highway."

"Okay."

At the Fry Shack, she just got a cheeseburger, small fries, and a diet soda. Cash got a double bacon cheeseburger with Cajun curly fries and a chocolate shake. She honestly didn't know where he put it.

While he ate, she checked in with Alex. *Headed home. Long day but good to be done. How are you doing? I miss you.*

Miss you too, he texted back. Voice to text is very handy. Miles and Trina took good care of me today. They brought me home, then bought me some groceries. Trina made me a casserole. My fridge is full! She gave me a haircut too. I'm handsome again.

Kat laughed. You never stopped being handsome. I'm so glad they were there for you. I'll be over tomorrow, first thing. I'll bring you some breakfast.

Pancakes from Digger's? That's what I had this morning and I could totally eat them again.

Anything you want. She snagged a fry, quickly popping it in her mouth. I'll text you in the morning to make sure that's still your choice.

Thanks. Drive safe. Text me when you get home.

Will do. She put her phone down and took a bite of her burger.

“Everything good at home?”

“Yeah. I was just checking with Alex.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Seems all right. He didn’t say anything about being in pain. Miles and Trina took care of him today.”

“That was nice of them.” Cash held his burger with both hands. Juice dripped into his paper container. “This is really good. I could eat another one of these.”

“I have no idea how you eat so much and stay so thin.”

“Genetics? My dad is skinny.”

“Your dad jumps around on stage like he’s being electrified. That’s enough to keep anyone skinny.”

“True.” His eyes narrowed. “If everything is all right with Alex, why do you look bummed? Or are you just tired?”

She shrugged. “I am tired. I think hearing about Miles and Trina taking care of him today makes me feel a little bad that it wasn’t me.”

“And he probably feels bad that he couldn’t be here today to help you.”

She smiled. “He probably does. I’m super happy Miles and Trina were there for him. Trina even gave him a haircut.”

“Cool. I should take her up on that, too. I wonder what Sierra would think of me with shorter hair.”

“If she likes you, it shouldn’t matter what your hair looks like.”

“I know. But you know how it is.”

She nodded. “I do.” She had another bite of her burger. “You really like this girl?”

“Yeah, she’s super cool and very talented.”

“You think she’ll end up going on tour with you guys? If that’s what happens?”

Cash nodded. “Yeah, totally. I mean, my mom does have a regular band she usually pulls together for tours, but it’s been a while. They might not all be available. Either way, Sierra could definitely be part of the group. Especially as a backup vocalist.”

“That could get awkward. If things don’t go well with you guys, I mean. Not saying they will, just something to think about.”

“True. We’re kind of taking it slow, but then my mom suggested we start our own band. Totally wasn’t expecting that.”

“I don’t see how you’ll have time for that if you both go on tour with her.”

“Nope. That will be our life for however many months we’re out there. But it would be nice to have her to jam with.” He stared at his burger, a weird, far-off look in his eyes. “And it would be nice to have someone to settle down with.”

She ran a fry through the little puddle of ketchup she’d made. “Are you saying...marriage?”

“Yeah, sure, maybe. Eventually. Being around my mom and you guys has been a big reminder of how great family is. I’d like to have one of my own someday, you know? Don’t you?”

She nodded. “I definitely do.”

“With Alex?”

She smiled. “Maybe. But I’m not rushing anything. Which doesn’t mean I want to wait years like I did with Ray.”

“It’s a good thing that worked out the way it did. Otherwise, you’d be getting divorced right now.”

A curious little shiver went through her. “That would be so strange. I can’t imagine that. But I also know Alex is a very different kind of guy.”

“Hey, don’t say anything to Sierra about what I said. I don’t want to scare her off because she thinks I’ve got some kind of agenda. Things have to happen naturally.”

“I won’t say a word. I haven’t even met her, you know.”

He grinned. “I know. But you will, eventually. I think she’s going to be around a lot more.”

“Are you bringing her to the wedding?”

He nodded. “Yeah. You bringing Alex?”

“Of course.”

“Cool.” He ate the last bite of his burger. “Going on tour with her will be a great way to see if we’re really combatable. I figure we either come back from that engaged or never wanting to speak to each other again.”

Kat laughed. “For the sake of everyone else on the bus with you, I hope it’s not the latter.”

“Me, too,” Cash said. “I really do like her. I’d love for things to work out.”

Kat totally understood. “I feel the same way about Alex.”

Chapter Forty-seven

Claire had never been happier to pull into the driveway at the Double Diamond. Danny parked beside her, which made sense, since his car was full of her stuff, too.

He got out and stretched as she did the same. “Good to be back.”

“I know. That was a lot of work. I really owe you.”

He smiled. “No, you don’t. You already put gas in my car. Besides, you’re about to work just as hard getting the bakery open. You already have been, really. But helping you out today helps me out tomorrow.”

She nodded. “That is true.”

“Hey, Claire.”

Claire looked up. Jules was standing on the second-floor wraparound porch. “Hey.”

“You need help? I can be down in two seconds.”

“That would be great, thanks.”

“On my way.” Jules disappeared back into the house.

Danny opened the back of his car while Claire started taking things out of the passenger seats.

With Jules’s help, they got both vehicles emptied in about half an hour.

Danny surveyed the boxes now covering Claire’s kitchen floors and counters. There were more in her bedroom. “When the kids get here with the

truck, text me. I'm going to run over and check on my dad."

"Okay," Claire said. "Thanks. Maybe we should leave the rental truck until tomorrow."

"I'd rather do it today," Danny said. "Tomorrow, I have some bakery work I have to do."

Jules nodded. "And I need Cash with me in the studio tomorrow."

"Right," Claire said. "I wasn't thinking. Tonight it is."

"Don't worry," Danny said. "We'll have two more people to help. Cash and I can deal with the heavy stuff."

"Hopefully, there won't be too much of that." Claire looked around then, frowning. "Where are Mom and Conrad? I saw her car downstairs."

Jules answered. "They dropped her stuff off then went to his house to put some of her boxes in his garage. They should be back any second."

"Just text me," Danny said again. "I'm going to move my car to my driveway, then check in with my dad."

"Okay." He left and she got to work unpacking a few boxes. She wasn't in the mood, but it had to be done. Jules helped her. Half an hour later, Claire's phone went off. She took it out and checked the screen. "Cash and Kat are here."

"I'll head down," Jules said. "I know you need to text Danny."

"On it," Claire said. She sent the text, then huffed out a breath. She was tired, but at least they were almost done. "Here we go again."

She took the elevator downstairs.

Danny was helping Cash back the truck in, giving him some hand signals so he could get close without clipping the house. The rental truck was a lot taller than anything any of them drove.

Cash hopped out. "Thanks, man."

"Sure," Danny said.

Conrad and Margo returned as Cash was opening up the truck. Jules was already helping Kat unload what was in her car.

Claire put her hands on her hips as she took a good look at what was in the truck. "I really hope everything in there fits in the elevator. Otherwise, we might need some more help."

Cash jumped up into the back of the truck. "I think it will. The biggest piece is that buffet server from the dining room, and if that can go up on one end, it should fit."

Claire made a face. "That sounds like a great way to scratch it."

He shook his head. “Don’t worry, we have moving blankets. We can protect it.”

He’d read her mind. “Okay, good. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Claire. We’re not going to do all the work to bring your stuff here just to ruin it.”

She smiled at him. “I know you’re not. I appreciate your help so much.” She appreciated all of them. If she and Kat had had to do this by themselves...she imagined it would have meant hiring a company and costing them a lot more time and money. “There are some kitchen-sink bars in your future.”

He smiled big. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

With the help of her mom, Conrad, Danny, Cash, Jules, and Kat, they were able to empty the truck and Kat’s car in about an hour and a half. As it turned out, the legs of the buffet screwed off, making it even easier to fit on its end in the elevator.

By the time they were done, however, it was sunset and they were operating by the outdoor lights.

“Mom?” Kat said.

“Yes?”

“If I drive the truck back to the rental place tomorrow morning, can you follow me over? That way Cash can get to the studio with Aunt Jules without worrying about it.”

“Of course,” Claire said. “Then I’ll have the rest of the day and tomorrow to work on the wedding cake.”

Danny ran his hand through his hair. “The work never ends, does it?”

Claire shook her head. “Nope. But that’s all right. It’s good to be busy.”

“I’m glad you think that way,” he said.

“Go home,” she told him. “You look as tired as I feel, which means I look worse.” She laughed. “Thank you again. I couldn’t have done today without you. Or any of you.”

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Call me tomorrow if you need help with anything.”

“I will, but I won’t.”

He chuckled as he gave them a wave. “Night, all.”

“Night.” They waved back.

Conrad nodded. “I’m going to head home as well. Unless there’s something else I can do?”

“No,” Claire said. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, young lady.” He winked at Margo. “See you tomorrow. It’s all right if you’re a little later than usual. Might not be a bad idea to sleep in.”

“I’ll be there on schedule,” Margo said. “Unless you need some extra sleep.”

“Marines never sleep in,” Conrad said. He grinned, then headed for his car. “See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks again, Conrad,” Margo said. Then she went toward the elevator. Cash closed the back of the truck. “I’m going to take a hot shower.”

“You don’t want anything to eat?” Claire asked. “I thought for sure that’s what you’d want.”

“So did I,” Jules said. “Where’s my son and what have you done with him?”

Kat laughed. “We had Fry Shack before we drove back.”

“That explains it,” Claire said.

Cash’s mouth bunched to one side. “I’m not saying I couldn’t go for some dessert.”

They all laughed. Claire put her arm around him. “How about some sour orange pie? There are probably some cookies left, too.”

He nodded. “I’ll take whatever you’ve got.”

“Now, that’s my son,” Jules said.

They walked toward the elevator.

“How about this,” Claire said as Kat pushed the call button. “Let’s all clean up then meet back in the living room for dessert. I’ll put out whatever we have, all right?”

“I’ll be in my pajamas,” Kat said.

Cash nodded. “Same.”

The elevator doors opened. Claire smiled as they all squeezed in. “Pajama dessert party sounds like the perfect ending to a long, hard day.”

“Yes, it does,” Jules said. “Which reminds me, I need to talk to you about those sour orange pies.”

“Oh?” Claire glanced at her sister. “What about them?”

“Jesse loved the piece I took him. He wants to know if you’ll supply the Dolphin Club with pies. He’d like to make it the club’s signature dessert.”

The elevator doors opened again. Kat and Cash dispersed to their rooms.

Claire stepped out but went nowhere. “Really? I’m sure we could. How

many pies do you think he'd want?"

"According to him, a minimum of twenty-one a week."

Claire did a little math in her head. "Wow." She smiled. "I'll talk to Danny tomorrow about it, but I can't see why that wouldn't be possible."

"Excellent," Jules said. "Should I make a pot of decaf?"

"Sure." A little trill of excitement went through Claire at the possibility of doing business with Jesse. If he was serious about the pies, which she had no reason to think he wasn't, that would mean they'd be opening with a standard weekly order.

She hadn't thought about offering to supply restaurants. But now she was.

Chapter Forty-eight

Margo did *not* sleep in, but when she woke, she found she was a little achy from the work she'd done the day before. Moving was not for anyone over the age of fifty as far as she was concerned. But she took two Aspirin and got herself going.

Today was the last full day of writing they'd have for a while. Tomorrow, Conrad's sister Dinah would be arriving and the day after that would be Willie and Miguel's wedding.

She sat next to him now, in his office, as they worked on the next chapter. It was coming along all right. But they both seemed to be feeling the pressure of the impending downtime.

She sighed. "Something's wrong. I feel like we've gotten off track somewhere."

He nodded. "I know."

"Where do you think it happened?"

He shook his head. "Let's go back to the previous chapter and read through."

"Are you going to print it out again?"

"No, we'll just read it on the screen."

"How about you read it out loud? I think that might give us a new way of looking at it."

“All right, I will.”

She focused on the wall behind his desk, wanting to give herself over to the words as she heard them and not be tempted to read over his shoulder.

As he began, she closed her eyes and listened intently, which wasn't hard. He had such a nice reading voice. The chapter unfolded well, the setup was good. Maybe the characters could be a little more rounded? A little more description might not hurt, either. She concentrated, listening for any parts that were slow or missing tension.

He reached the end. “Her fists clenched, her nails digging into her palms as she strode away from the hospital. She would get her revenge. She would show them just how serious she was. No one would tell her what to do. Not more than once.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “It sounded better than I thought it was going to. Are we wrong? Is it actually working?”

His eyes narrowed. “I think it's...fine. But I think we can do better than that. What if she doesn't leave the hospital? What if she stays there?”

“That would mean she'd have to talk to the police about the body that was just found.”

He nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. “That's exactly what it would mean. It would certainly up the tension.”

“You're so smart. Yes, it would. Can we save that chapter as-is, though? Just in case we change our minds? I'd hate to have to rewrite the whole thing.”

“I'll copy and paste it into a new document, then we'll work from that one and make a decision when we're done.”

“Very good.” She rubbed her hands together. This was exciting. A little nerve-wracking, too. They'd never changed an entire chapter, but this, she supposed, was what writing was all about. What was that saying she'd heard about writing? You had to kill your darlings? Well, they were about to do just that if they rewrote an entire chapter that was probably good enough.

But “good enough” had never made anyone a bestseller, had it? If they were going to compete in the thriller market, they had to be as good as they possibly could be.

“All right,” Conrad said. “Here we go.”

Just then, his doorbell rang. He looked toward the front of the house. “Not sure who that could be.”

“Do you want me to check?” Margo offered.

“No, that’s all right. I could use a chance to stretch my legs anyway. Be right back.” He got up and went to see who it was.

She positioned her chair more in front of the screen and looked at their opening paragraph. It could stay, but immediately after that—

“Dinah!” Conrad’s surprise rang out loud and clear in his voice. “You’re a day early.”

A tinny laugh answered him. “Yes, I am. Surprise! I haven’t caught you up to anything, have I?”

Margo’s attention was no longer on the screen, even though her gaze remained focused there. Dinah was here. Conrad’s sister, the woman who, as he’d already informed Margo, would probably not like her or approve of her.

The same woman who’d run off Conrad’s other love interests.

Joy of joys. With a sigh, Margo stood, lifted her chin, and girded her loins. She had mentally prepared herself to meet Dinah tomorrow, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

“Not up to anything,” Conrad answered. “But Margo and I are hard at work writing.”

More laughter. “It’s so cute that you’re writing a book.”

Cute? Margo frowned. She already didn’t like the woman. That was not a good way to start. Should she kill Dinah with kindness? No, that was ridiculous. That wasn’t who Margo was. There was no point in being anything other than herself.

She could just hear Conrad sigh.

She stepped out of the office, facing the front door, a cool but civil smile on her lips. “Hello. You must be Dinah.”

Dinah was a petite woman with a slender build, her hair artfully highlighted with strands of soft, buttery blond that almost hid the gray. Her face was lined with age, but she wore a little makeup. “And you must be Margo.”

“I am. I wasn’t expecting to make your acquaintance until tomorrow.”

Dinah smiled. “I came up early to surprise Conrad.”

Margo tipped her head to look at him. “That’s funny. I didn’t think you liked surprises.”

“I don’t,” he answered. “Thankfully, the Corps taught me to roll with the punches.” He seemed less than pleased by his sister’s early arrival. He looked at Dinah. “Your bags are in your car?”

“They are.” She dangled her keys off one finger.

He took them. "I'll be right back."

Dinah took a few steps toward Margo as Conrad went to get her luggage. "You're awfully tall, aren't you?"

Margo stared down at Dinah's petite frame, biting her tongue to keep the many retorts dancing there at bay. "I was blessed with some height, yes. I've always thought I would have liked to be taller."

Dinah shuddered. "Not me. I don't think men like a manly woman."

"There's nothing manly about being tall any more than there is womanly about playing dumb." Margo smiled. "You know how some women act. Detestable, really."

Dinah opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Conrad joined them again, carrying a tote bag and a large, wheeled suitcase. "I thought you were only here for the weekend. This is a lot of luggage for three days."

Dinah smiled and shrugged like it was amusing. "I just like to be prepared."

Margo nodded with more enthusiasm than she felt. "Absolutely. It's a woman's prerogative to overpack. Our outfits take more thought and accessories than anything a man might wear."

Dinah seemed surprised by Margo's sudden agreeability. "That's right."

Conrad left the topic alone. "I'll put your things in the guest room."

He disappeared again, leaving Margo to wonder if that was his way of dealing with his sister. Keeping himself busy. But that couldn't last forever.

Margo gestured toward the kitchen. "Would you like something to drink? I'm sure you know your way around, but I'd be happy to get you a glass of water or iced tea."

"Water would be good."

Margo headed for the kitchen. She took a glass from the cabinet, filled it with ice at the refrigerator, then water from the dispenser next to it. She handed it to Dinah. "There you go."

Dinah took the glass but didn't drink. "This book you and Conrad are writing. What's it about?"

"It's a thriller. A murder mystery. Our working title is *The Widow*."

"How fun." Dinah took a sip of her water. "I've heard it said you should write what you know. Does that mean you're a widow?"

The question hit Margo like a splash of cold water. She took a breath, gripping her composure. "I am. Twice over."

Dinah's manicured brows rose. "Is that right?" She took another sip. "So is this book sort of autobiographical?"

She said it in a joking fashion, and thankfully, Conrad returned in time to catch it. He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Margo understood immediately that Dinah was a game player and a pot stirrer. Margo decided right then that she wasn't going to join in. Plain truth was her best weapon. "Your sister wants to know if the murder mystery we're writing is based on my life, seeing as how she's just insinuated I had something to do with the death of my husbands." She looked at Dinah. "Is that about right?"

"*Dinah.*" Conrad glared at her. "What on Earth has gotten into you? What kind of thing is that to say?"

"I wasn't, that is, I didn't," Dinah sputtered. "I was just making a joke."

Margo laughed softly. "Oh, is that what that was? You'll have to forgive me for not picking up on the subtlety of your humor." She felt for Conrad. But she wasn't staying here another second longer so that Dinah could use her for a punching bag. "I'm going to run. I'm sure you two have a lot of catching up to do."

She smiled at Conrad. "I'll talk to you soon."

He looked about as unhappy as she'd seen him. "I'll walk you out."

Neither of them said a word until they were outside, standing by her car, then he spoke first. "I'm sorry about that. I tried to warn you."

"Yes, you did. And I appreciate that. I believe I'll work from home tomorrow." She put her hand on the door handle. "I'll still meet you for lunch, if you'd like. But I won't be coming over again until she's gone. I'm not interested in that kind of saber rattling."

"You sure you want to join us for lunch?"

She nodded. "I won't run scared. And it'll be in a public place, so she'll have to behave a little. You're not going to stand me up for the wedding, are you?"

"Not a chance. I'll need the break anyway."

Margo laughed and nodded. "Of that, I have no doubt."

Chapter Forty-nine

*W*illie tried on her wedding dress, now altered to fit her, and came out for Roxie and Trina to see. “What do you think?”

Trina gasped as she pressed her hands together, her face alight. “They did a beautiful job, Mimi. It looks like it was made for you. And you look beautiful in it.”

“You really do, Ma,” Roxie said. “It’s perfect. And just the right length with those silver sandals.”

“Thank you both. And thanks for picking it up, Roxie,” Willie said. She did a little twirl. “I feel like a million bucks.”

“You look like a million bucks,” Roxie said. “Miguel is going to fall in love with you all over again.”

Willie smiled, the anticipation of the day making her feel all tingly with happiness. “Are you girls going to try your dresses on, too?”

“I was going to work on some dinner,” Trina said. “But I can try my dress on if you want, Mimi.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Willie said. “Neither of your dresses needed alterations and I can still remember how beautiful you both looked.”

Roxie got up. “No dinner for me. I need to get ready to meet Ethan. I’m eating with him.”

“Oh, right,” Willie said. “The jazz concert. All righty, you go have fun.”

And I know I already said it, but your hair looks great. Trina, you did a bang-up job.”

“Thanks, Mimi.” She smiled at Roxie. “It’s so pretty it makes me want to go rose gold.”

Roxie touched her newly lightened strands. “I couldn’t be happier with it. I can’t wait to see what Ethan thinks.”

“He’ll love it,” Willie said. “Bet you a dollar.” She went back to her room to change and hang her dress up. But this wasn’t a one-person dress. She called out, “Trina, I might need you to unzip me.”

“Coming,” Trina called out. She showed up a few seconds later. “Here.”

Willie turned so she could access the zipper. “How was your day, my girl? Did you give Miles a haircut?”

“I did.” Trina got the zipper down. “Alex, too. I was thinking about making some tuna melts for dinner. Does that sound okay to you? Or do you want something else?”

Willie held her dress in place as she turned back around. “Tuna melts sound wonderful.”

Trina smiled. “I’ll go get started on those.”

She closed the door as she left, leaving Willie to finish changing. Willie wiggled out of the dress and laid it on the bed. Then she reached around and undid the long line bra she had on. Not the most comfortable item of clothing that she’d ever worn, but she’d only have it on for the wedding and reception. She’d manage.

She changed into one of her comfiest nightgowns, stuck her feet into her slippers, and returned to the living room. Roxie was in her bedroom getting ready and Trina was in the kitchen, mixing up the tuna fish for the sandwiches.

Willie went to her chair. “Can I have chips with mine? And one of those nice pickle spears?”

“Sure, Mimi. You want something to drink while you wait?”

“Maybe a soda. What do we have?”

Trina opened the fridge. “There’s some diet A&W root beer, some diet Dr Pepper, and plain tonic water.”

“Tonic’s no good without gin and I don’t want to drink anything tonight. I’ll have a root beer.”

“Coming right up.” Trina grabbed a can, filled one of their big tumblers with ice, then poured the soda in and brought it over. “There you go.”

“Thanks.” Willie took a sip, then turned the television on. “Maybe we can find a movie to watch.”

“I’d love that. Whatever you pick is fine with me. I have a few things to go over on my laptop for the salon tomorrow, but it won’t take me more than ten or fifteen minutes.” She went back to the kitchen and turned on the oven’s broiler.

Willie looked through the different streaming services they had and found one of her favorite movies, *Pillow Talk*. “Here we go. This is a good one. Doris Day and Rock Hudson. Boy, was he a looker.”

Trina laughed. “Are you cheating on Cary Grant?”

“Cary wouldn’t mind. Even he probably thought Rock was hot.” Willie hit Play, then Pause so the movie was ready to go. She didn’t want to start it until Trina had finished in the kitchen and was able to join her.

While she waited, Willie picked up her phone and sent Miguel a message. *I had the most wonderful time today. I love my ring. And I love you.*

He sent her back a smiley face and a heart. *You are my everything, my love. I cannot wait to make you my bride.*

One more day, she answered.

Si, one more day.

She smiled at the screen, completely filled with how wonderful her life was. She looked at Trina, working away in the kitchen. She prayed that someday, Trina found the same kind of love and happiness with a man that Willie had with Miguel. Same for Roxie. Whether that meant Miles and Ethan or whoever. She just wanted her girls to know this feeling.

They deserved it. Far more than she did. She’d already had love so many times. Trina had never had it, and Roxie had only had a poor copy of the real thing. Willie frowned. At least Bryan had given Roxie Trina. She was the only thing that kept Willie from hating him completely.

“Dinner is ready,” Trina announced.

Roxie came in then. “Smells good.”

“You look nice, Ma,” Trina said.

“Thanks. Just going to grab my bag out of the fridge and then I’m off. You two have a good night.”

Willie nodded. “Tell Ethan we said hi.”

“Will do.” Roxie waved as she headed out.

Willie put her phone back on the side table. Trina brought the plates over. Willie took hers. “You’re such a dear, sweet girl. How was your day with

Miles? I got so preoccupied with my dress that I didn't ask more about it. I'm sorry about that."

Trina laughed. "Mimi, your wedding dress is a pretty big deal. You don't have to apologize for being preoccupied with it. My day was good. We picked Alex up from the hospital, then took him for some breakfast before getting him home. After that, we got him some groceries. Then I made him a tater tot casserole, so he'd have some food for the week. Then I gave him and Miles haircuts."

"You were busy!"

"I was." Her smile didn't look all that happy.

"Something happen today?"

Trina shrugged before going back to the kitchen for her drink and some napkins. "I ran into Liz at the grocery store. Or rather, we ran into her, then she ran into me."

"Who's Liz?" Willie took the napkin Trina was offering.

"Miles's ex-girlfriend. I first met her when we went to eat at that place on the beach, Coconuts. She's very pretty, has nice clothes, good teeth, the whole thing. Comes from old family money, apparently. You know the kind."

"Mm-hmm." Willie frowned. "Looks like she smells something bad and it's you. That kind?"

Trina nodded. "Yeah. She's like a pretty snake, you know? Nice to look at but just as deadly when it bites."

"Did she bite you?"

"Not exactly." Trina explained how Liz had come into the salon for an interview, not realizing the salon was Trina's. Then she told Willie everything that had gone down in the grocery store. "I was upset but Miles made me feel better. In fact, he went right back to the soup aisle to say something to her, but she was gone. He looked but couldn't find her."

Willie was incensed. "How dare that snooty little so-and-so act that way toward you. She's got no right."

"No, she doesn't, but that didn't stop her. You know how some people are." Trina sighed. "I just hope she doesn't do anything against the salon. She's connected. Or at least her parents sound like they are."

"Honey, nothing is going to happen. It's all going to be just fine. You'll see. That girl will realize what a fool she made of herself and probably never bother you again."

"I hope you're right."

“What did you say her name was?”

“Liz Stewart.”

Willie nodded. “Say grace for us, Trina.”

“Okay, Mimi.”

While Trina had her eyes closed praying, Willie grabbed her phone and made a note of that name. Liz Stewart. She didn’t trust her memory not to let it slip.

“Amen,” Trina said.

“Amen,” Willie said right after her. She hadn’t really been paying attention, but she thought God would understand on this one.

Chapter Fifty

Roxie was glad she'd chosen a long, flowy sundress instead of the shorter one she'd almost put on. Sitting on a blanket on the grass meant crossing her legs, something she never would have been able to do in the shorter dress. The longer one might not have been her usual style, but it was perfect.

All around them sat couples and groups of people, blankets spread out as they waited for the music to start. The jazz group was on the small stage that had been set up. They were taking their spots and getting their instruments ready.

To the right of the park, the sun was setting over the Gulf, painting the sky in gorgeous shades of bright pink and electric orange. It was a perfect night. Even more perfect because of the company.

Her cooler bag was in front of her and she was about to unpack it, when she looked over at Ethan. He was staring at her. "What? Is it the hair? You don't like it, do you."

He shook his head, smiling. "I told you I love it and I meant that. I just can't get over what a transformation it is. You were always beautiful, but it's taken a few years off of you. And you already looked younger than your real age. People might think you're *too* young for me now."

She laughed, rolling her eyes. "Don't be silly."

He leaned in and kissed the side of her neck. “Seriously, they’re going to think I’m robbing the cradle.”

“I wouldn’t go that far but thank you.” A little shiver of pleasure went through her. She knew he was right. The softer color *had* taken some years off of her. As much as she’d loved the red, she now realized it had been a little bit much. This new color was much more forgiving. And flattering.

“You’re welcome.” He opened the basket he’d brought, which looked like an actual picnic basket, something she’d never expected him to have.

The top was hinged and when he opened it, she could see two bottles of wine in holders, two wine glasses, what looked like a sub sandwich wrapped in white butcher paper, a medium-sized bag of potato chips, a clear grocery store container of cut-up fruit, plastic utensils, and paper napkins. There might have been something else under the sub, too.

“You brought a lot more than just wine,” she said as she looked into the basket.

“Guilty. I got an Italian cold cut sub from Publix along with some other stuff. I figured we might be hungrier than just cheese and crackers, since this was basically going to be dinner. At least it is for me.”

She nodded. “Me, too. But I brought more than cheese and crackers.” She looked in the basket again. “Not that much more.”

“Well, let’s put it all out and have at it. I’m hungry.”

They did just that. Roxie was glad she’d brought some paper plates. Ethan unwrapped the sub, putting a half on each plate, then opened the chips and added a handful to the plates as well. On another plate, she made up a few crackers with cheese and put small sprigs of grapes alongside them. She pulled out the can of nuts, but didn’t open them.

Ethan rested his hand on the edge of the basket. “Red or white? I wasn’t sure, so I brought one of each.”

“With an Italian sub? Probably red.”

He nodded. “That’s what I was thinking, too.” He uncorked the bottle and poured two glasses, which were conveniently the stemless kind, allowing them to sit securely on the blanket. He moved the basket to the side, then picked up his glass. “Here’s to a great evening.”

“Cheers,” she said. She took a sip. She wasn’t a big fan of red wine in general, but this one was nice. Mild and fruity and not too dry. It even seemed a little bubbly. “What is this? It’s really good.”

“Something the wine person at Publix recommended to me. It’s a

Lambrusco. To be honest, I have no idea what that is and I'm sure I've never had it." He laughed. "I'm not really a wine guy but I'd already said I was bringing some and this seemed nice."

"It's really nice." She grinned. "I'm not much of a wine drinker, either, but I like this." She took another sip. "You did very well."

"Always something I like to hear. Maybe you can give me some help with what I'm supposed to wear to the wedding so I can keep my streak going."

"It's sort of dressy casual. You know, it's a beach wedding, so..."

He shook his head. "I have no idea what that means. Tell me in plain English. Better yet, just tell me what to wear."

"Do you have nice tan pants or shorts? Not cargo shorts."

"I have some nice tan linen pants that I wear to church sometimes."

"Perfect. How about a nice tropical or Hawaiian shirt?"

"Yep, I have those, too."

"I'm wearing periwinkle, so—"

"You're wearing what?"

"Periwinkle. The color."

His eyes narrowed. "That's green, right?"

She laughed. "No, it's blue. Blue with a little bit of lavender in it."

"If you say so."

She shook her head. Men could be so funny without even trying sometimes. "Do any of your nice shirts have blue or purple in them?"

He nodded. "A couple with blue."

"Pick one of them. And no sneakers."

"I can do that." He picked up his half of the sandwich.

"I have full faith in you." She picked hers up, too.

As the sunset faded, soft, easy jazz began to fill the air as the band started up. It wasn't so loud that they couldn't talk, but they both went silent for a while as they listened and ate.

Ethan ate faster than she did, confirming just how hungry he'd been. He finished the last of his sub, then wiped his hands on a napkin. "Where are your mom and Miguel going after the wedding?"

"Puerto Rico, eventually, but they aren't going on their honeymoon until after the salon gets open."

He nodded. "But what about right after? Are they going to a nice hotel or anything? Or just one of the houses?"

Roxie hadn't even thought about that. "I have no idea. But there are no plans for a hotel as far as I know. But really, they should have a special first night together."

"You could always get them a room as a surprise."

"That's a great idea. Do you think I could still do it this late in the game?"

"Sure. There's got to be a nice room somewhere in this town that's available."

She nodded and pulled out her phone. "Do you mind if I do some quick research?"

"Not at all."

She brought up her browser. "I'm not sure where to start." She looked at him again. "Who would have the nicest honeymoon suite, do you think?"

"I don't know if it's the nicest, but I bet it's the classiest. Try the Hamilton Arms."

"Of course," Roxie said. "Perfect. In fact, I'm going out to the parking lot to call them and see if I can't book the room right now."

"Good idea. Take your credit card."

She grabbed her purse. "Also a good idea. What would I do without you?"

He grinned. "Prepare to be even more impressed when you get back, because I'll have dessert ready by then."

Chapter Fifty-one

*H*er mom had fallen asleep well before Jules, but Jules was too wound up to sleep. The lights were off, she had her earbuds in, and she was scrolling through the results that had come up when she'd searched Instagram with the "new country music" hashtag.

Still being awake didn't mean she wasn't tired. She was. But the day she'd had in the studio had filled her with the same kind of energy she often felt when on tour.

It was almost like having an electric current running through her, that kind of zippy, happy, alive feeling that came from a great crowd or an especially perfect set. Today's studio session, even without Cash, had been electric in a lot of ways.

It had proven to her that getting the kind of sound she wanted was completely possible. Right here in Diamond Beach, too.

That was in big part due to Jesse and all of his help. She hoped the deal with Claire and the pies worked out. Dessert wasn't Jules's area of expertise by any means, but it seemed to her that serving that great pie at Jesse's club would be a great way to get the bakery's name out there.

She shifted position, stretching her legs out as best she could with Toby sprawled out on one side of the bed. For a small dog, he slept big.

The music she was listening to, new bands, new singers, and definitely

new sounds, was filling her with even more electricity.

Her agent had been right. There was something interesting going on in country music. A new kind of sound that was bold, and in your face, and unapologetic about the kind of story it was telling.

Dixie was going to fit right in. Jules felt that now in a way she hadn't before. She could see it and understand it, this movement that was happening.

Her only concern was her age. Most of these singers, many of them women, were young. Twenty- and thirty-somethings. The guys, too, but the women seemed to be breaking out in a way that the men weren't. Not yet, anyway.

Would she be perceived as too old to do this kind of thing? Would anyone care? She really hoped not.

It was also giving her a few doubts about covering the Johnny Cash song. Maybe that was showing her age in a way she shouldn't, but there was a good part of her—most of her, really—that didn't care.

She loved Johnny Cash. Anyone who thought she was old-fashioned or out of touch for using his music, well, they could just move along. You had to know where you came from to understand where you were going.

Roots were roots for a reason. They kept you grounded. Gave you support. And provided a place for you to grow from. *Folsom Prison Blues* stayed.

She listened to a few more songs, nodding her head along with the beat, absorbing the rhythm and the energy and tucking it away to help inspire her for tomorrow. Recording day. Maybe it would even help inspire the last few songs she still needed.

As the next video played and a young woman started singing, the hair on Jules's arms rose with the effect of the music. Wow. She wanted to be that good. Although that wasn't really being fair to herself. She was that good. In a lot of ways, she was technically better, because she had years of experience under her belt.

But she wanted to be that fresh. That raw and honest. That was very different from being good. It meant letting her heart come out through the words and music.

Could she do that? She wasn't sure. But she was going to try.

Just like she ought to try going to sleep. She was about to take her earbuds out and put her phone aside when a text message popped up.

From Lars, of all people. *You up?*

Yes.

Can I call?

Give me two minutes. She got out of bed and went out to the screened porch. Somehow, Toby stayed asleep, which was good, because she'd been a little worried he'd think this was an excuse to go out again.

Her screen lit up with an incoming call. She answered, still keeping her voice down, because Claire's room adjoined the porch and she didn't want to wake her sister up. "Hey."

"Hey. Long time no talk."

She nodded. "Very true. Everything all right?" She had a sinking feeling it wasn't. She and Lars had been divorced for a while, but that didn't mean she couldn't recognize when he had something in his system. He sounded intoxicated. Or possibly stoned. Or maybe even both. She closed her eyes and prayed she was wrong.

"I don't know, you tell me. I haven't been able to get Cash on the phone lately."

She opened her eyes, knowing she'd been on the money. "Everything is very good here. I don't know why you haven't been able to reach Cash." Although Jules had an idea. If Cash knew his father was using again, that could be a big deterrent for wanting to talk to him.

"I know he's there in Florida with you. I know he's working on music with you."

"So then you have spoken to him."

"No, just a couple of texts. Don't twist my words, Jules."

She took a deep breath. She was done with this phone call. There was little point in speaking to Lars when he was like this. And she had a divorce decree that said she didn't have to. "I really need to go to bed. Why don't you get some sleep, too? You don't sound sober, which is disappointing."

"Don't tell me what to do. And don't get all holier than thou on me, either. We're not married anymore, remember? You don't get to preach to me anymore."

She'd never preached to him. Begged him to get sober, yes, but never preached. Her hands were trembling, her body wired with tension as old, familiar trauma resurfaced. She didn't need this. She'd divorced him to save herself and her children from this exact thing. "Good night, Lars."

She hung up, then sat on the sofa. She needed to calm down and breathe fresh air before she could go back inside and actually try to sleep.

Her phone screen lit up with Lars calling back. She flipped the phone over and ignored it.

Soft footsteps reached her ears as Cash's feet and legs appeared on the spiral stairs. He quietly came down to the second floor, opened the screen door, and sat beside her on the couch. "You were talking to Dad. I overheard. He'd just called me."

She nodded. "Then you know he wasn't sober."

"Yeah." He slumped back against the seat.

She put her arm around him. "It's not your problem to deal with."

"I know." Cash sighed. "He wants me to fly to Spain. The band's playing there right now on their European tour."

"He wants you to come out there? To do what? Just hang out?"

Cash shook his head. "He said I could play with him. He's only saying that because I told him I was working on music with you."

Lars was jealous. "You're an adult. You get to make your own choices."

"Mom, it's not even a choice. There's no way I'd leave you. Even if we weren't about to record, I still wouldn't be going out there. He's off the wagon. I have zero interest in participating in that."

She nodded. "Same here."

"There is one thing, though."

"What's that?" She asked.

"He said if I don't fly out there, he's disowning me." Cash shrugged but even in the dim light of the moon, she could see hurt in his eyes. "Doesn't mean anything but I figured I should tell you all the same."

She hugged him closer. "Maybe he'll sober up in the morning and realize he was being a jerk."

"Maybe," Cash said.

But they both knew that wasn't true.

She desperately wanted to lighten the mood. A thought came to her. "Hey, I'm playing Saturday for Miguel and Willie's wedding. You and Sierra want to sit in with me? Do a couple of songs?"

He smiled. "Yeah, okay. That would be fun. Are we the wedding band, then?"

She grinned and kissed the side of his head. "I guess we are."

She'd never been so happy two people she hardly knew had decided to get married so quickly. She'd never looked forward to a wedding quite so much, either. God bless Willie and Miguel.

Saturday couldn't get here fast enough.

Sour Orange Pie

Ingredients

Crust:

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup Lorna Doone cookie crumbs
6 tablespoons melted butter
2 tablespoons sugar
Pinch of salt

Filling:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch
3 egg yolks
1 tablespoon melted butter
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sour orange juice (can substitute 1 tablespoon orange juice plus 3
tablespoons lime juice as well)
1 teaspoon orange zest
1 cup hot water

Meringue:

3 egg whites

¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
¼ cup sugar

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix the crust ingredients and press into a 9 inch pie plate until evenly distributed. Bake for 8-9 minutes or until golden. Let cool.

For the filling, combine sugar and cornstarch in a saucepan and whisk in melted butter. Slowly pour in hot water, whisking as you go to prevent lumps. Whisk in egg yolks and orange juice next. With the pan over medium heat, cook for about 5 minutes until mixture starts to thicken. It should coat the back of a spoon.

Remove from heat and let cool 5-10 minutes before pouring into crust. For the meringue, whip egg whites in a bowl with electric mixer on high until glossy. Add the cream of tartar, then add the sugar one tablespoon at a time until blended. Spread the meringue over the filling and bake about 15 minutes until it turns golden.

Cool completely, then serve.

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Christmas on the Island

The Wedding

About Maggie:

Maggie Miller thinks time off is time best spent at the beach, probably because the beach is her happy place. The sound of the waves is her favorite background music, and the sand between her toes is the best massage she can think of.

When she's not at the beach, she's writing or reading or cooking for her family. All of that stuff called life.

She hopes her readers enjoy her books and welcomes them to drop her a line and let her know what they think!

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