

GRACE MEYERS

The Little Bookstore on Cape San Blas

A JOURNEY WITH YOU
BOOK ONE



**THE LITTLE BOOKSTORE
ON CAPE SAN BLAS**

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CONTENTS

[Copyright](#)

[Free Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Continue The Story!](#)

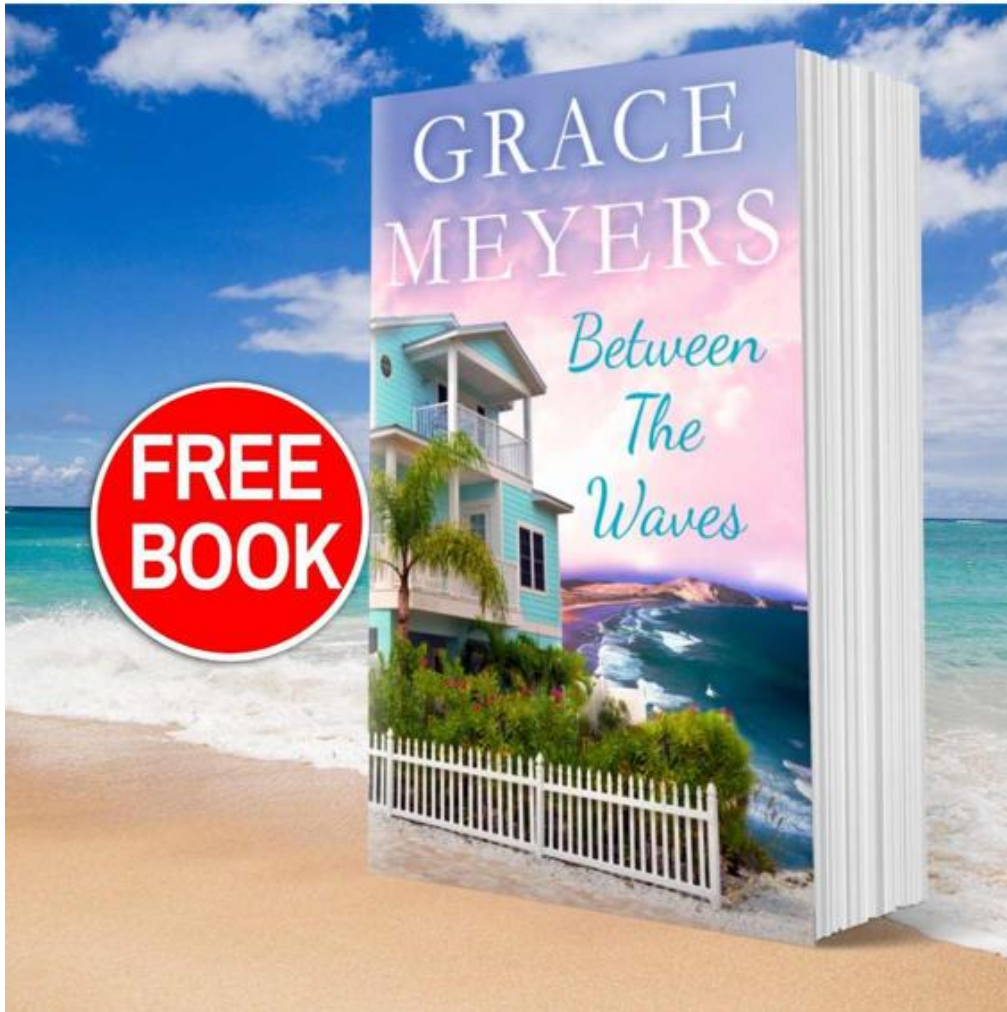
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CHAPTER 1



Cape San Blas, Florida, glistened under the pale winter sun, its shores adorned with seashells and secrets. Nestled in this small beachside town was a quaint little bookstore known as *Bookshore*. The store's owner, Nicole, was a shy and introverted woman with a heart brimming with love for books and a yearning for a romance that could rival the passion found within the pages of her favorite novels.

Nicole's history was woven with threads of heartbreak and resilience, a tapestry of experiences that shaped her into the woman she had become. She had always been an *only* child, born into a family where her father's presence was short-lived. His sudden death from a car accident when she was ten left a void in her life, and she grew up under the watchful yet erratic care of her mother, a tortured artist who never settled in one place for long.

With her mother's frequent travels and a succession of temporary homes, Nicole's childhood lacked stability. Each new house brought new faces, but the constant shifting of people only deepened her longing for a sense of belonging. Amidst the ever-changing landscapes of her life, she found love in the pages of books, finding comfort in the stories that transported her to worlds far beyond her own.

As she grew older, Nicole longed for a stable and loving partnership, a family of her own. She married a man she thought was her soulmate, only to discover that they were not on the same page when it came to children. Her husband, not

sharing her dream of parenthood, shattered her heart by cheating on her, leaving her feeling betrayed and broken.

With the weight of the failed marriage and unfulfilled dreams, Nicole made a life-altering decision. Determined to start anew and find her own happiness, she boarded a one-way flight to Florida, leaving behind the memories and pain of her past. The small beach town of Cape San Blas beckoned to her, its tranquil beauty offering a fresh canvas on which to paint her future.

In Florida, she sought comfort in the warm embrace of the ocean and the gentle lull of the waves. The coastal breeze whispered promises of healing and hope, soothing the wounds left by her past. She took refuge in her bookstore where she found a sense of purpose. It became her sanctuary, a place where she could immerse herself in the stories that had always brought her comfort.

As the days turned into weeks, Nicole began to blossom amidst the sun-kissed scenery. She connected with the townspeople, forming meaningful friendships that made her feel like a part of a caring community. The bookstore became a haven for fellow book lovers, and Nicole found joy in sharing the magic of literature with others.

Despite the pain of her past, Nicole's heart remained open, her yearning for a passionate romance still flickering within. But this time, she was more cautious, wary of entrusting her heart to someone who didn't share her dreams and desires.

But as the years passed, she couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't experienced a love story of her own—one that swept her off her feet and made her heart dance like the waves of the ocean.

Nicole possesses a timeless beauty that reflects the wisdom and resilience gained through the years. At 44 years old, her face carries a gentle grace, with soft, expressive eyes that reveal the depth of her emotions. The color of her eyes is like a pair of deep, welcoming pools, often reflecting the ever-changing hues of the ocean she adores.

Her long, dark tendrils cascade down her shoulders, framing her face like a veil of silk. Though often kept simple and unassuming, her hair carries a natural shine that catches the light, reminiscent of sun-kissed waves dancing on the shore.

Nicole's features are soft and delicate, giving her a sense of approachability that draws people in. Her smile is warm and sincere, reflecting the kindness and compassion that reside in her heart. Though she might sometimes seem reserved and shy, her eyes light up when discussing her passion for books and the fictional worlds that have captured her imagination.

She has a slender, graceful figure, with a quiet elegance that complements her personality. Nicole's style tends to be classic and comfortable, reflecting her love for simplicity and authenticity. On most days, you'll find her dressed in casual wear, often donning a cozy sweater and comfortable jeans, which allows her to move freely as she goes about her daily tasks in the bookstore.

A few subtle laugh lines grace the corners of her eyes, a testament to the joy she has found in the little pleasures of life. Her eyes can convey a myriad of emotions, from curiosity and wonder to vulnerability and strength, making her a character who is both relatable and captivating.

One chilly December morning, as Nicole stood behind the worn wooden counter, arranging a stack of novels, a regular customer named Ms. Jenkins, a lively older woman with an endless curiosity for local lore, approached her.

Nicole thought of Ms. Jenkins and how she had heard long, imaginative stories from the townspeople about her. She was one of the wealthiest people in town, so she was well-known and well-respected.

Ms. Jenkins had a history as colorful as the seashells that adorned the shores. Many years ago, she was a young woman filled with dreams and aspirations, eager to embark on a journey that would take her far from her small beachside town.

Born and raised in Cape San Blas, Ms. Jenkins grew up with a strong sense of community and a deep love for the ocean. Her father was a fisherman, and she spent her childhood learning about the sea and its mysteries. But as she entered her teenage years, a restlessness began to stir within her. She yearned to see the world beyond the familiar horizon, to experience life beyond the shores of her hometown.

Upon graduating high school, Ms. Jenkins bid farewell to her family and friends and set off on an adventure. She traveled from coast to coast, exploring different cities, embracing new cultures, and learning from every encounter. Her wanderlust led her to live in bustling metropolises, quaint villages, and even far-off countries, each place leaving a memorable mark on her soul.

During her travels, she had a chance encounter with an artist named Henry, a kindred spirit who shared her love for the sea. They fell deeply in love, and for a time, they wandered together, capturing the beauty of the world through art and embracing the freedom of a nomadic lifestyle. Their love story was as passionate as the waves crashing against the shore, and they reveled in the joy of experiencing life's wonders together.

But life has a way of presenting unexpected challenges. As time went on, the realities of their artistic pursuits and the nomadic lifestyle began to weigh heavily on their relationship. The constant movement and the pursuit of creativity sometimes took precedence over the stability needed for a lasting partnership.

Amidst the beauty of their shared adventures, Ms. Jenkins felt an unspoken yearning for the roots she left behind in Cape San Blas. The memory of her childhood home, the sound of the waves, and the warm embrace of her family tugged at her heartstrings, calling her back to the place that had always been her anchor.

As difficult as it was, Ms. Jenkins and Henry eventually parted ways, each continuing their artistic journeys in separate directions. But Cape San Blas had imprinted itself on her soul, and after years of wandering, she knew it was time to return to her roots.

Back in her beloved beachside town, Ms. Jenkins found comfort in reuniting with family and old friends. She embraced the sense of community that she had always cherished, knowing that her heart had found its way back to the place where it truly belonged.

With the wisdom of her travels and the experiences of a life well-lived, Ms. Jenkins became a vibrant and cherished member of Cape San Blas. Her stories of far-off lands and exotic cultures captivated everyone she met, and her zest for life inspired those around her to embrace adventure and curiosity.

As she grew older, she became deeply involved in the community, sharing her love for history and local lore with the younger generations. She became the town's unofficial gossip girl, delighting in sharing tales of the past and the mysteries that still whispered through the cobbled streets and old buildings.

It was through this role that Ms. Jenkins became friends with Nicole, the shy and introverted bookstore owner. She saw a kindred spirit in the young woman, recognizing a yearning for love and a passion for books that mirrored her own. Their friendship blossomed, and Ms. Jenkins became a mentor and confidante to Nicole, guiding her with the wisdom and understanding that only a life well-lived could bring.

“Good morning, dear,” Ms. Jenkins greeted, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “I must tell you something fascinating about this store you’ve taken over.”

Nicole smiled warmly, always delighted by Ms. Jenkins’ stories of the town’s past. “Oh, please do tell! I love hearing about the history of this place.”

“Well, you see, the bookstore was once owned by a man named Mr. Monroe,” Ms. Jenkins began, her voice hushed as if sharing a well-kept secret. “He was quite the enigmatic character, always surrounded by an aura of mystery.”

Intrigued, Nicole leaned in, her curiosity piqued. “What kind of mystery? Was he involved in some underground operation or treasure hunting, like in the stories I read?”

Ms. Jenkins chuckled, enjoying the younger woman’s enthusiasm. “Oh, indeed, it’s almost as if this store holds some secrets of its own. The rumors say that Mr. Monroe was fascinated by hidden treasures and had a penchant for collecting rare books with mystical tales. Some even believe he was part of a secret literary society that sought to uncover the world’s most obscure stories.”

Nicole’s eyes widened, her imagination running wild with possibilities. “That sounds like something straight out of a novel! Do you think there might still be hidden treasures or forgotten manuscripts waiting to be discovered here?” Nicole’s eyes wildly searched the room, as if something was going to appear that she hadn’t seen before.

Ms. Jenkins tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Who’s to say? But the most significant mystery lies in Mr. Monroe’s disappearance. He vanished under mysterious circumstances, leaving the townsfolk with unanswered questions and an unsolved puzzle that has intrigued the community for years.”

As Nicole absorbed the story, a mix of excitement and trepidation stirred within her. To own a bookstore with such a rich history fascinated her, but it also made her wonder about the man who once stood behind the same counter surrounded by the same stories she cherished.

“And what happened to the bookstore after he disappeared?” Nicole asked, her curiosity deepening.

Ms. Jenkins’ expression turned solemn. “The store was turned over to the bank and sold at auction. People came and went, but none seemed to embrace its legacy quite like you do, my dear.”

A sense of responsibility weighed on Nicole’s heart. She felt a connection to the store and its history as if she were destined to carry on Mr. Monroe’s legacy and perhaps even unravel the mysteries he left behind.

Nicole smiled. “Thanks, Ms. Jenkins.”

“Anytime, dear!” She waved her long, silk-gloved hand in the air over her shoulder as she walked out. Nicole chuckled and rolled her eyes.

Nicole stood behind the counter, diligently stacking books and organizing the shelves, her mind fully immersed in the comforting rhythm of the task. The bell above the door chimed, signaling the arrival of a visitor. She looked up to find a well-dressed man, his crisp suit contrasting with the rustic charm of the bookstore.

“Good afternoon. You must be Nicole, the new owner of *Bookshore*, correct?” His eyes scan the room.

Nicole smiled. “Yes, that’s me. Welcome to the store. How can I help you?”

The man leaned on the counter, closer to Nicole. “I’m from the bank just down the street. I wanted to stop by and see how things are going with the store since you took over.” He stood back up and brushed his suit off.

Nicole nodded. “Oh, well, things have been quite busy, but I’m enjoying it. There’s something magical about this place, you know? I’ve always loved books, and owning a bookstore has been a dream of mine.”

“I see.” The man slowly walked around the store, touching random books. “But why this old, dusty store? It seems like a lot of work for a place that’s seen better days.” He made a face and brushed some dust from his fingers.

Nicole paused. A thoughtful expression covered her face. “There’s a charm to it, a sense of history and stories waiting to be discovered. Every book on these shelves holds a world of its own and I feel like it’s my mission to share those stories with others.” She briefly thought about Mr. Monroe.

The man raised an eyebrow. “I suppose that’s an interesting way to look at it. I’m just curious why you’d choose a store like this when there are newer, more modern

spaces available.” He eyed her carefully. It seemed like he was looking for something for her, but Nicole answered his questions sweetly.

“Well, I believe that even old things have value and beauty. It’s like uncovering a treasure hidden in plain sight. Besides, there’s a history to this place that I find intriguing. It’s almost like the walls themselves have stories to tell.”

The man looked intrigued. “Stories, you say? That’s an interesting perspective.” Nicole smiled and paused. They both waited awkwardly. “Oh! I almost forgot.” The man pulled a key from his pocket. “I found this key in Mr. Monroe’s files. It seems he abandoned his safety deposit box before he disappeared, and since you’re the new owner, I thought it might be an extra key to the store.” He handed it to her.

“Oh, really? That’s unexpected. Thank you for bringing it to me.” Nicole’s mind ran wild with possibilities.

“No problem.” If you need any assistance or have any questions, just reach out. You want to try that key out?” He motioned toward the door. Nicole felt uneasy. She fiddled with the key in her hand. She looked at him.

“No, that’s okay.” She smiled.

The man frowned. “Oh, you sure?” He watched her reaction.

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s just an extra.” She shrugged and placed it in her pocket.

He looked irritated at first but smiled. “Okay, well reach out if you need anything.” He smiled, nodded his head at her, then disappeared out the door.

Nicole pulled her hand from her pocket and gazed at the small key, wondering what it might unlock. She walked over to the door, curiosity getting the best of her. She slid the key into the lock, but it didn’t turn.

CHAPTER 2



The day of the book signing event had finally arrived, and Nicole's heart fluttered with a mixture of excitement and nerves. She had prepared the bookstore meticulously, making sure every bookshelf was neat and every corner was inviting. As the clock ticked closer to the event, her pulse quickened and she couldn't help but steal glances at the entrance, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the renowned author, Gabriel.

Gabriel's charismatic nature and infectious laughter had been a defining aspect of his personality from a young age. Growing up in a lively household with loving parents, he was encouraged to embrace his sense of humor and zest for life. His mischievous glimmer and ability to make others laugh earned him the reputation of the class clown, but his humor was always rooted in bringing joy and happiness to those around him.

As he ventured into the world, Gabriel's adventurous spirit flourished. He had a thirst for exploration and a desire to make the most of every moment. From his college days, where he joined spontaneous road trips and took part in daring escapades, to his travels across different countries, he embraced new experiences with open arms.

Gabriel's love for storytelling was evident from a young age. He would often regale his friends and family with imaginative tales, painting vivid pictures with his words. This passion for storytelling led him to become a renowned author,

crafting enchanting narratives that touched the hearts of readers worldwide.

Despite his fame, Gabriel remained grounded and humble, cherishing the connections he formed with people. His genuine kindness and ability to empathize made him approachable and down-to-earth. He found joy in lifting others' spirits and making them feel special, leaving a lasting impact on everyone he encountered.

Nicole first came to know Gabriel through his books. As an avid reader, she had been captivated by his writing style and the way he breathed life into characters and worlds. His books became a source of comfort and inspiration for her, igniting a fascination with the man behind the enchanting tales.

When she heard about his book signing tour, Nicole couldn't resist the opportunity to meet the author she admired so much by hosting him during his tour. The prospect of meeting Gabriel in person stirred a mix of excitement and nervousness within her. She had always been a fan of his charismatic and fun-loving nature, as depicted through his interviews and public appearances.

When the door finally opened and Gabriel stepped inside, a hushed anticipation filled the air. He exuded an aura of charm and confidence that drew people to him like moths to a flame. Nicole couldn't help but feel a mix of shyness and fascination as she greeted him at the entrance.

"Welcome, Mr. Rutherford. It's an honor to have you here at Bookshore!"

Gabriel warmly smiled. "Thank you, Nicole. It's a pleasure to be here. Your bookstore is lovely, and I can feel the passion for books in every corner." He made fists with his hands and lightly shook them in the air.

Nicole blushed at the compliment, her heart fluttering at the praise from someone she admired so much.

"Oh, thank you. I've always loved books, and owning this store has been a dream come true."

Gabriel nodded and smiled. "I can see that. It takes a special kind of person to run a bookstore and create an atmosphere that welcomes readers with open arms." He slowly looked at her, from her head to her feet, then back up again.

Nicole blushed.

As the event began, a crowd gathered around Gabriel, eager to have their books signed and engage in conversation with the esteemed author. Nicole observed from a distance, not wanting to intrude, but her eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the way Gabriel interacted with his readers. He was not only charismatic but also genuinely interested in each person he met, making them feel seen and valued.

Finally, when there was a momentary lull in the crowd, Nicole mustered the courage to approach Gabriel. She stood before him, her shyness momentarily overcoming her, but she was determined not to let it get the best of her.

"I... I just wanted to say how much I admire your work. Your books have always been a source of inspiration for me." Nicole said softly.

"Thank you, Nicole. It means a lot to hear that." He smiled. "How exactly have I inspired you?" He raised his eyebrow and rested his chin on his hand.

Nicole thought for a moment. The question caught her off guard. "Well, I bought this bookstore."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, really?"

Nicole nodded. "I recently went through a... um..." she paused.

"Divorce?" He tapped his ring finger, then pointed to her hand. Nicole blushed and nodded. "You've been fiddling with your finger as if there's a ring there. And I can tell you've been wearing one." Nicole quickly lowered her hands to her sides. She didn't realize she had been fidgety.

"Wow." Gabriel shook his head. "His loss," he muttered,

Nicole got butterflies. "Well, it was a tough time for a little while. But, after reading your book *Summer Stone*, I was

encouraged by her tenacity to find her brother's murderer. She didn't stop, even after losing her dad." Nicole's face fell. She remembered her dad and got sad momentarily. Gabriel seemed to notice because he smiled and reached for her hand.

"Well, if you haven't heard it, then let me be the first to say: You're doing a great job." Nicole blushed again. At this point, she felt like her face was going to burst into flames.

"Books have always been my refuge, my escape. They've taught me so much about life and love."

Gabriel smiled. "That's the power of storytelling, isn't it? It allows us to explore different worlds and experiences, to understand and empathize with characters who are so different from ourselves."

Nicole nodded excitedly. "Absolutely. It's like magic, transporting us to places we've never been and introducing us to people we'd never have the chance to meet."

A connection sparked between them, a shared love for books and the enchantment they held. In that brief moment, Nicole felt a kinship with Gabriel, as if they were both travelers on a journey of words and emotions.

As the book signing event continued, Nicole found herself conversing more with Gabriel, their discussions flowing effortlessly from one topic to another. Her initial shyness began to fade, replaced by a newfound comfort in his presence. The enigmatic author had a way of putting her at ease, making her feel like they were old friends reconnecting after years apart.

Gabriel checked his watch and stood from the table. Nicole approached Gabriel with a smile, her heart fluttering with a mix of contentment and sadness that the evening was coming to an end. She remembered the warning about the impending rainstorm, and concern for Gabriel's safety tugged at her thoughts.

"Thank you so much for being here tonight, Gabriel. It was an amazing event, and I'm grateful you chose Bookshore for your book signing."

“It was my pleasure, Nicole. Your bookstore is truly special, and your passion for books is inspiring. I had a wonderful time here.” Gabriel smiled.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Nicole paused, nervously. “Um, I heard there’s going to be a rough rainstorm tonight. I hope you have a safe journey back to your hotel.”

“Thank you for the concern. I’ll make sure to be cautious.” Gabriel smiled. “What are your plans for this rough evening?” He smiled and looked around the store. “Maybe a bit of dusting?” He laughed.

Nicole gasped. “I’m short! I can’t reach very high!” She pointed at the stool where she stood to dust the tops of the shelves. She wondered if Mr. Monroe was tall enough to dust without a stool.

He chuckled and placed his hands in his pocket. He strolled around the store, slowly walking down the aisles. “How long have you owned *Bookshore*?” He pulled a book from the shelf and read the spine. His finger traced the title: *The Great Gatsby*.

“Actually, just a few weeks.” Nicole looked around. There were still some cobwebs high on the ceiling. She needed a taller stool.

“Oh. Was it abandoned beforehand?” He flashed her a mischievous smile.

“Yes, it was,” Nicole said matter-of-factly. She crossed her arms, defensively.

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. “Really? I can’t imagine why someone would leave this beauty.” His face grew serious. She was taken aback by his genuine appreciation for her store. She smiled.

“You know, Gabriel, Bookshore might appear like an ordinary bookstore on the surface, but it’s actually full of mysteries and secrets,” Nicole slyly smiled.

Gabriel raised his eyes. “Oh? Tell me more.”

“Well, legend has it that there’s a hidden compartment somewhere in the store, a secret passage that leads to untold treasures.”

Gabriel chuckled. “Treasure, you say? How thrilling! And have you discovered this hidden passage, oh intrepid bookstore owner?”

“Ah, not yet. But I have my suspicions. It’s like a puzzle waiting to be solved, and I can’t resist the allure of a good mystery.” Nicole waved her finger in the air. They both chuckled.

“Well, I hope you find the biggest, juiciest secrets in this shop.” He winked, turned, then disappeared out the door.

The wind was picking up. The storm raged outside Bookshore, and Nicole’s heart pounded with fear as she heard the howling wind and the crashing of rain against the windows. She clutched the small flashlight tightly in her hand, seeking comfort in its dim beam as the power went out, plunging the bookstore into darkness.

She pulled out her phone, hoping to call for help, but her hopes were dashed as she saw the dreaded “No Signal” indicator. The storm must’ve knocked out the cell tower’s connection.

With the flashlight guiding her, Nicole hurried to the back office, seeking shelter from the wild elements outside. She locked the door behind her, hoping it would provide some sense of security. Sitting at the desk, she tried to steady her trembling hands.

The loud clap of thunder startled her and the flashlight slipped from her hands, clattering onto the floor. The beam of light caught something shiny through the vent, sparking her curiosity. Nicole reached for the vent cover, quickly removing it to find a small silver box inside. The box had a slot for a key, and her mind immediately went to the key she had received from the bank.

She grabbed the key from the desk drawer and inserted it into the slot. With a soft click, the box opened, revealing a collection of old, weathered documents and a small, intricate pendant. The pendant glimmered in the flashlight's beam, seemingly holding secrets of its own.

As Nicole examined the contents of the box, another gust of wind howled outside and she heard a loud crash in the front of the store. Panic surged through her as she ran back into the main store area, the rain now spraying her first shelf of books.

Her eyes fell upon a small box in the corner of her office, filled with leftover supplies from past events. She rummaged through it, her hands trembling, and found an old tablecloth. Rushing back to the window, she spotted a few nails that were used for hanging Christmas lights.

With a sense of urgency, Nicole hung the blanket over the window, using the nails as makeshift hooks. Surprisingly, the makeshift barrier held, protecting the bookstore from the rain's onslaught.

As the storm continued to rage outside, Nicole found herself drawn back to the silver box and its mysterious contents. The pendant held an air of intrigue, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was on the cusp of uncovering something extraordinary.

It was crafted from silver and depicted an open book with a circle elegantly wrapped around it. The circle seemed to symbolize eternity, and the book symbolizes knowledge and stories waiting to be discovered.

The pendant held an aura of wisdom and secrets as if it were a talisman with the power to unlock hidden truths. As Nicole held it in her hand, she couldn't shake the feeling that it was meant to be in her possession, that it held a deeper significance in her life.

Next to the pendant were the old documents, weathered with age, and covered in fine calligraphy that hinted at a bygone era. The first document she picked up was an old map of Cape San Blas, its parchment-like texture telling tales of exploration and adventure. The map detailed the small

beachside town in its early days. The second was the original copy of the deed to the bookstore. It was dated for 1918. Lastly, there was a photograph of a group of men standing in front of the bookstore. It looked almost the same. She flipped over the photo... *1919*.

Nicole's heart quickened as she traced her fingers along the faded creases of the photo, wondering about the stories it held. It was as if she was holding the blueprint to the town's past, a key to unlocking its secrets.

As she continued to explore the contents of the silver box, a feeling of awe and reverence washed over her. It was as if she had stumbled upon a time capsule of the town's history, with each item holding a piece of the puzzle waiting to be assembled.

Nicole realized that these items were more than mere objects; they were fragments of a greater story, a narrative that had been woven throughout the years, connecting past and present in a mesmerizing dance of fate and destiny.

CHAPTER 3



The morning sun peeked through the clouds, casting a soft, golden glow over the aftermath of the storm. Nicole stood in Bookshore gently sweeping up the broken glass from the shattered window, remnants of the tempest that had raged just hours before. She was still trying to make sense of the mysterious discovery from the night before, the pendant and documents tucked safely away in the silver box on her desk.

As she swept, lost in her thoughts, the sound of the doorbell jingling pulled her back to the present. She turned to find Gabriel standing at the entrance, his hair slightly disheveled from the wind, and a warm smile on his face.

“Hey, Nicole. I hope you don’t mind me dropping by unannounced.”

“Gabriel! Of course not, I’m glad to see you. But what brings you here so early?”

“Well, it seems the storm had other plans for me. My flight got canceled, and I thought, why not spend some extra time in this charming beach town?”

“I’m sorry to hear about your flight, but I’m glad you’re here.” Nicole motioned to the floor. “I’m sorry about the mess!”

“Let me help you with the cleanup.” He reached over and grabbed the broom from her. “That storm was rough, huh?” He began sweeping the glass into a neat pile.

They worked side by side, Gabriel carefully picking up pieces of glass while Nicole swept away the smaller shards. The atmosphere was light and playful, their laughter and flirtatious banter filling the air as they shared stories of their encounters with storms in the past.

“You know, Nicole, if I knew cleaning up broken glass could be this much fun, I would have brought my own storm with me.”

“Oh, you and your charming ways. But be careful, this glass can be sharp.”

Just as she said that Nicole accidentally cut her finger on a particularly sharp piece. She winced and quickly pulled her hand away, but Gabriel was quick to react.

“Are you alright? Let me see.”

“It’s just a small cut, I’ll be fine.”

“Here, let me help. I saw some napkins under the counter earlier.”

He grabbed the napkins and came back to Nicole, gently cleaning the cut with care. The tenderness of his touch sent a warm shiver down her spine, and she couldn’t help but notice the genuine concern in his eyes.

“You should be more careful, Nicole. Accidents happen, but I’d hate to see you hurt yourself.”

He applied a band-aid to her finger, his touch lingering for just a moment longer. The intimacy of the moment made her heart race, and she found herself mesmerized by the connection between them.

“There, all better. He smiled and planted a small kiss on her finger.

As they continued to clean up, Nicole couldn’t help but feel a sense of comfort and gratitude for Gabriel’s unexpected presence. It was as if the storm had brought them closer together and she couldn’t wait to see where this newfound connection would lead them. In that moment, the broken glass

and the storm's aftermath seemed like a small price to pay for the enchanting encounter she was experiencing with Gabriel.

As Nicole made the call to the repairman, she was informed that it would be a few days before he could make it to Bookshore. The storm had caused widespread damage, and he was backed up with calls from other businesses and homes in the area. Sighing with a mix of frustration and understanding, she hung up the phone. Gabriel noticed her disappointment and walked over, setting aside the broom he had been using to help with the cleanup.

Gabriel looked at Nicole, "Everything okay, Nicole?"

"Yeah," she replied. "It's just that the repairman won't be able to come for a few hours. I guess I'll have to wait a bit longer to get the window fixed."

"No worries. How about we take a break? Are you hungry?" Gabriel raised his eyebrows. Nicole thought about food and her stomach rumbled in response. She smiled at Gabriel's thoughtful offer.

"Actually, yes. I could use a break. All this broken glass and rainwater stir up an appetite, huh?" They both chuckled.

"Great! There's a lovely local cafe just a few blocks away, I think. I ate there yesterday after the signing. How about we go grab some lunch?"

"That sounds wonderful," Nicole smiled.

They locked up Bookshore, leaving a sign on the door to let customers know they would be back soon. The sun had emerged from behind the clouds, casting a warm glow over the town. As they walked to the cafe, the sea breeze brushed against their skin, carrying a hint of salt and the scent of fresh rain.

At the cafe, Nicole sat at a booth by the window. Gabriel walked to the counter and then returned with two steaming bowls of soup and a plate of sandwiches.

“I hope you don’t mind. I got us some warm soup.” Gabriel set the steaming soup and delicious-looking sandwiches on the table. It may be Florida, but I thought it’d be comforting after the storm.”

“No, not at all. It looks delicious.” She took a deep inhale of the soup. The warm, salty fluid smelled delicious and made her chest warm. “Thank you, Gabriel.”

They dug into their lunch. The cozy atmosphere of the cafe, coupled with the good food and Gabriel’s company, made the wait for the repairman seem less bothersome.

As they chatted and laughed over their meal, Nicole felt a sense of comfort and ease in Gabriel’s presence. It was as if they had known each other for much longer than they actually had. There was a natural flow to their conversation, and Nicole found herself opening up to him in a way she hadn’t with others.

“So,” Gabriel took a sip of a soda and set it back on the table. “Tell me, what has landed you in the Cape?”

She didn’t know where to begin. “It’s not that interesting,” she chuckled. He looked at her and waited. She didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t had this type of attention in years. Nicole took a moment to gather her thoughts, her eyes drifting to a distant memory.

“What brings you happiness?” Gabriel watched her mouth, waiting for a response.

Nicole smiled. “Books. Reading, writing, being surrounded by stories. They’ve always been my refuge, my escape from the harsh realities of life. And now, owning this bookstore, sharing that passion with others, that brings me immense joy.”

“You have such a deep love for books, and it’s evident in the way you talk about them. I admire that about you.” Nicole blushed at his compliment, feeling a warm sense of connection growing between them.

“So, how did you get Bookshore?” Gabriel leaned back in his seat.

Nicole sighed. She swirled her spoon in her soup. “Well, when I found out Greg, my ex-husband, was cheating, I thought my life was over. It felt almost impossible to get up in the morning.” She paused, gathering her thoughts. “But eventually it got better. She was much younger, so *that* didn’t make it any better.” She rolled her eyes.

“Wow, what a jerk.” Gabriel shook his head. “He must’ve been blind, right?”

Nicole chuckled. “I’d always wanted kids, but he changed his mind about two years after we got married. It was safe... and comfortable. So, we just kind of fell into a routine. I suppose I understand why he got a wandering eye.”

“Wow. Out of everything you’ve just said, I’m most shocked by that. That wasn’t your fault. If he wanted to cheat, he was going to cheat. There was nothing you could’ve done differently.” He reached out and placed his hand on hers. “That’s not fair to you.” Nicole’s cheeks grew warm. She thought about their relationship. She *did* everything she could. Maybe Gabriel was right. She looked up at him. “You’re beau—”

“Nicky!” Ms. Jenkins came sashaying over. She had on a long, red dress. It was gorgeous. The sequins and sparkles glittered in the sunlight, sending small lights dancing all around the room. She sure loved to make an entrance. “I know that’s not my book-loving Nicky, taking the day off! My, my. Who will dust those books?” She chuckled and walked over to the table.

“Hey, Ms. Jenkins.” I smiled at her.

“Maybe you two could go back and knock some dust off those books.” She held out her hand to Gabriel. “Ariel. But you can call me Ms. Jenkins.”

He reached for her hand and kissed her knuckle. “Nice to meet you, Ariel Ms. Jenkins. I’m—”

“Oh, I know who you are dear. Nicole has talked about your visit non-stop for a week.” She pursed her lips at him and

turned toward Nicole. “Haven’t you?” She winked slyly at Nicole, whose face was turning red.

“Well, I mean—” Nicole started.

“You’re her inspiration.” She nodded and patted Gabriel’s arm.

Gabriel smiled. “So I’ve been told.” Nicole felt like the only person in the room. Gabriel and Ms. Jenkins both looked at her and smiled. She could feel the fire spreading from her cheeks throughout her face.

“Well, Gabriel. It’s so nice of you to grace us with your presence again. I suppose we have the storm to thank?” Ms. Jenkins winked at Nicole again. “Well, excuse me, young ones. I have a date.” She straightened her dress and nodded to them. “Have a good night.” She walked to the door and pushed it open. She turned back to the restaurant and sang, “It’s raining men!” The waitress rolled her eyes and laughed. Nicole busted out in a fit of laughter. Gabriel followed. They fell into stitches of laughter, forgetting all that was around them.

The soft chime of the cafe’s door signaled the end of their delightful lunch together. Nicole and Gabriel stepped out onto the sidewalk, the sun peeking through the clouds.

“Thank you for lunch, Gabriel. I had a wonderful time,” Nicole smiled.

“The pleasure was all mine, Nicole. I must say, this little cafe was a great find,” Gabriel studied the front of the cafe.

As they stood there, a comfortable silence settled between them, both reluctant to part ways. Nicole found herself drawn to Gabriel’s magnetic presence, and she could tell he felt the same.

“You know, Nicole, I should probably get back to my hotel before it gets too late. But before I go...”

Before he could finish, Nicole took a step closer, her heart beating a little faster with each passing moment. She reached

out her arms, and Gabriel didn't hesitate to wrap his own around her in a warm embrace.

They held each other, neither willing to let go, as if they were savoring the closeness they shared in that moment. Nicole felt the steady rhythm of Gabriel's heartbeat against her chest, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of belonging she hadn't felt in a long time.

Gabriel whispered, "You're amazing, Nicole. I feel a connection with you that I can't explain." Gabriel pulled back slightly to look into her eyes, his gaze intense and full of sincerity. "Can I see you again?"

Nicole's heart skipped a beat at his words, and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I'd like that."

Gabriel: "Great. How about tomorrow evening? We could meet for dinner?"

Nicole nodded. "That sounds wonderful."

Gabriel smiled. "It's a date."

"It's a date."

"Until tomorrow, then," Gabriel winked and backed to leave.

Nicole turned on her heel. "Until tomorrow."

With one last smile, Gabriel turned and walked down the sidewalk, leaving Nicole feeling a mix of excitement and anticipation for their upcoming date.

Deciding to make the most of her time before the repairman came, Nicole made her way to the town's quaint library. As she browsed through the shelves, her mind drifted back to the silver box and its mysterious contents. She knew she had to find out more about the pendant, the old documents, and the intriguing photograph.

With determination in her heart, she approached the librarian and asked for assistance in researching the town's history and any connections to the items she had found. She wrote down a website and gave it to Nicole.

“This is all old newspaper archives dating back to the early 1900s! Back when Cape San Blas was established,” the historian said.

Nicole smiled, “Thank you.”

“If you go over there,” the historian pointed to a full shelf near the wall, with books from top to bottom, “there’s a whole section about early San Blas.” Nicole turned towards the shelf.

“Great!” She took the card from the woman at the desk and turned to the shelf.

“Let me know if I can help!” She turned her back to Nicole and began typing on her computer and looking at library cards.

Nicole scanned the shelves, reading the titles on the books’ spines. *Early Cape San Blas. CSB Census 1918-1930. CBS Census 1930-1950.* She traced her finger along the books until she saw the Map of the Ages. It reminded her of the map she found in the box. She pulled it from the shelf and opened it. She flipped through various maps created from early Cape San Blas. There were maps with stores, some with landmarks, and others with various shapes that looked like houses. As she turned the pages, she noticed one had been ripped out.

“Hmm.” She squinted her eyes. When she got to the end, she noticed a small symbol on the back cover. It was the book symbol from the pendant she found! Her jaw dropped. She looked up at the historian who was still typing away.

“Excuse me,” Nicole hurried over to the counter. She laid the book down. “Did you know this was missing a page?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes. It’s been gone for quite a while. Probably some kids messing around with it after a school project. I’m sorry about that.” She reached for the book.

“No, it’s okay.” Nicole laid her hand on the book. “Do you know where the page could be?”

The historian shook her head. “It’s been gone for as long as I’ve been here... and I’ve been here for nearly thirty years.”

Nicole’s shoulders dropped in disappointment. “Okay. Well, do you know what this is?” She turned the book over

and pointed to the symbol.

“Oh, sure! That’s the Liberty Society symbol.” She paused. “The Liberty Society was a book group created when Cape San Blas was settled. It was a big part of the community for a long time.”

“What happened?” Nicole asked.

“Honestly, no one knows. The main founding members of the group suddenly disappeared. Their families moved away, and people just stopped asking questions.” The historian shook her head. “It’s a shame.” She pointed to the book. “They created that.”

Nicole picked the book up off the counter and gripped it in her hands. “Wow,” she studied the book.

“I know,” the historian nodded. “Would you like to check it out?”

Nicole nodded furiously. It was almost as though she could feel the history vibrating in the book.

CHAPTER 4



Nicole sat at her desk in the dimly lit corner of her bookstore, her laptop screen casting a soft glow on her face. Her fingers danced across the keyboard as she typed “Liberty Society Cape San Blas” into the search bar. As the results loaded, she took a sip of her steaming cup of tea, feeling a mixture of excitement and curiosity building inside her.

The first few links were just book reviews mentioning the Liberty Society, but then, her eyes widened as she saw an intriguing headline: “*The Forgotten Literary Legacy: Unraveling the Tale of the Liberty Society.*” Nicole clicked on the link, and an old-fashioned, digitized newspaper from the early 1900s filled her screen.

The article detailed the history of the Liberty Society—a local group of immigrants who arrived in Cape San Blas in the early 1900s, bonded by their love for books and literature. They aimed to create a community where book lovers could gather and share their passion for reading and storytelling, regardless of background or ethnicity. Nicole’s heart swelled with appreciation for this group of like-minded people who had laid the foundation for her bookstore’s legacy.

As she scrolled further, she found a few grainy black-and-white photographs of the Liberty Society’s members, their faces filled with enthusiasm and joy. It was a mixture of men and women of different skin tones. A pang of curiosity struck her when she noticed the pendant she found in the small silver box appeared in the photos taken toward the end of the 1970s.

The article mentioned that the Liberty Society had remained active throughout the years, nurturing generations of bibliophiles until their last meeting in 1988. But from that point on, there was a void, and the society seemed to disappear entirely from the records. Nicole's mind buzzed with questions. *Why did the Liberty Society cease to exist suddenly? What happened during their final meeting?*

She continued her search, hoping to find more clues about the pendant and its connection to Tommy Algoon, the current owner of Bookshore. As she delved deeper into the online archives, she stumbled upon an old forum thread discussing local history. Someone had posted a blurry photo of Tommy Algoon, alongside the caption, "*Tommy Algoon - Keeper of the Liberty Society's Secrets?*"

Nicole's heart pounded. Could Tommy Algoon somehow be linked to the disappearance of the Liberty Society? What role did he play in all of this? Her instincts told her that this mystery ran deeper than she had initially imagined. She grabbed the silver box from the drawer in her desk and unlocked it. She removed the photo and compared it to the people. It was some of the same people but from a different angle in front of the store. This photo was never posted! Nicole smiled and rubbed the photo between her fingers. She wondered who took it.

Her phone buzzed on her desk. She picked it up and looked.

Tomorrow is too far...

It was a text from Gabriel. She smiled. Another message came in. It was a location. She clicked it and the map showed the local movie theater. A huge grin spread across her face. She turned, grabbed her purse, and ran out the door, locking it behind her.

"Hey, look who's here." Gabriel smiled as Nicole walked up to the movies. "I already got our tickets. Let's head inside."

Nicole and Gabriel sat in a dimly lit movie theater, waiting for the movie to begin. There was a playful and flirty atmosphere between them.

Nicole leaned in. “So, what kind of movie are we about to watch, Gabriel?”

Gabriel smirked. “Oh, it’s a romantic comedy. But honestly, I think we could create a much more exciting plotline ourselves.”

Nicole blushed. “Is that so? I’m all ears. Tell me, Mr. Romantic Plot Twister.”

Gabriel leaned in and whispered, “Well, it starts with two adventurous souls who go on an unexpected journey together. Along the way, they uncover hidden treasures, solve thrilling mysteries, and, of course, share a few stolen kisses.”

“Stolen kisses, huh?” Nicole giggled. “That sounds like the makings of a classic story. But are you up for such an adventure?” Her mind wandered to the silver box. She wondered if she should tell him.

“With you? Absolutely. I’d embark on any journey, no matter how daring, as long as you’re my co-pilot.”

Nicole playfully nudged him. “Smooth talker, aren’t you? But I must admit, your charm is hard to resist.”

“It’s not just charm; it’s genuine admiration for an extraordinary woman sitting right next to me,” Gabriel winked.

“You certainly know how to make a girl feel special,” Nicole smiled.

“Well, you are special, Nicole. There’s something about you that’s captivating and intriguing—a rare kind of magic.” Gabriel’s eyes watched her face for a reaction.

Nicole looked into his eyes. “And you, Gabriel, have a way with words that leaves me speechless.”

Nicole brushed her fingers on his. You know how to make the simplest touch feel electric.

“And when our lips finally meet...”

Nicole and Gabriel’s whispers are drowned out as the movie begins, the screen lighting up their faces. A loud drumroll started as an advertisement began to play. They both jumped and returned to their seats. Their flirty banter faded into contented silence, but the charged atmosphere between them stayed.

“It’s sweet. It’s crunchy. It’s refreshing. It’s the best flavor.” Gabriel took a spoonful of his mint chocolate chip ice cream and rolled his eyes. “It’s delicious.”

Nicole sighed. “You’re crazy. Cookies and cream are the best. You get cookies *and* ice cream. What’s more to want?” She took a big swig of her milkshake. Gabriel chuckled.

“So, what’s your story?” Nicole looked at Gabriel.

Gabriel paused. “I’ve been fortunate enough to see the world, to explore different cultures and places. It’s been an exciting journey, but it’s also been a solitary one at times.”

Nicole’s heart felt heavy. “Solitary? How so?”

Gabriel looked deep into her eyes. “Well, with all the traveling and work, I never really had the opportunity to settle down and build a family. Don’t get me wrong; I’ve had incredible experiences and met amazing people, but there’s always been something that felt missing—the warmth of a loving partner and the joy of raising kids.”

Nicole nodded. “I know that all too well. It’s hard, Gabriel. But it’s never too late to start a family if that’s what you truly want. I’m trying to convince myself of that, too.”

“That’s true, and it’s something I’ve always wanted. I’ve envisioned myself as a husband and a father, creating a home filled with love and laughter. But my career and adventures consume all my time and energy.” Gabriel smiled softly.

“It’s wonderful that you have a successful career, but I can imagine how the desire for a family might have tugged at your heartstrings.”

Gabriel thought for a moment. “It has. Every time I see children playing or couples laughing together, a part of me longs for that kind of companionship, that sense of belonging. I believe I’d be a devoted and caring husband, and I know I’d pour my heart and soul into being a loving father. But I chose a different path, and that’s okay.”

Nicole grabbed his hand. “Gabriel, you have so much love to give, and I have no doubt that you’d make an incredible husband and father. You deserve to find someone who cherishes and supports you.”

Gabriel gently squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Nicole.” He pulled her hand to his mouth and planted a kiss on her knuckles.

Nicole felt a sense of warmth, trust, and connection with him. She took a small breath and whispered, “Can I show you something?”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows and excitedly nodded.

Nicole and Gabriel sat at a table in the cozy corner of Nicole’s bookstore, surrounded by the items she found—the small silver box, the pendant, the map of Cape San Blas, the book from the library, and the original deed to the bookstore. She had the articles pulled up on her computer.

Gabriel’s eyes light up with excitement as he examines the pendant.

“Nicole, this is incredible! Look at this pendant. I remember seeing a similar symbol during my travels in Italy. It was in an old library, hidden in the heart of Florence.” Gabriel said enthusiastically.

Nicole was intrigued. “Really? What did it signify?”

It represented a secret society of scholars and intellectuals who shared a passion for literature, art, and ancient knowledge. They were called “La Società dei Liberi Pensatori,” which translates to “The Society of Freethinkers.”

Gabriel was visibly excited. “It was an important part of the library. Lots of community members knew about them.”

Nicole was amazed. “That’s fascinating! Could there be a connection between that society and the Liberty Society here in Cape San Blas?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It’s entirely possible. Secret societies often had branches in different parts of the world, and their symbols held hidden meanings known only to the initiated. I remember being captivated by the mysterious aura surrounding that symbol when I stumbled upon it in Florence.”

Nicole leaned in. “And now, we have the same symbol right here, tied to the Liberty Society in Cape San Blas. This is getting more intriguing by the minute.”

“Absolutely! It’s like we’re uncovering a hidden thread that connects two worlds separated by time and distance. The Liberty Society’s love for books and literature might have roots stretching back centuries.” Gabriel flipped the pendant over in his hands.

Nicole smiled. “We’re unearthing the secrets of this quaint little town. But why did the Liberty Society suddenly disappear after 1988?”

Gabriel crinkled his chin. “That’s the million-dollar question. It’s possible they were guarding something precious—knowledge, artifacts, or even that hidden treasure hinted at in the article.”

“With Tommy Algoon’s partnership with the Liberty Society, there might be someone who is trying to track down whatever they were protecting,” Nicole added. “Maybe it has something to do with Mr. Monroe’s disappearance. I got this place because he disappeared and it was turned over to the bank for auction.”

“You could be right. But what are they after, and why now?”

Nicole thought for a moment. “We need to be careful. If there’s something valuable at stake, it could attract the wrong kind of attention. But we also can’t ignore this opportunity to

learn more about the Liberty Society and its connection to that mysterious symbol. I need to know the history of this place.” Nicole looked around the store.

Gabriel nodded. “Agreed. We should keep investigating but proceed cautiously. The more we dig, the closer we might get to unraveling the secrets of the Society and why they had to disappear.”

Nicole smiled, “And we’ll do it together. I’m glad you’re here to share this adventure with me, Gabriel.” She started gathering everything back together.

Nicole softly smiled. “Oh, I see. That’s quite an exciting opportunity for you, Gabriel.”

Gabriel looked up at her. “You’re not upset or angry, right? I’m just so busy. I hardly have time to rest, let alone...” he paused.

“Run around on an investigation about books and secret societies?” Nicole waved her hands. She thought she might cry for a moment. She wondered why she got her hopes up. “No, not at all. I understand that this is an important part of your career, and I wouldn’t want you to miss out on such a wonderful opportunity.”

Gabriel sighed. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“I want you to pursue your dreams and passions. I know this book tour means a lot to you.” She smiled a small, solemn smile. She tried to convince herself she was fine.

Gabriel was grateful. “I can’t express how much your support means to me.”

“You don’t have to. It’s natural to feel a bit disappointed that our investigation will have to wait.”

Gabriel looked into her eyes. “I can’t help but feel a bit hurt that you seem so okay with it.”

“It’s not that I don’t care, Gabriel. It’s just that I believe in you and your talent. I don’t want to hold you back or make you feel torn between your career and our shared interests.”

Nicole finished gathering the items and placed them all together in the bottom drawer of her desk.

Gabriel looked surprised. “You’re not holding me back at all. If anything, you’ve inspired and enriched my life in so many ways.”

“That’s very kind of you to say,” Nicole smiled. “I bet your fans love to hear that,” she chuckled.

Gabriel looked at her. “It’s the truth. You’ve brought joy and excitement into my life, and I don’t want to lose that.”

“We won’t lose it, Gabriel. This is just a temporary separation.”

“Thank you for being so understanding and patient with me,” Gabriel sighed. “I’m going to miss you.”

Nicole smiled at him and stood up. “And I’ll miss you too, but we’ll stay connected, and I can’t wait to hear about all your adventures on the book tour.”

“It’s a promise then. I’ll share every moment with you.” Gabriel stood up and she guided him to the door.

“Well, you should get some rest. I hope you have a great trip.” She turned away from him to head back into her office. Tears started to sting her eyes.

As she took a step, Gabriel grabbed her elbow and pulled her around to face him. He looked into her eyes. “A promise.” He slipped his hand across her jaw and behind her ear and neck, pulling her face close to his. He paused for a moment. Searching her eyes. Waiting for approval or denial. After what seemed like an eternity, Nicole pressed up onto her tip toes and planted a strong kiss on his lips.

He closed his eyes and leaned deep into the kiss. He wrapped his arm around her lower back and pulled her against him, wrapping her in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held tight. The kiss was deep and passionate. She hadn’t felt this type of passion in so long. After a minute or so, Nicole pulled away from Gabriel and took a few steps back.

“Wow,” she whispered.

Gabriel smiled. “Wow, indeed.”

CHAPTER 5



Nicole smiled at the historian as she walked inside the old library. The sunlight shined through the windows, creating curtains of dust in the beam of light.

The historian was flipping through an old book. “Ah, welcome back, Nicole. I see you’re still as curious as ever about our town’s history.”

Nicole smiled. “Absolutely! Your stories and knowledge have been so enlightening. I’m eager to learn more about how Cape San Blas came to be. And... please forgive me... I was so rude and didn’t get your name last time.”

The historian raised her hands. “Oh, no worries! You were enwrapped in a new mystery! It’s Christian Algoon, but you can call me Chrissy.” She smiled.

Nicole’s jaw dropped. “Wait... like-“

“Yep. Like *the* Tommy Algoon. But it’s my husband’s side.”

“Oh! That’s great. I have so many questions for you.” Nicole hurried to the counter. “Did you know Tommy? Did you know Mr. Monroe?” Nicole lowered her voice. “Do you know what happened to him?”

Christy shook her head. “I never met Tommy. He left the store to his son, my father-in-law. Poor ole Tommy, though. My father-in-law was one of the worst gamblers in the Cape. He lost it in a poker game. Shortly afterward, Mr. Monroe bought the bookstore. I haven’t had much to do with it, and

since my husband's passing I don't really speak to them anymore."

Nicole looked disappointed. "Oh, okay."

"I'm sorry, dear, I wish I had more answers for you."

"That's okay!" Nicole reassured her. "I didn't come here for that." She laid the book down on the counter. "I was curious about the beginning of Cape San Blas. Maybe it would put these maps into perspective." She patted the book.

Christy nodded. "Of course, my dear. Now, let me tell you about the founding of our beloved town." She fixed her glasses and leaned on the counter. "It was back in 1918 when a diverse group of immigrants, hailing from various backgrounds and races, embarked on a journey across America. They sought solace and freedom, escaping from their troubled pasts, and their love for books brought them together."

Nicole was intrigued. "Books brought them together? That's quite unusual for that time."

Christy smiled. "Indeed, it was. As they traveled, they carried books filled with stories from their homelands and cherished traditions. Reading became a way for them to find comfort, connection, and understanding, bridging the gaps between their different cultures."

Nicole leaned in. "And how did they end up here in Cape San Blas?"

Christy opened the book and flipped through the pages. She stopped on one of the maps. "As they journeyed, word spread about this beautiful, serene place—the shores of Cape San Blas. Along the way, other travelers from different races were drawn to their sense of community and the bond they shared through literature." She traced her finger along the edge of old Cape San Blas.

Nicole was impressed. "That's remarkable!"

Christy nodded. "Indeed, it was a beautiful coming together of souls. When they finally arrived in Cape San Blas, they decided to settle here, creating a place they could call home. Their collective love for books led them to protect their

precious literature from the salt and ocean water, which gave birth to the idea of *Bookshore*.”

Nicole smiled. She thought of the photo. They were standing proudly in front of their store created to house the most precious mementos.

Christy continued. “They built a community centered around books and literature, cherishing the stories they carried from their pasts and weaving new ones together.”

Suddenly, a book fell off a nearby shelf. Christy and Nicole turned to look, and a woman was quickly walking by.

“In a hurry, I suppose.” Christy walked over to the book, picked it up, and gently placed it back on the shelves. “So, that’s how Cape San Blas came to be! Here.” She walked to another shelf, looked for a moment, then brought a book back. “Give this a look. It’s the very first census of the Cape.”

Nicole grabbed it. “Thank you!”

Christy motioned to the book of maps. “You can keep that one a little longer if you want. Nobody’s asked about it in ages.”

Nicole smiled. “That would be great.”

Nicole sat in her bookstore sipping some tea. She wondered why she even had a home. She only slept there. Her stomach grumbled. She was hungry. Her phone started to buzz and her screen lit up. Nicole picked it up. “Hey!”

Gabriel’s voice filled her phone speaker. “Hey there!”

“How was your flight?” Nicole leaned back in her seat and sat her cup down.

“Boring as ever. You know, I think I’d rather be stranded at an airport than sit through those long flights.” Gabriel chuckled. “I was looking for a quiet spot to sit, and I stumbled upon a group of people doing yoga right there in the middle of the airport lounge.”

Nicole giggled. “Yoga at the airport? That’s unexpected!”

“Tell me about it!” Gabriel said. “They had their yoga mats spread out, meditating and doing all sorts of poses. It was like a mini-yoga class right there amidst the hustle and bustle of the airport.”

“That’s both bizarre and fantastic. I love how people can find moments of serenity in the most unexpected places,” Nicole said.

“Exactly! It was a delightful sight, and I couldn’t help but smile. You know, it reminded me of you and your love for books. You find joy in unexpected places too.”

Nicole smiled. “Well, while you were dealing with that adventure, I was busy at the library.”

Gabriel was intrigued. “What did you find out?”

“I discovered some fascinating information about the early days of Cape San Blas. I got to see the first census of the town, and it was so interesting to learn about the people who lived here back then,” Nicole said excitedly.

Gabriel was impressed. “That sounds interesting! Sounds like you’re turning into quite the detective, Nicole.”

Nicole laughed. “Maybe I am. There’s just something so thrilling about unearthing the past and discovering the mysteries of this town.”

Gabriel: “I’m glad you’re enjoying it. I wish I was there to help.”

Nicole smiled. She held onto the warmth in her chest for a few moments. “I do, too. I’ll keep digging and let you know if I find anything more.”

“I’ll be eagerly waiting for your updates,” Gabriel said. An announcement came on over a loudspeaker behind Gabriel. “I should get going. They’re calling my next flight. I just wanted to call and talk to you.”

Nicole’s cheeks hurt from smiling. “I’m glad you called. Have a safe flight.”

“Bye, Nicole.”

As Nicole laid her phone down, she jumped as Ms. Jenkins clapped in the front of the bookstore. Nicole jumped and placed her hands on her chest.

“How cute are you,” she screamed.

“You scared me half to death,” Nicole said. She was trying to catch her breath.

“Are you all married yet? You know. I am an officiant. I once married a beautiful Middle Eastern couple during my journey across the Philippines.” She playfully started moving her arms as though she was dancing. “It was a beautiful ceremony. We danced for almost nine hours!”

Nicole had regained control of her heart rate. “Hey, Ms. Jenkins. How are you?” She stood over and walked to the counter.

“Lovely, darling, how are you?” Her eyes were searching the room as if she’d never been there.

“I’m well.”

“I can tell from that phone call.” Ms. Jenkins winked. “When’s he coming back?”

Nicole shrugged. “He has a few meetings across the county.”

Ms. Jenkins raised her eyebrows. “Oh. What an important man.” Nicole laughed. “Are you two dating?” She eyed Nicole. Nicole felt a pang of sorrow in her chest. “No, we’re just friends.”

“Ah.” Ms. Jenkins nodded. “Don’t let that get you down. Let me tell you a tale of romance, betrayal, and ultimate reconciliation that took place right here in this very town many years ago.”

Nicole’s curiosity was piqued, so she walked over and rested against a bookshelf. “Please, continue.”

Ms. Jenkins cleared her throat. “Not long ago, there was a young couple deeply in love. They were the talk of the town, and their love story was the stuff of fairytales. But as with many tales, challenges lay ahead for them.”

Nicole listened intently, captivated by Ms. Jenkins' storytelling.

Ms. Jenkins continued. "You see, the young man, Thomas, had dreams of adventure and fame. He set out on a journey, leaving behind his beloved, Emily, promising to return one day. Emily waited patiently, believing in their love, but as time passed, she couldn't help but feel a growing sense of abandonment."

Nicole gasped. "That's heartbreaking."

Ms. Jenkins nodded. "Indeed, it was. As the years went by, Emily's heart grew heavy with betrayal and hurt. She had to make a difficult choice - to let go of Thomas or to hold on to hope."

Nicole nodded. "What did she decide?"

"At first, she couldn't bear the pain any longer and tried to move on with her life. She met a kind man, William, who adored her and offered her a life of comfort and stability. Emily was content but always wondered what could have been with Thomas."

Nicole asked, "Did Thomas ever return?"

Ms. Jenkins replied, "Oh, he did, my dear. After years of wandering and seeking, Thomas finally returned to Cape San Blas. He carried the weight of his absence and the realization that he had let go of something truly precious. He sought forgiveness, but he didn't expect what he found."

Nicole leaned in, eager to hear the conclusion of the tale.

Ms. Jenkins continued. "Emily had indeed moved on with William, and their love had blossomed. But when Thomas returned, their paths crossed again. Hearts were torn between the love of the past and the love of the present."

Nicole looked at her. "What happened then?"

"In the end, Emily chose forgiveness. She understood that love is a complex and mysterious journey. She reunited with Thomas, not out of obligation, but out of a desire to find

closure and peace. And you know what they say, my dear, love has a way of healing wounds and rekindling flames.”

Nicole smiled and looked down. “What if I’m not loveable?” She thought back to all the times Greg had ignored her. How much he paid attention to the other people in his life. He cared little about her day-to-day life. She would be sitting right next to him and feel so alone.

Nicole’s eyes filled with a mix of vulnerability and uncertainty.

“I mean, I’ve always dreamed of finding someone special, but sometimes I can’t help but wonder if there’s something about me that pushes people away.”

Ms. Jenkins looked at Nicole with a gentle smile, her eyes full of compassion and wisdom. “Oh, my dear, that’s a question we all grapple with at times. But let me tell you something important... every person who can feel love is deserving of love in return. You, Nicole, are no exception. In fact, your capacity to love so deeply and passionately is a testament to your heart’s beauty.”

“But what if I’ve made mistakes in the past?”

“We all have our journeys, and love is not without its trials and tribulations. It’s part of the human experience. But those experiences, both the joyful and the painful, shape us and make us who we are. They don’t diminish your worthiness of love; rather, they make you all the more worthy of a love that will cherish and understand every facet of your being.”

“But I’ve seen so many people around me find their fairy tale endings, and sometimes it feels like it’s out of reach for me,” Nicole briefly thought about Gabriel. How could she expect him to give everything up for her?

Ms. Jenkins leaned closer. “Oh, but it’s not out of reach, my dear. Your fairy tale ending is just waiting to unfold. Love works in its own mysterious ways, and the right person, the one who sees and cherishes your beautiful soul, will come into your life when the time is right.”

Nicole quickly wiped away a tear. “I want to believe that, Ms. Jenkins. I really do.”

“Then believe it, my dear. Love is a powerful force, and it has a way of bringing people together, even when they least expect it. Your heart has already shown its capacity for love, and that alone makes you immeasurably lovable,” Ms. Jenkins said firmly.

Nicole took a deep breath. “Thank you, Ms. Jenkins. Your words mean so much to me.”

“You’re welcome, my dear.” Ms. Jenkins patted her on the shoulder. “And always remember, just like Emily, you have the power to create your own fairy tale. Be patient with yourself, be open to love, and one day, you’ll find the person who will see you for the wonderful soul that you are.”

Nicole smiled and Ms. Jenkins wrapped her in a hug.

The door to the bookstore opened and the repairman from a few days ago stepped in.

“Hey, Nicole, just checking in on ya.” He stepped over to the newly fixed window and tapped on it. “Everything going okay so far?” He had come earlier that day to fix the window from the storm.

“Yep. Thanks, Tony.” Nicole waved to him.

Ms. Jenkins abruptly grabbed Nicole’s hand. She cleared her throat and looked at Nicole. Nicole looked at Tony, then giggled. Tony was tall, dark, and handsome. He was older, so his black hair was more of a salt-and-pepper color. Ms. Jenkins cleared her throat again, and Nicole understood.

“Tony,” she motioned toward Ms. Jenkins. “This is Ariel. Ariel Jenkins.” Ms. Jenkins reached for Tony’s hand.

“Ms. Jenkins, this is Tony.” She waved her hand toward Tony.

“My pleasure,” Mrs. Jenkins said as Tony took her hand and lightly shook it.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Tony smiled a large, toothy smile.

“Well, Nicole is just so busy this time of day.” Nicole looked around to see no one except the three of them in the shop.

‘Tony, why don’t we grab lunch at the café on the corner? So we can get out of her hair?’ Ms. Jenkins smiled.

He checked his watch. “I’d love to.” He turned to open the door and they both disappeared out into the sun.

CHAPTER 6



Nicole’s eyes fluttered open as she was stirred from her peaceful slumber by the sound of knocking at her front door. Groggy and disoriented, she glanced at the clock beside her bed, which displayed an early Saturday morning hour.

As she reluctantly crawled out of bed, she noticed her disheveled appearance—a thin silk shirt and shorts that she loved to sleep in. She wrapped her favorite robe around her for a bit of modesty and comfort before making her way to the door.

Nicole opened the door. Sun poured into the room and blinded her. Gabriel stood in the doorway. “Gabriel? What are you doing here?” She blinked a few times, trying to get her eyes to adjust. She looked around. She wondered if she was dreaming.

Gabriel’s eyes widened momentarily as he looked her up and down, appreciating her appearance, but quickly realizing his reaction, he tried to regain his composure.

Gabriel smirked. “Sorry, Nicole. I didn’t mean to catch you off guard. We have to go soon.”

Nicole blushed. The robe had come undone while she was trying to see. “Oh, um, that’s okay. I didn’t expect anyone to be knocking at my door this early. Especially you. Aren’t you supposed to be on tour? And go where?”

“I had a few days off.” Gabriel shrugged. He checked his watch. “Our flight leaves soon.” He stepped past her and into

her house. The small, comfortable living room was tidy, as always.

“What a beautiful home. It looks just like you.” He turned around and eyed her up and down again. He raised his eyebrows. “Are you wearing that?” Nicole looked down. One side of her robe had fallen. She quickly grasped it and pulled it around her. She shook her head and rushed down the hallway. “I’m not complaining,” he called out!

Nicole retreated into her room and shut the door behind her. She pressed her back against it. She thought for a moment before poking her head out the bedroom door. “Wait,” she shouted. “Did you say, *flight*?”

The airport was a bustling hive of activity, with travelers scurrying to their gates, the wheels of their luggage creating a symphony of clicks and clacks on the polished floor. The chatter of people talking, laughing, and bidding farewell to loved ones filled the air, creating a lively cacophony that mirrored the pulse of excitement running through Gabriel and Nicole.

Large, bright signs adorned the walls, pointing in different directions, and guiding passengers to various airlines and terminals. The departure boards displayed a flurry of information, announcing upcoming flights and their respective gates. As Gabriel and Nicole weaved through the crowd, their eyes darted from sign to sign, ensuring they were headed in the right direction.

Nicole’s excitement was evident in the way she quickened her pace, her heart racing with anticipation for their upcoming adventure. She gripped the handle of her luggage firmly, maneuvering it with skill and agility, the wheels rolling smoothly across the floor as they navigated the airport maze.

Gabriel kept close to her side, his infectious laughter adding an air of joy to their hurried pace. He couldn’t help but steal glances at Nicole, admiring the way her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and how her hair danced gently in the breeze of their movement.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this. This is crazy,” Nicole huffed and almost felt anxious about abruptly leaving.

Gabriel grinned. “Oh, we’re doing this, Nicole. An impromptu trip like this is just what we needed.”

“It’s exhilarating, isn’t it? I must say, I wasn’t expecting to spend my weekend in Italy, but what do you know?” Nicole smiled.

“Well, you know what they say - life’s too short to not embrace the unexpected,” Gabriel said.

As they approached the security checkpoint, their excitement was only tempered by the slight rush they felt to ensure a smooth journey through the airport. Nicole followed the guidelines, placing her belongings in the bins and proceeding through the metal detectors with Gabriel by her side. Once they were through, they found themselves in the departure area, where rows of gates awaited their passengers.

“We’re almost there. Can you believe it?” Gabriel asked.

“It’s like a dream come true. I can’t believe you convinced me to take this leap.”

“I knew you had a sense of adventure in you.” Gabriel winked and grabbed her hand.

As they finally reached their gate, they exchanged a look of excitement and contentment. Their fingers interlocked each other, and they smiled, feeling the connection between them grow stronger with each passing moment.

The announcement for boarding echoed through the terminal, and they joined the queue, ready to embark on this thrilling journey together. As they settled into their seats on the plane, the hum of the engines and the anticipation of the trip ahead filled their hearts with a sense of adventure and possibility.

Nicole yawned and stretched as she entered the cozy hotel room, feeling the exhaustion from the long flight and layover

seep into her bones. Gabriel placed their suitcases on the floor, a tired but eager smile on his face.

“Phew, that was quite the journey, but we made it.” He twisted his back a few times to stretch it and sighed.

Nicole nodded. “It’s been a whirlwind, but I’m excited to see what secrets this place holds.”

Gabriel pulled out his phone and started searching for directions to the library he mentioned earlier this week. The symbol in this Italian library is the same as the one in her Floridian bookstore. There has to be a connection somehow.

“Ah, here it is. The library isn’t too far from here. It looks like it’s just a short walk away.”

“Perfect. Let’s freshen up a bit and then we can head over. I’m curious to see if we can find anything about the pendant and those documents.”

Gabriel grinned. “Absolutely, and who knows, we might stumble upon some more hidden treasures along the way.”

As they freshened up and made their way out of the hotel, the excitement of their upcoming exploration reenergized them despite their weariness. The cool breeze of the evening gently swept through the streets, adding a touch of magic to the moment.

“You know, I can’t believe we’re here, Gabriel. It’s like we’re characters in one of those adventure novels I used to read.”

“Well, life has its way of surprising us and turning reality into extraordinary tales. And you, with your adventurous spirit, fit right into this enchanting narrative,” Gabriel said playfully.

Nicole blushed at the compliment, feeling grateful for the journey they were embarking on together. They followed the directions on Gabriel’s phone, enjoying the sights and sounds of the charming town as they walked hand in hand.

As they approached the library, Nicole’s heart quickened with anticipation. The building held the promise of answers,

and she couldn't wait to delve into the mysteries it might hold.

"Let's go, Gabriel," Nicole said excitedly.

They stepped into the library, greeted by the hushed atmosphere and the scent of old books. As they wandered through the aisles, their eyes fell on the symbol from the pendant etched into an old book.

Nicole whispered. "There it is! The symbol."

"You're right! Let's see what this book has to offer," Gabriel said excitedly.

CHAPTER 7



Time moved too fast. *Their* time, for *the moment*, was coming to an end as quickly as it began. Gabriel and Nicole stood together at the airport, their hands intertwined as they faced the impending farewell. The promise of his return lingered in the air, but the ache of separation weighed heavily on both their hearts.

“Okay, but please take care of yourself, Gabriel,” Nicole hugged him.

“You know I will. And remember, we’re bound by the stories we share, no matter the distance.”

They shared a tender kiss, taking in the warmth and comfort of each other’s presence one last time before parting ways.

As Nicole sat in the cab on her way home, the weight of the separation felt heavier with each passing mile. She gazed out the window, trying to keep her composure as memories of their time together flashed before her eyes.

Upon arriving home, Nicole found herself drawn to the notes and journal from Italy. The pages held the history of the Liberty Society.

The Liberty Society traced its origins back to a time when stories were passed down through generations orally, and the power of words was revered as a sacred gift. Over centuries, it evolved into an organization that sought to preserve not just

stories, but the essence of the people whose voices were often silenced by oppression, genocide, and racism.

In the face of prejudice and injustice, the Society was born as a refuge for those whose narratives were threatened to be erased from history. Recognizing the power of literature and the preservation of cultural heritage, the society set out on a mission to collect and store important stories, recipes, and documents from diverse cultures around the world.

Each chapter of the Liberty Society was founded by courageous individuals who believed in the resilience of human stories and their ability to bridge gaps and foster understanding. As time passed and humanity faced new challenges, the Society grew stronger, adapting to technological advancements while staying true to its core purpose – keeping people’s voices alive, even after death.

With chapters scattered across continents, the Society created a vast network of dedicated individuals working tirelessly to collect and safeguard literary works, original documents, and cherished recipes that held cultural significance. It became a sanctuary for those who faced persecution due to their heritage or beliefs, offering protection to writers, historians, and everyday people seeking to share their truths.

But as the Society’s reputation grows, it inevitably attracts adversaries – those who seek to suppress or manipulate history to serve their own agenda. The enemies of the Liberty Society are ruthless in their attempts to destroy valuable literary works, as they recognize the power of information in shaping societal narratives.

People with nefarious motives try to infiltrate the Society, attempting to steal original works to sell them for profit or use them for manipulation. The enemies are well-funded and connected, making the society’s mission of preserving knowledge and history all the more challenging.

Yet, the Liberty Society remains resolute in its mission, drawing strength from the knowledge that protecting these literary treasures is essential for preserving the truth of human

experiences. They use secret codes, hidden libraries, and intricate systems of protection to safeguard the invaluable collection.

New members of the society undergo an initial newcomer period, gaining trust and demonstrating their dedication before being inducted into the larger chapter. This process ensures the society's survival and maintains the integrity of its purpose, guarding against potential infiltrators.

As generations pass, the Liberty Society becomes a beacon of hope and resilience, a guardian of voices that might otherwise have been silenced by time or force. Their work transcends borders and cultures, reaching into every corner of the world, and weaving a tapestry of human history and cultural heritage.

Despite facing immense challenges, the Liberty Society continues to thrive, knowing that their tireless efforts are essential in ensuring that every voice matters and that the power of literature will forever shine as a guiding light in the darkness. As long as there are stories to tell, the Liberty Society vows to stand as protectors, guardians, and champions of the literary secrets that hold the power to shape the world's future.

The clock had just struck midnight and Nicole was alone in Bookshore, meticulously searching the notes. As she turned the page on her journal, a faint sound caught her attention, causing her to freeze. She listened intently, her heart beating faster with each passing second. She heard footsteps.

Curiosity and a tinge of caution propelled her forward, and she tiptoed toward the front of the store. The dim light cast eerie shadows across the shelves as she approached the entrance. Her hand reached for the light switch, but before she could flick it on, a voice echoed through the darkness.

A woman said, harshly, "Don't turn on the lights."

Nicole's pulse quickened, and she could barely make out the figure of a woman standing near the doorway.

Nicole gulped. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“That’s not important. What I need to know is what you know about this store and its previous owner, Mr. Monroe.”

Nicole tried to sound composed. “I... I’m Nicole, the current owner of Bookshore. Mr. Monroe used to own this store, but he vanished. I don’t know much about him.” She reached for the light.

“Lies!” Nicole’s hand jumped back. “I’ve been Mr. Monroe’s neighbor for years. I’ve seen him come and go, but he’s never just disappeared like this. Tell me the truth!”

Nicole was hesitant. “I swear, I don’t know anything more than what I’ve told you. I found records that said the store was turned over to the bank and sold at an auction.”

The woman softened her tone. “I apologize for my intensity. It’s just... I’m worried. We used to talk about books and life. He’s a kind man, and I can’t bear the thought of what happened to him.”

As the woman’s demeanor changed, Nicole felt a flicker of understanding and empathy. She took a step closer, her curiosity piqued. “I understand your concern. I wish I knew more about him and his history with this store, but all I have are fragments of information.”

The woman became anxious. “Is there anything you can tell me? Did he have any secrets?”

Nicole slid her hand to the light switch. “I wish I could help you more. Maybe we could work together to uncover the truth about Mr. Monroe and this store.” She paused. “I’m going to turn the light on now.” After a few moments, the light flickered on and showed the woman from the library who had knocked the book off.

The woman seemed relieved. “I’d appreciate that. It’s comforting to know that you care about what happened to him too.”

Nicole offered her hand. “I’m sorry we started off on the wrong foot. I’m Nicole, by the way.”

“I’m Daisy.” She reached out and shook her hand.

As the two women formed an unexpected alliance, she silently nodded and left the store. Nicole’s heart slowed to a steady pace. She rushed over to the door and shut and locked it. She ran back to her office and sat down at her desk.

The weight of her emotions pressed down upon her like a heavy storm. The events of the past few weeks had taken a toll on her heart, and now, in the solitude of the evening, her emotions spilled over.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she allowed herself to feel the pain she had been holding back. She thought of the hurtful betrayal of her ex-husband, the shattered dreams of a life they had planned together, and the loneliness that followed his departure.

“I trusted him,” she whispered to herself, her voice breaking with sorrow. “I gave him my heart, and he broke it.”

Nicole’s thoughts drifted to Gabriel, the man she had grown fond of. Her heart longed for his reassuring presence, but he was far away, and the ache of his absence only added to her sadness.

The memories of the intruder’s visit flooded her mind, and the fear and vulnerability she had experienced that night resurfaced, leaving her trembling with anxiety.

As her tears flowed, she allowed herself to feel the depth of her emotions. The hurt, the longing, the fear—it all poured out, leaving her feeling raw and exposed. Yet, amid her pain, there was a sense of release and catharsis, as if her tears were cleansing her soul.

Nicole’s phone rang as she sat on the floor, lost in thought. She glanced over to see Gabriel’s name on the screen and quickly got up to retrieve her phone. As she walked toward it, she accidentally stepped on an envelope lying on the floor. She picked it up and noticed her name written on it in elegant calligraphy.

Nicole muttered to herself, “What’s this?” She tried to open the envelope. She heard the phone ring again and

realized it's Gabriel calling. In her haste to answer, she tucked the envelope under her arm and picked up the call.

“Hey, Gabriel! Sorry, I missed your call earlier.”

“No worries. How are you doing, Nicole?”

Nicole paused. Her eyes were still on the envelope. “I’m... I’m okay. Just sorting through some things.”

“I wanted to check in on you.” He paused. “Did you get it?”

Nicole seemed confused. “Get what?”

Gabriel paused.

“Hello?” Nicole asked.

Gabriel cleared his throat. He mumbled something into the receiver.

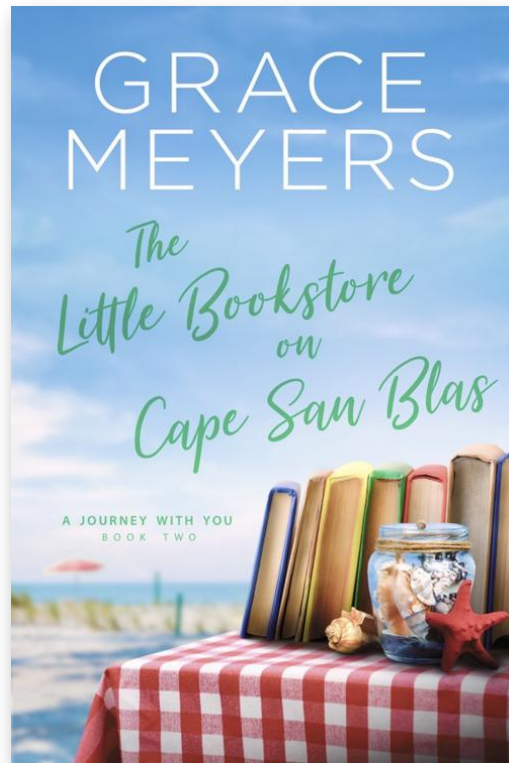
“What? I can’t understand you.” Nicole pressed the phone closer to her ear.

“Did you receive the invitation?” he asked.

Nicole looked at the envelope in her hands. Her mind raced into overdrive again with anticipation leading the way.

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