

IVORY FIELDS

*The beach house
with you*

A SWEET LOVE • ONE



THE BEACH HOUSE WITH YOU

A SWEET LOVE
BOOK 1

IVORY FIELDS



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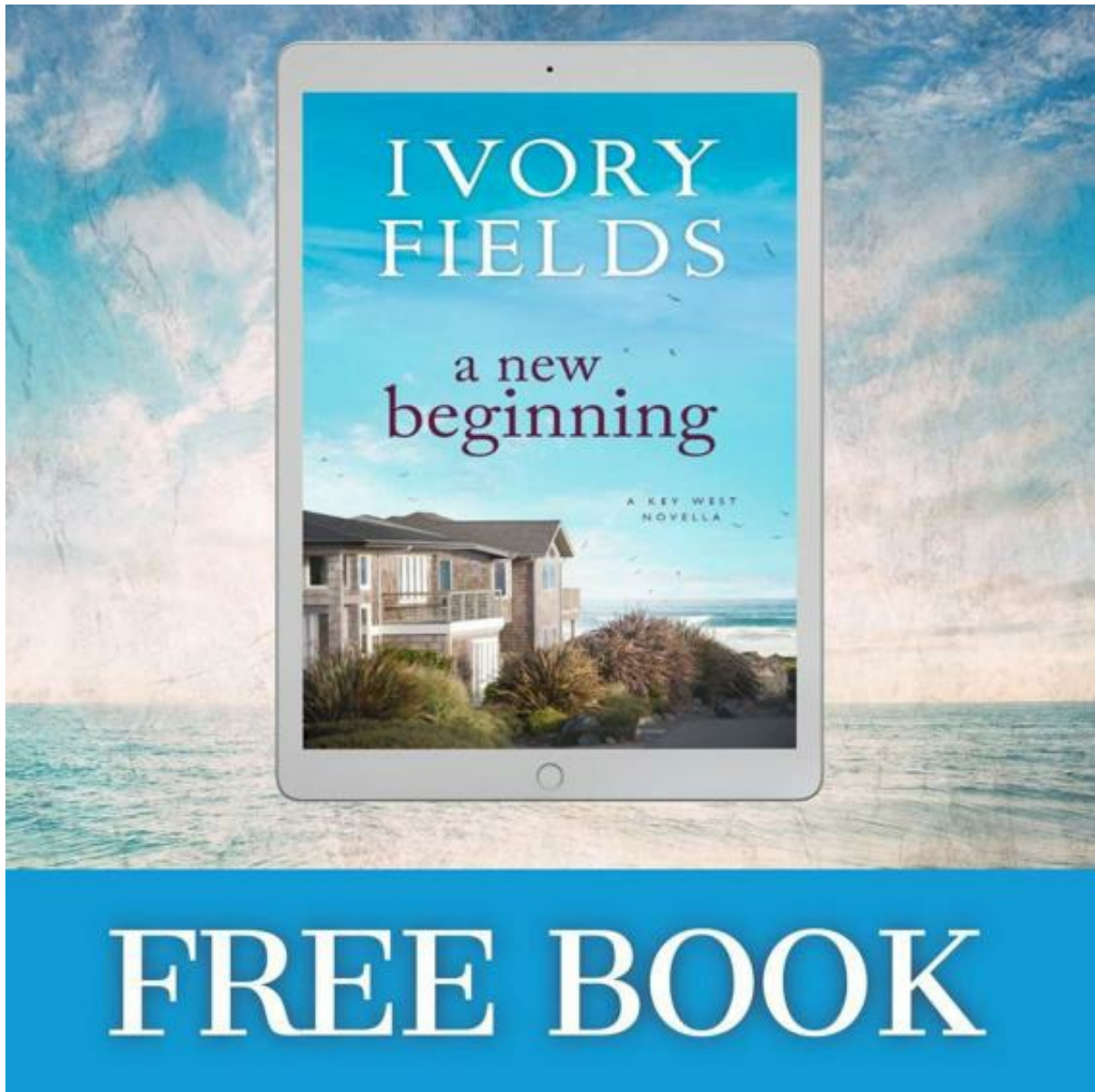
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PROLOGUE



“Jeanette, do you have that case file for the McClaren boys?” Henry asked, stopping by her cubicle.

Not looking up from her work, Jeanette pulled one manicured hand away from her keyboard and fished out a file from the stack to her right. Her eyes flashed from her computer screen to the file for a brief second to confirm the name and then handed it to her manager of Montreal’s Family and Children Services. Henry took the file, barely looking at it, and studied Jeanette.

She was a good one, Jeanette O’Shea was. A tough cookie as some would say. Most agents quit the agency after five years if there wasn’t a promotion on the table—which came few and far between—but not Jeanette. She’d been with the agency for almost twenty years and had been a champion over and over again. And at forty-three, she was just as sharp now as she was when she first started, which was why Henry was having trouble forming the words that he knew he had to say. Clearing his throat, Henry tugged at his tie, adjusted his glasses, and leaned an elbow on her cubicle wall.

“Jeanette, could you stop for a moment, please? I need to speak to you in my office.” Still nervous, Henry began moving from foot to foot.

Jeanette stopped typing, the sound ceasing so suddenly that it jarred Henry. She turned her bright green eyes toward him, and one of her strawberry blonde brows hiked up inquisitively. With a sigh, she took off her beaded readers and folded her hands on her desk.

“What is it, Henry?” she asked, her tone polite but firm.

“Perhaps we could go—”

“No, I’m not going into your office, Henry. I have to finish up here. Besides, you and I are the only ones here. Everyone else has gone home for the day. So what do you need?”

Perspiration appeared on Henry’s forehead as he once more began to shuffle his feet. Unable to take her gaze, he looked down at his tie. His hands itched to toy with it, but instead, he shoved them into the pockets of his slacks. He hated to do this. He really did, but it wasn’t up to him. It was up to someone above his pay grade.

“Jeanette, you have been an amazing contribution to our agency,” he began, the words making his stomach churn. “Your performance and work ethic have always been above and beyond. You’ve been a team player, helped train so many of our agents through the years—”

Jeanette put her hand up, her long, French manicured fingernails flashing in front of his eyes. Secretly, Henry had loved that she kept her nails done. So few of the employees continued to take care of their personal appearance after the first few months due to the mentally exhausting workload that came with the job. But Jeanette? She always showed up early, looking perfectly polished.

“I know where this is going, Henry,” Jeanette said, resignation lacing her tone. “Please, have a seat before you give yourself a panic attack.”

Not needing to be told twice, Henry grabbed the nearest rolling chair and plopped into it.

“I knew this was coming,” Jeanette continued, crossing her legs calmly and scooped her chair toward him.

“I’m due for another pay raise and at this rate, they could hire two fresh-out-of-college youngsters for the same amount. Am I right?”

Henry’s face scrunched in pain as he looked at Jeanette’s calm expression. “Yes,” he bit out, feeling absolutely awful. “But I fought for you, Jeanette. I swear I did. I reminded them of how integral you’ve been over and over again.”

“I know you did, Henry,” Jeanette said softly, giving him a kind smile. “Remember when I trained you? What did I tell you?”

Henry’s guilt grew worse as he swallowed hard.

“That I was great, and I was going to do great things,” he replied, his voice shaking.

Jeanette nodded. “And you are and you do. Trust me, Henry, I’m proud of you that you became my boss. But I’ve been here longer, and I’ve always

known how this place works. So, I want you to know that I know this is beyond your control. Take a breath. Relax. I'm not mad at you."

Henry's posture crumbled as she said this, and Jeanette's heart went out to him. He really was a good boy. Well—man. He was a good man. And he really didn't deserve any blame in this.

"It was wonderful to work with you, Henry," Jeanette said as she got up from her chair. "When did upper management want me out?"

"Three weeks. They want you to train the two new hires they've picked up," he explained.

Though she shook her head, Jeanette smiled sweetly at him as she picked up her purse.

"I'm sorry, but that just won't do for me," she replied gently. "This will be my last day. I understand that means I don't get severance pay, but...I quit. Thank you, Henry."

As she began to walk away, Henry scrambled out of his chair to follow her.

"Jeanette, wait. We need you to stay!" he pled.

"Pish posh," Jeanette replied in the same gentle tone as she pushed the elevator button, "you'll do just fine without me."

Before Henry could say another word, Jeanette stepped onto the elevator and closed the door. Poor Henry looked panicked as the view of his face shrank, but that was no longer her problem now. The moment the elevator started moving, Jeanette let out an exhaustive breath and leaned heavily against the stainless steel wall. In the privacy of the motorized room, she broke her stringent facade and gave in to the upheaval of emotions. She'd known it was coming, but still, it hurt. Nearly twenty years of dedication. Twenty years of sleepless nights, and awful nightmares over everything she'd seen come out of the foster care system came tumbling out, and she let herself sob.

Being the strong woman she was, she composed herself by the time the elevator doors opened. When they did, she walked without turning her head to the lobby doors and pulled out her cell phone. As usual, when she tried to call her husband, Daniel didn't answer. Normally it didn't bother her, but today, it did. She didn't need to lean on him often, but at this moment she absolutely did.

Jeanette walked the few blocks home, keeping her face composed as she weaved through the side streets and into the suburban cul-de-sac where she

and Daniel lived. By the time she reached the front door, her sadness was clawing at her throat, and as she opened it, she called for her husband.

“Daniel? Daniel, where are you?” she asked, walking through their house. “Daniel, you won’t believe what just happened—OH MY GOD! DANIEL!”

Jeanette’s normally soft tone reached a rare strangled shout of surprise as she saw her husband of twenty-two years scrambling to pull on his pants. On their couch, looking like a scared mouse, was a woman half her age, trying desperately to pull her blouse on the right way. The composure she’d been able to cling to while losing her job was suddenly gone, with no extra scrap of it to spare, and Jeanette felt herself start to become undone.

“Sweetheart, please, I can explain,” Daniel pleaded, still struggling with his jeans. “This isn’t what it—”

“If you finish that sentence, I will have no choice but to get violent,” Jeanette cut him off, her tone deadly. Her steely glance passed over the woman again, and despite everything, she simply rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“I’m going to go stay at Carmen’s,” she told him, walking toward the stairs, “and your lady friend had better be gone by the time I’m finished packing.”

“Jeanette, please, wait,” Daniel pleaded, ignoring her warning and following her. She turned suddenly on the steps, startling Daniel so much that he nearly lost his balance and fell backward.

“You and I will talk later, Daniel, I promise you that. But you picked a horrible one to get caught being a trash husband. Now please, stay away from me.”

1



“*M*om, this is so exciting!” Carmen squealed, pouring Jeanette another glass of white wine.

“It totally is, Miss Jeanette,” Franny, Carmen’s roommate agreed, holding her glass up so she could get a refill.

“Thanks, girls,” Jeanette replied, accepting the fresh, full second glass of wine. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve appreciated your support these last few weeks. Not just letting me crash here, but listening to me whine, making me go out, letting me mother you—probably a little too much.” She added the last part with a grimace, and Carmen and Franny were quick to assure her that it wasn’t too much at all.

It had been a little over a month since the day her world had come to a screeching halt. And, after a decent amount of crying, and just a dash of self-pity, Jeanette was ready to move on. Carmen and Franny had welcomed her with open arms and had immediately offered to let her stay as long as she needed. Although she appreciated the offer very much, she knew she couldn’t just sit and wallow on her daughter’s couch.

She had called her cousins Whitney and Amanda on a lark one night a week or so ago when Franny and Carmen were out on dates and she was dwelling on her sadness alone. It had been years since she’d spoken to them, but only because life had gotten busy. So, when they picked up her Facetime call, she was relieved when they both smiled at her instantly and asked her how she’d been.

“Oh, honey, that is awful!” Amanda gasped, her big, cornflower blue eyes

misting over with tears. She was a sweet, sensitive soul, her cousin Amanda. Whitney, her little sister, however, was a little rougher around the edges.

“Do we need to come up there and help make Daniel disappear?” Whitney had asked, completely serious.

Jeanette had felt better talking to the two of them instantly, and soon they were calling one another almost every night. That was how she had found out poor Aunt Miriam had passed recently, and in her trust, had left her beloved bed and breakfast, The Sea Glass Cottage, to them. At first, when they had invited her to move back to the coastal hamlet of Provincetown, Jeanette had politely declined.

But gradually, as Amanda and Whitney told her about the disrepair the old place was in, and how they wanted to revamp it, Jeanette’s interest began to pique. When she’d left Provincetown and married Daniel, she promised herself she wouldn’t go back. Her childhood had been...tricky at best, and her teenage years had been a blur of tears. That was a long time ago, though, and with Amanda and Whitney’s excellent skills of persuasion, Jeanette found herself changing her mind.

Tomorrow, she would be taking a flight from Montréal–Trudeau International Airport to the Boston-Logan International Airport, where Amanda and Whitney would be picking her up. Then, after a two-hour ferry ride, she would be back in Provincetown. It was a massive move, she knew. But somehow, she knew it was necessary.

“You two are still planning to come to visit next month, right?” Jeanette asked Carmen and Franny. “Amanda and Whitney said it’ll be at least two months before the renovations are done and then they don’t get many guests during the winter season, so there will be plenty of room.”

“Absolutely,” Carmen agreed. “I’ve been reading up on Massachusetts, and all of the tourist sites say September is the perfect time to visit.”

“Ooh, do you think we could pay a visit to Salem?” Franny asked, her brown eyes lighting up with excitement. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“It’s a bit of a hike, but if you don’t mind, I don’t see why not,” Jeanette replied cheerily.

For the next few hours, the three women talked excitedly about Jeanette’s new adventure as they finished packing her things. She didn’t have a lot. After finding out the real details of Daniel’s affair, Jeanette had lost interest in keeping most of the things from her former life. She’d kept her extensive clothing and shoe collection—bought and paid for on her own dime and the

few family heirlooms she'd kept over the years. But everything else stayed behind with Daniel.

She figured she didn't need much else anyway, at least not for a while. The Sea Glass Cottage had a commercial kitchen that Amanda had said was outdated but fully functional, and since there were no guests, she'd have full range to utilize the common rooms. They were going to allow her to stay in one of the guest rooms through the winter season, but if she chose to stay with them after that, she'd have to stay in one of the employee rooms in the attic area. Jeanette wasn't sure if she was going to stay permanently yet or not, but she loved that they weren't rushing her to make a decision.

"Okay, Mom, I think you're all set," Carmen said, rolling tape over the last box. "Franny and I will be shipping these out for you right after we drop you off at the airport. Do you need any help with your suitcase?"

Jeanette shook her head as she wrapped one arm around Carmen and the other around Franny.

"Nope, I got that covered. Thank you both so much. Not just for helping me pack, but for letting me come here and being there for me. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

Both of the young women hugged her back tightly.

"After everything you did for us growing up, Miss Jeanette?" Franny giggled. "It's the least we could do. Honestly, if it wasn't for you, I don't think I would have had a childhood."

"And Dad was never there for me," Carmen added, still squeezing her mom tightly, "even though he was the one that was home all the time. Seriously, Mom, we wouldn't have made it without you."

Jeanette felt a lump of emotion form in her throat as she heard this, and kissed them both on the top of the head.

"You two should head to bed," she said, her voice a little shaky. She pushed at them lightly, sending them off to bed as if they were once more eight years old instead of twenty. Both of them said goodnight one more time as they headed down the hallway toward their bedrooms, leaving Jeanette alone in the living room.

The moment she heard their bedroom doors close, Jeanette felt the tears she'd pent up starting to fall. She found the wine bottle that only had a few sips left in it and upended it into her glass before stepping out onto the balcony off of the living room. She was greeted by a gust of warm August air, and she felt comforted by its playful nature.

Twenty years. Not just of marriage, but of her career. And now both were gone, lost on the same day. How? And why? She'd been an amazing worker for the agency and an amazing wife. There was nothing or no one who could tell her otherwise. And yet, she'd lost them all the same.

Jeanette had had her suspicions about Daniel, sure, just like she had had her suspicions about her job. Unlike her, he struggled to keep a steady job. There was always something wrong with every place he was hired at. The pay wasn't good enough. The work conditions weren't suitable. They made him wear a uniform. Endless reasons. Then a couple of years ago after he'd quit his last one, he decided he didn't need to work anymore. Their house was paid for, and with Jeanette's retirement and small trust, it just wasn't necessary.

She'd thought it odd that he would want nothing to do all day but wait for her, but at first, she'd found it sweet. Then he stopped answering the phone if she called during the day. And sometimes, when she came home, he wasn't there and wouldn't be home for another few hours. Still, nothing could have prepared her for what she had walked in on. Seeing that stripped something away from her, something she wasn't sure if she could ever get back.

Daniel had fought to keep her from leaving. He had begged, pleaded, and offered to go back to work—especially after she'd taken his name off of her bank accounts. And that was how she found out about his other little issue. If he wasn't cheating, Jeanette discovered that he was gambling. According to him, he wasn't bad, but things were starting to turn slightly south for him.

Jeanette realized then and there that her finding out about his cheating had actually been a gift from the universe. Daniel had been planning to start using her hard-earned money to fuel his habit, and she knew that they could never reconcile. Even if he never cheated again and went cold turkey with the gambling, she'd always fear when he'd start again.

Stop crying, she told herself internally, brushing away her tears.

"It's time for a fresh start," Jeanette said aloud, peering over the mass of illuminated buildings of the city set against the dark blue night sky. She raised her glass to the view, toasting it goodbye, and drained her wine glass in one gulp.

Back inside, she snuggled up on the couch she'd been sleeping on the last few weeks and pulled the thin blanket up to her chin. As she willed herself to sleep, she whispered a new little mantra to herself.

Tomorrow is the beginning of something bold. The start of something

new. Tomorrow is when I feel strong again. I am bound and determined to make this work for me. And I will not fail.



Jeanette stepped into the Boston airport, a little tipsy. She'd done her best to avoid an alcoholic breakfast drink, but then the lure of mimosas became too strong. She was trying to tell herself it was a mistake. To drink so early in the morning was obviously a cry for help. Or at least that's what she used to think. But in truth, the bubbly orange juice had helped tamper down her anxiety and even made her a tad giggly.

"Jeanette! Jeanette! Over here!" a familiar and beloved voice called through the sea of people.

She pushed gently through the mess of bodies, heading toward the voice, and a huge smile broke across her face as she spotted Whitney and Amanda. They hadn't changed much since she'd seen them last. They still shared a startling resemblance to their mother. Sandy blonde curls, bright blue eyes with long eyelashes, and pronounced noses speckled with light brown freckles.

She remembered the three of them playing in the corner of their great-grandfather's wheat field, using sticks as swords to rescue the princess trapped in the wheat monster's dwelling in the center of the field. They had been so young then. So innocent and naive. And then the real world hit. And they all discovered that their fellow man could be worse than any made-up monster they conjured.

"Hi!" Jeanette squealed excitedly. Her purse strap fell down to her elbow as she opened her arms, and the three of them embraced tightly.

"You look so great, doll," Whitney praised, giving her another squeeze

before taking Jeanette by the shoulders and holding her back so she could look at her. “I see you’ve escaped the gray hair curse as we did.”

Jeanette laughed as Amanda threw her arm around her shoulders and they began to walk to baggage claim.

“So far, yes, but only time will tell,” she replied, looking back and forth between them. “Oh, I can’t believe it! We’re together again!”

Once more the three of them converged on one another for a group hug, annoying the travelers milling around them. Together they fished out the two bags Jeanette had checked, and then the three of them talked excitedly as they made their way to the ferry. She’d heard a little bit about what was happening at The Sea Glass Cottage through their phone calls, but now that they were together, Amanda and Whitney filled her in on more information.

She discovered The Sea Glass Cottage had fallen into despair a few years ago, but when the pandemic hit, it had really taken a plunge. With no constant flow of guests, there was no money for repairs, and one by one they had to shut off the rooms to make ends meet. Then, when Aunt Miriam lost her battle with cancer, her will had revealed a pleasant surprise among the gloom of her passing. She’d left her girls a small fortune, along with a request to return The Sea Glass Cottage to its original glory.

So far, they’d paid for work to renovate the outside of the bed and breakfast. A new roof, siding, and porch had replaced the rotted-out and dangerous planks that had once been there. Work was currently being done on the windows as well.

“We’ve been really blessed,” Amanda explained as the ferry sailed into the dock. “Jason has been a real gem in helping us find great contractors who don’t charge an arm and a leg, though I’m not sure if he’s doing that for our benefit or his.”

“Who’s Jason?” Jeanette asked, following them off the ferry.

“You remember Jason,” Whitney replied cheerily. “His daddy used to be the sheriff’s deputy.”

Jeanette balked, memories flooding back to her.

“Jason Flaherty?!” she asked, surprised. “He’s still around?” Jeanette shook her head in amazement. “By now, I thought he’d be a millionaire contractor in some big city.”

“He was,” Amanda replied, “but he came back when his daddy died and never left. I’m not really sure if that’s what he had planned, but he’s made it work. Our place wasn’t the only one that got hit hard. Most had to sell. Jason

bought them up and owns a company called Provincetown Properties now.”

“How original,” Jeanette replied dryly.

“We think he wants our place too.” Whitney perked up. “I mean, why else would he be so willing to help?”

“Do you want to sell?” Jeanette asked, looking back and forth between the two of them.

“No!” they replied in unison. Just like they used to when they were young.

Jeanette pulled her lips between her teeth, hiding her smile. Some things never changed.

“Besides, even if we did, Joe would swoop in in a second. He’s been a bear with a sore behind ever since he discovered Mamma didn’t leave him anything. Thinks he deserves a cut of The Sea Glass Cottage,” Amanda said, rolling her eyes.

“Shows up once or twice a week to pester us about ‘buying in,’” Whitney added, “as if he had anything to offer.”

Joe. Jeanette remembered Joe. He was an awful boy who had loved to make all of the girls cry. He’d put wasps down their dresses, would hide behind trees to scare them and then chase them with sticks. One time he’d locked Amanda in a closet and not even the grown-ups could convince him to give up the key. Aunt Miriam eventually had to call the sheriff’s office, and Jason’s daddy had to come and jimmy the door open. Everyone had been furious, but Joe’s father, Aunt Miriam’s second husband, had refused to let anyone punish him.

“I’m assuming he hasn’t changed much?” Jeanette asked.

“Not one bit,” Whitney replied dryly. “But let’s talk of better things. Look! We’re here!”

Once off the ferry, they walked to the parking garage where they loaded Jeanette’s luggage into The Sea Glass Cottage shuttle van. The drive home was very short, and now, as Jeanette looked out the window and toward the old bed and breakfast, she felt a whoosh of happiness go through her, stomping out the negative emotions she’d been feeling over hearing about Joe.

Despite the renovations, it looked exactly the way it did when she was little. Like straight out of a fairy tale book, it still looked more like a castle than it did a house, with rounded turrets and quaint little quirks. Amanda had put her own artistic touches on it, like setting colorful marbles and stones into

the walkways, making them sparkle in the sunlight.

“What do you think?” Amanda asked, smiling as she opened the back doors of the shuttle van.

“Like stepping back in time,” Jeanette replied with a smile, her eyes still taking in the view. Just beyond the bed and breakfast was the beach, which even from here she could see was speckled with guests from the surrounding tourist properties.

From behind her, she felt Whitney wrap her arms around her and give her another squeeze.

“Welcome home, honey,” she said warmly. “Come on, let’s get you settled.”

JEANETTE LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM, wide-eyed. “Babes, this is sweet, but you don’t have to give me this room,” she assured them. “It’s a suite! I mean, it could be rented out as is!”

“It could,” Whitney agreed with a shrug, “but we’re not going to. Like we said, we’re not going to take on guests again until the whole place is finished. There’s no reason for not letting you enjoy it.”

Jeanette remembered this room. She’d loved to sneak into it between guests and play princess. It was one of the turret rooms, beautifully rounded instead of squared, with a wraparound balcony and circular windows that popped outwards instead of drawing up. The walls had been painted a bright white, which captured the sunlight perfectly and brightened up the room. The bed was outdated but greatly appreciated by Jeanette. It was an antique, dark oak, four-poster bed complete with baby blue curtains that wrapped around it. The furniture matched the bed perfectly with each piece adorned with the same baby blue fabric.

“I love it.” She sighed, turning around to face her cousins with a big smile. “Thank you both so much. For the room, for being you, for everything.”

“Oh, honey, that’s what family’s for!” Amanda exclaimed, bouncing on her feet excitedly.

“Besides, we’ve missed you,” Whitney added with the same enthusiasm. She paused, as if rethinking her statement, and added, “Although we are

saddened by the circumstances.”

Ah, yes. The circumstances. To her surprise, Jeanette had been so wrapped up in hearing about The Sea Glass Cottage and walking down memory lane, she'd almost forgotten the whole reason why she was there. Suddenly feeling drained, she sat down hard on the edge of the bed and sighed.

“I almost forgot,” she murmured, her eyebrows lifting up. Across from her, she caught Amanda shooting Whitney a dirty look and elbowing her gently in the ribs.

“Sorry, babes,” Whitney said regretfully, “can we do anything?”

Amanda placed a hand on her younger sister's shoulder and squeezed gently, stopping her from making more futile attempts to repair the conversation.

“Why don't you take some time to unpack?” Amanda asked gently, looking at Jeanette. “It's almost lunchtime. We'll go downstairs and organize some food. You just come join us whenever you're ready. How does that sound?”

“Don't you have the construction company coming?” Jeanette asked. “I don't want to keep you from anything important.”

“We're taking a small break,” Amanda explained. “They'll be back next Monday to continue the work, but for now, we have all this time for ourselves.”

Jeanette nodded mutely, and without another word, Amanda and Whitney closed her door, leaving her to herself. A heavy sigh with tears attached to it escaped her chest once she was alone. Glassy-eyed, she bent down to one of her suitcases and unzipped it. She tried for a while to put her things into the closet and dressers, but soon gave up and abandoned the task.

She took another look around the room, then walked over to the balcony doors to open them. The crisp, salty scent of the ocean air hit her as she stepped outside, lessening her pain a little. She had done so well all day—keeping away from thoughts of Daniel. And now here they were again, smacking her right where it hurt.

Bracing her hands on the wrought iron railing, she leaned over the edge and let out a frustrated sound that was a mix of yelling, screaming, and sobbing. She beat her hands against the railing in her sadness and then began a feeble attempt at shaking it.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” a voice said.

Startled and embarrassed, Jeanette froze instantly. She looked around at the balconies that lined the boutique hotel sitting beside The Sea Glass Cottage and saw nothing.

“Down here,” the voice said again, in the same bemused tone.

Shielding her eyes with her hand, Jeanette leaned over the railing and looked down. Though he had changed quite a bit, Jeanette saw the familiar face of Jason Flaherty peering up at her through dark sunglasses. He hadn’t changed much, if at all. It was as if time had decided not to touch him since she’d last seen him in his early twenties. Tanned, dark hair, and he had the same athletic build—as if the man hadn’t gained a single pound. Jeanette wondered suddenly if he even remembered her.

“You wouldn’t do what?” she yelled down at him.

He pointed up in her general direction.

“Take your frustration out on the railing.”

“And why not?” she replied defensively, crossing her arms.

A cheeky grin spread across Jason’s face as he continued to look up at her.

“Well, for one, it’s not entirely braced yet and we don’t want you tumbling from all the way up there. For two, that railing didn’t do anything to you. It doesn’t deserve to be treated in such a harsh way.”

Despite her feelings of sadness and frustration over Daniel, Jeanette let out a dry chuckle. He still had the same cheesy, sarcastic humor about him. Another thing that hadn’t changed.

“Well, that may be true,” she replied dryly, “but if I shook the person my frustration was meant for, I’m pretty sure I’d have the cops called on me.”

“You always were a little rough around the edges,” he replied, going along with the bit.

So he *did* remember her.

“Stay there,” Jason said, walking toward the latticework of the giant house.

“Where else am I going to go?” she quipped back.

Jeanette watched, amused, as Jason grabbed ahold of the ivory-covered lattice and began to climb up. As she watched him, she couldn’t help but notice his biceps and forearms rippling as he made his way up to her balcony. Within a minute, he was swinging his legs over the railing, and standing beside her. He looked her up and down, as if studying her, and then removed his sunglasses so his deep blue eyes met her green ones.

“Good to see you, Netti Spaghetti,” he said, his voice deep and calm. Jeanette gave him a single nod.

“You too, Tarzan,” she replied, referring to his recent climb. Jason gave her a side smile, flashing white, straight teeth.

“You home for good?” he asked, dusting his hands together.

Jeanette shrugged, her mind still hung up on the childhood nickname he’d given her.

“Probably. Maybe. To be honest I’m not really sure.”

Jason nodded his head. As if he understood where she was coming from. Had she been literally screwed over by someone too?

“So, what do you know?” Jeanette asked. Though it was still very warm, she wrapped her yellow cardigan tighter around her white blouse. While he had only gotten muscular with age, she had widened a bit. She still had a great figure, in her opinion, but two-piece bikinis were definitely no longer comfortable.

Jason shrugged nonchalantly.

“Only that Amanda and Whitney are very happy to have you here, and that your stay is...open-ended.”

Jeanette felt a new swell of love and appreciation for her two cousins as Jason said this. They had always known how to be discrete. She made a mental note to do something nice for them.

“So, I hear you’re some sort of real estate mogul now,” she said, switching topics.

Jason’s sly side smile returned. “Does that surprise you?”

Jeanette shook her head.

“Not really. I always knew you were going to be a mogul of some sort. Happy to hear you’re on the up and up, though.”

Jason’s side smile spread into a wide grin and for the first time, he chuckled.

“So, are you going to ask?”

“Ask what?” Jason replied.

“Why I’m here,” Jeanette explained. He gave her another shrug.

“You’ll tell me if you want me to know.”

“You know, I’m starting to remember how annoying you were,” Jeanette quipped.

“And I’m remembering how funny you were,” he quipped back right away.

Unable to stop herself, Jeanette laughed and shook her head.

“You know, Amanda and Whitney are downstairs getting some lunch together. Do you want to come in and join us?”

“I appreciate the offer,” Jason replied, his tone genuine, “but I’ve got to get back to work. I just wanted to save that railing from you before you choked the life out of it.”

“You had perfect timing,” Jeanette joked. “One more minute and it would have been a goner.”

“Good thing I saw you then,” Jason quipped. He gave another sly smile and began to climb back over the railing. He paused when both feet were on the other side, and met Jeanette’s eyes a final time.

“I’ll see you around?”

Jeanette nodded.

“I’ll be here.”

Jason nodded once more and began to descend.

“Take care of yourself, Netti Spaghetti.”

3



The moment Jeanette opened her door, she caught the whiff of something delicious wafting up from downstairs. She let out a moan as her mouth began to water, and headed down the staircase.

“It smells amazing in here,” she said, pushing through the double kitchen doors. Unable to help herself, Jeanette smiled as she looked over the kitchen, a fresh wave of nostalgia washing over her. It still looked exactly the way it did when she was younger. Canary yellow walls, off-white Formica countertops, appliances that should have broken down decades ago, yet somehow, had stood the test of time.

Whitney popped her head out of the open fridge and smiled. She produced a pale pink Pyrex dish and closed the door with her hip. Amanda turned briefly from the stovetop, winked, and turned her attention back to the pot she was stirring.

“I hope you don’t mind leftovers,” Amanda said over her shoulder. “We just made this clam chowder last night so it’s fresh. We’ve got some leftover homemade bread too.”

“Sounds great,” Jeanette replied, taking a seat at the retro, oval-shaped table lined with six metal chairs that were covered with faded, cracked leather.

“I made some of Grandmama’s shrimp salad this morning too, and some deviled eggs,” Whitney added.

“Gosh, that looks terrific! Boy, I’m being hit with all kinds of things from the past today,” Jeanette said, looking into the Pyrex dish Whitney put on the

table.

“Really?” Amanda mused, bringing the pot of chowder to the table. “The room is bringing back memories too?”

From different cupboards, Whitney pulled out three earthenware bowls, a bottle of wine, and a pack of crackers. She grabbed three soup spoons from the drawer and joined them, looking at Jeanette curiously.

“That,” Jeanette agreed, “and I just got a visit from Jason Flaherty.”

Amanda paused midway through ladling the chowder into bowls and looked up at Jeanette with her brows raised.

“Really? I didn’t hear him come in,” she said, moving again.

Jeanette chortled as Whitney poured her a very full glass of wine. *Bless her*, she thought.

“That’s because he didn’t come in. He climbed up the lattice and met me on the balcony.”

For a moment, Jeanette’s two cousins stared at her wildly, and then they both burst into laughter.

“Of course, he did,” Amanda said, rolling her eyes.

“Why am I not in the least bit surprised?” Whitney added, shaking her head as she grinned.

“Has he done this before?” Jeanette asked, amused.

“Not that we know of,” Amanda replied, taking a seat, “but I don’t think he’s changed much since we were teenagers. He’s just as daring now as he was back then.”

“Yeah, but back then we were durable,” Jeanette quipped. “If he would have fallen, he probably would have just bounced back up. Now, if he fell, he’d probably break every bone in his body.”

Jeanette took a bite of the clam chowder and rolled her eyes. “Mmhm. Delicious.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Amanda replied, accepting the praise, “but as for Jason, I’m pretty sure he lives up to the ‘you’re as old as you feel philosophy.’ I mean, he’s a big-time CEO. If he wanted to, he could be one of those bosses who only shows up once in a blue moon. But we see him all the time working with his construction crew, getting down and dirty with the labor.”

Jeanette’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. She’d met plenty of powerful men in Montreal, and none of them were willing to get their hands dirty.

“Really?” she asked. “Why?”

Amanda and Whitney shrugged.

“Who knows?” Whitney replied, passing her the shrimp salad. “But for whatever reason, his crews seem to really like how hands-on he is. We hear them talking outside sometimes. Seems like they have a lot of genuine respect for the guy.”

Jeanette thought about this as the three of them fell into a comfortable silence as they enjoyed their lunch. Jason was older than her by a good five years or so, but now, thinking back, he was the one who made sure *everyone* was included in the games, no matter how young they were. She also recalled that he had very little tolerance for bullying.

“So,” Amanda began as they started to clear the table, “now that you’re here, what do you want to do?”

Jeanette picked up her bowl and spoon and carried them to the sink, already deciding to take care of the dishes for everyone.

“Honestly?” she replied. “I’m not sure, but I know I don’t want to just lie around and do nothing. I did enough of that at Carmen and Franny’s. I need something that gets me back on my feet again. Is there anything I can do around here to help?”

“Oh, honey,” Whitney laughed as she put things back into the fridge, “we have a whole laundry list of things we need done.”

“Perfect! Why don’t you give me what you got and I’ll get started?”

Amanda and Whitney shared a concerned glance before turning to Jeanette.

“Are you sure?” Amanda asked, her tone gentle. “You don’t want to at least take the rest of the day to relax?”

Jeanette shook her head.

“No, thanks. I’ve done about all of the relaxing I can for now,” she replied. “Seriously, what have you got? Even if it’s stuff I can’t get completed today, I can at least get started.”

Whitney pulled a magnet off the fridge holding a lined piece of pink paper and handed it to Jeanette. As she skimmed down the list, she realized her cousins weren’t joking. There was landscaping work they wanted to do themselves, rooms to strip that weren’t being used, and they wanted to complete an inventory of the furniture as well as a detailed list of what goes where. The list went on, and at the bottom of it were the words *weekly menu planning*.

“What’s this one mean?” Jeanette asked, pointing to it. Whitney read it

over her shoulder and then nodded.

“Oh yeah, we forgot to tell you about that. Since we’ve decided to keep the kitchen the way it is, we decided to put our catering and service license to use to make up for some of the funds we’re not getting for being closed to overnight guests. We do a closed-menu dinner service here every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. When we can find the help, we also cater events.”

“It’s pretty successful,” Amanda chimed in, “plus it’s a great way to get people interested in booking rooms whenever we’re ready again. They come in, get to see our place, eat our amazing food—”

“And while they do that, we get to talk about how great this place is,” Whitney interrupted. “It eats away at our profits a little, though, especially now that it’s so popular. We have to hire a server or two to help with the workload, and we don’t accept tips, so the hourly has to be pretty high.”

“Well, I can take care of that,” Jeanette replied happily, “and you don’t even have to pay me!”

“Don’t be silly.” Amanda laughed. “Of course, we’d pay you. And greatly appreciate your help, but we were going to cancel this week’s service so you’d have time to settle in.”

Jeanette shook her head, getting back up.

“Don’t do that. It’s kind that you’re allowing me to stay here, but I don’t want to be the reason you’re losing any money. Seriously, if you haven’t sent out the cancellation memo yet, let’s go ahead and do it. What’s your menu for this weekend?”

Amanda went to a drawer, pulled out a pink notebook that the page had come from, and opened it up to the last page.

“So, we were thinking of doing a casual dining situation outside on the beach. Since the season is almost over, we thought we’d do one last outdoor hoorah. Hawaiian barbeque style with chicken, shrimp, and beef, some macaroni salad and some sort of rice dish, and a few roasted veggies. For appetizers, I wrote down grilled clams and mussels with some toast points. And then for dessert offer something really chocolatey and something really fruity.”

“That sounds amazing,” Jeanette agreed, reading over the ingredient list. “Why don’t I go get most of the groceries you guys need? Thursday’s only a couple of days away and it’ll all keep. Then Thursday morning I can go to the fish market and pick out some fresh clams and mussels.”

“Are you sure?” Whitney asked, placing a comforting hand on Jeanette’s

shoulder. “I mean, that sounds great, really, but if you’re not up to it...”

Jeanette reached up and patted Whitney’s hand.

“I’m up for it,” she promised. “Do you guys mind if I get the keys to the van? Oh, and is Morrison’s still open? Is that where you go?”

Amanda nodded and pulled the shuttle van keys off the row of hooks along the kitchen wall.

“Yep. Wait until you see what they’ve done with the place. They’ve really spruced it up since you’ve last been here,” she said, handing the keys to Jeanette. “I’ll give Wilma a call when you’re on your way over and have her put your name on our tab. And please feel free to get anything you want for yourself. We really do want you to be comfortable here.”

Whitney nodded her head, writing out another small list of groceries they wanted for themselves. Jeanette accepted it, went upstairs to change, and in a few minutes, she was out the door and on her way to Morrison’s. Like everything else about the past, the way there came back to her, and in ten minutes she found herself in the nearly full parking lot of Morrison’s Grocers and Spirits.

Amanda had been right, the old family store had really grown up since she’d last been home. They still stuck with the organic and locally sourced products, but the selection had more than tripled. Soon, she found herself wandering through the aisles, taking in the views of the beautifully branded options that were both understated and classy. In fact, halfway through shopping, she found herself pretending she wasn’t back home at all, but in a fancy French upscale store, strolling pleasantly in her pale yellow sundress.

“Well, look who it is.”

A man’s voice pierced through Jeanette’s daydream, bringing her back to reality. She looked away from the selection of canned fish, and for a moment, she couldn’t place the rather unhappy face that was staring back at her. His dark eyes were beady and nearly hidden with gray, bushy eyebrows. He had a cowboy mustache that made him look more of a creeper than a man on the range, and he had jowls that likened him to a bulldog. Unlike the other people in the store, who were fairly well-dressed, he wore a pair of dirty jeans and a plain, dark green t-shirt that fitted over his protruding belly like a second skin.

“I’m sorry, but I think you might have me confused with someone else,” Jeanette said, starting to feel uncomfortable by the way he was looking at her.

The man chortled as he hiked his thumbs into his belt loops.

“What, you don’t have love for your family anymore?” he asked.

Like running into a brick wall, Jeanette was jarred as she suddenly understood who she was talking to. Amanda and Whitney’s stepbrother Joe didn’t at all resemble the kid that had once terrorized her and over half of the kids in the neighborhood. He had the same eyes, sure, but other than that, there was nothing left of what the muscular, angry teenager used to be.

“Well, hi, Joe,” Jeanette said. She was struggling to find more words to say, but nothing polite came to mind. Instead, she pressed her lips together tightly and began shifting from one sandaled foot to the other uncomfortably.

“Hi back,” he said gruffly. “What are you doing here?”

A myriad of possible answers came flooding to Jeanette’s mind, but there were none that she felt comfortable giving him. In fact, for some reason, she wanted Joe to know as little as possible.”

“Shopping,” she replied waving her hand around with a flourish.

His beady eyes stared at her suspiciously, then he grunted as his lips pulled up into a smirk.

“Not trying to help my sisters keep The Sea Glass Cottage going I hope,” he said.

“Stepsisters,” Jeanette corrected. It flew out of her mouth immediately, her brain not even processing the words before she said them. She blushed uncomfortably, not sure where that little quip would land. To her discomfort, Joe only sneered, revealing two crooked rows of yellow teeth.

“That’s right, you ladies stick together. I should have known that’s what you’re back here for,” he said, looking her up and down as if disgusted. “That’s fine. It doesn’t matter. They don’t have the stuff it takes to run a place like that. It should have gone to me. Like my dad wanted.”

Jeanette’s one brow arched in a challenging manner. She didn’t want to get into an argument with Joe. Not in the store and not on her very first day back. But the urge to do so was strong.

“Whatever you say, Joe,” she replied, staring right back at him with a straight face. “Listen, I’ve really enjoyed our little reunion, but I’m nearly finished with my shopping and need to get back. Lots to do you know. Especially since it’s just us three little ladies working all alone.”

To her amusement, Joe’s had the decency to look flustered, and she took that opportunity to steer her cart around him and head to the checkout.



“*H*ow was the store?” Amanda asked. Jeanette had pulled back up to The Sea Glass Cottage, and Amanda and Whitney had come out to help carry in the groceries.

“I ran into your brother,” Jeanette replied, her tone flat. Amanda and Whitney both grimaced.

“Yikes. We were hoping it would be a while before you saw him,” Whitney said, taking an armful of cloth tote bags.

“He looks so...” Jeanette trailed off, not able to think of a polite way to express her thoughts.

“Yeah,” Amanda agreed, shaking her head sadly, “time has not been kind to him. But maybe that’s just payback for him not being kind to the world.”

Jeanette laughed as she followed her cousins back into the house. “That’s a great way to put it.”

“Did he say anything to you besides hello?” Amanda asked, starting to put groceries away.

“Nothing surprising,” Jeanette replied with a shrug, “other than the three of us are doomed because we don’t have a man around.”

“Is that what we are?” Whitney asked in mock amazement. “Here I thought the proper term was blessed.”

“Amen, sister,” Amanda replied, making Jeanette laugh again. They all worked together to put the rest of the groceries away, chatting as they did so about Joe’s progress from bad boy to miserable old man.

“Mom always thought he had the potential to turn it all around,” Amanda

explained. “She thought that if he’d just been handed the right opportunity, he’d straighten himself out and not be so hateful. But, the more she and our stepdad tried to help him, the more things Joe ended up ruining. Originally, ownership of The Sea Glass Cottage was to go to the three of us. But when Joe ended up in trouble with the feds a few years ago, Mom decided to cut him out. She left him a little of her savings, but he blew through that in less than a week.”

“What happened there?” Jeanette asked, intrigued.

“He thought he was going to be the next big fish mogul,” Whitney explained, rolling her eyes. “But, of course, all of his ideas involved cheating of some sort. He started boasting about a business license and got into a few deals with some of the local boatmen. But he failed at holding up his end of the deals almost immediately and got caught in a bunch of lies. Eventually, the boatmen he screwed over got the authorities involved. That’s when they found out his business wasn’t real, and that he was selling illegally outside of shopping centers on the mainland. It was a big mess.”

“Sounds like a gem,” Jeanette said sarcastically. Both Amanda and Whitney nodded.

“Honestly, though, it’s a little hard not to feel sorry for him.” Amanda sighed.

“Speak for yourself,” Whitney replied quickly, adding a cackle. “That man is meaner than a rattlesnake that swallowed a balloon full of cement. He’s had at least three decent women try to spruce him up and change his ways, and he chased every single one of them away. That’s a man who knows who he is and likes it. There’s no reason to feel sorry for him.”

“Here, here,” Jeanette said in agreement.

Once the groceries were all put away, Jeanette, Amanda, and Whitney headed to the back deck of The Sea Glass Cottage that overlooked the beach. Their conversation switched from Joe to much more pleasant things as the day slowly turned into night. Like the old friends they were, they finished one another’s jokes, reminisced about the old pretend games they’d played as children, and discussed only the bright possibilities of their future.

Later, when they were all talked out and ready for bed, the three of them hugged each other goodnight and went their separate ways. After a long shower, Jeanette finished unpacking, no longer hindered by thoughts of Daniel, and then grabbed her sketchbook before heading back out to her balcony. She by no means considered herself an artist, but it was a hobby she

used to enjoy much more frequently before her life got busy and Daniel gave up on working. As she started to sketch, a smile grew on her face, and for the first time in a while, she felt at peace.



With as busy as her couple of days had been, Jeanette found little to no time to lose herself in thoughts of Daniel or her old job. With a renewed work ethic, she had checked off everything on Amanda and Whitney's list and had found that she quite enjoyed helping with the weekend dinner services they hosted. The work was not only fun, but so was interacting with their guests. She discovered that most of them were tourists that at one time or another had stayed at The Sea Glass Cottage, and they were all eager for it to open its doors once again.

When Jeanette wasn't working on tasks around the bed and breakfast or helping with the dinner arrangements, her time was easily filled with pleasant conversations with Amanda and Whitney. She had missed them more than she realized and for many reasons. Of course, not everything they discussed was all sunshine and rainbows.

Jeanette had known that Amanda had married some fifteen years ago, but she hadn't been able to make it to the wedding. But what she hadn't known was that she had gotten married for less than romantic reasons. Instead, she had married for friendship and favor. A good friend she'd met in college had needed a green card, and Amanda had agreed to become the necessary stepping stone for her husband to qualify for citizenship. Though their marriage wasn't romantic, it was full of love. She got to meet Javier on the first night of their dinner service and she found him to be kind, funny, and sensitive, very much like her cousin.

To this day they were best friends, with the promise of divorce if either

found a more suitable mate. So far, though, neither had been lucky in love, and their marriage still stood. Jeanette pondered, though, if that was a bad thing because from what she saw, they were both very happy with their arrangement.

Whitney, she discovered, had fallen in and out of love many times, and had been proposed to three times. Whenever it came to actually getting married, though, she always found one reason or another to end it. Again, Jeanette didn't blame her. After all, if she would have paid attention to Daniel's red flags, she wouldn't have gotten married either. She was very thankful for her daughter Carmen, and wouldn't trade that for the world. However, part of her began to wonder what her life would have looked like if she hadn't walked down the aisle.

By Saturday, she had caught up with her cousins, learned every detail about their last twenty years or so, and she was in awe of them. They were not only strong and independent but also still able to cling to their sensitive sides, a feat which was rare these days.

"You're up early!" Whitney announced as she came into the kitchen. Jeanette turned from the full pot of coffee she'd just finished brewing and smiled.

"With a view like this to wake up to, it's hard not to be an early riser," she replied happily. She pulled another coffee cup from the mug tree and poured a cup for Whitney.

"It's one of the many reasons why it's hard to be sad here," Whitney agreed cheerily. She pulled out the coffee creamer from the fridge and then murmured a thanks as she accepted the mug from Jeanette.

"So listen, I know that you said that you were fine if we asked the crews to start their work again a little earlier than previously scheduled, but we wanted to be sure." Whitney stirred some creamer into her mug and brought it to her lips for a sip. "I mean, if it's about keeping busy, there's plenty of other stuff we could do. We could show you around a little more. Spend a few days on the beach. Whatever you want really."

Jeanette smiled as she shook her head and stirred some creamer into her own mug.

"I really appreciate that, but honestly, I've been really enjoying getting back to work. Especially this kind of work. I mean, I can't tell you how nice it is to not have to go home and cry myself to sleep. Here, I go to bed with a smile on my face and wake up with one. I'd like to keep those good vibes

going. But, of course, if you and Amanda need the break, please, by all means, take it.”

Whitney shook her head as she began cracking eggs into a bowl.

“Nope, we’re kind of on the same page as you are. We like the work. Plus, it feels like every day we’re getting a little closer to getting this place back in shape. We just wanted to make sure we weren’t taking advantage of you.”

Jeanette laughed as she pulled out the bread and toaster.

“Not at all, I promise. If anything, you’re keeping me from going insane.”

“Good morning, ladies,” Amanda announced cheerily as she walked in. “Ooh, coffee.” She made a beeline for the coffee maker, and Jeanette turned so she could pour her a mug.

“Thanks, doll,” Amanda said, accepting the mug before turning to Whitney. “Did you already talk to her about the crew?”

“Yep,” Whitney agreed, pouring the scrambled egg mixture into the hot frying pan.

“I promise,” Jeanette said with a laugh, “I am ready and raring to go. You guys don’t have to worry about working me too hard. And to be honest, I’m kind of sad that this is the last night of the week that we’re doing the dinner service. I like it, it’s fun. You guys get a real crowd in here.”

“We do,” Amanda agreed, “but unfortunately we’re reaching the end of the tourist season, so our regulars won’t be around.”

“Well, maybe I could help you with some marketing?” Jeanette offered. “I know there’s not a ton of locals that stay here in the winter, but it might be enough for us to open up a night or two a week.”

“I’m fine with that!” Whitney agreed, transferring the fluffy scrambled eggs into a serving bowl.

“That sounds great, actually,” Amanda added. “Maybe it’ll segue us into another venture. Who knows?”

Before they could continue the conversation, they heard someone call “hello” from the hallway. A moment later, Javier walked in, holding a brown grocery bag.

“Good morning, ladies,” he announced, his white smile spread wide across his handsome face.

“Good morning, Javier,” they all replied to him in unison. He bent down to kiss Amanda on the cheek and then carried the bag to the counter.

“I’m glad I caught you before you had breakfast. I got these grapefruits

and they are *amazing*. You have to try the avocados too. They're just like the ones I used to eat back home."

"Only if you join us," Amanda replied playfully.

"But of course," Javier replied, smiling at her adoringly. "You look beautiful today by the way, babes. I love that you took my advice with that new spray for your hair. It gives it so much more body."

"Well, you've never steered me wrong on beauty products before," she replied happily.

While Jeanette halved two grapefruits, Javier made quick work of the avocados, and they sat them on the table. With their forks, they smushed the green goodness onto the toast and then scooped some scrambled eggs onto the top.

"Oh my gosh," Jeanette groaned, taking her first bite. "You're right, these are amazing."

"And full of yummy vitamins and nutrients for our gorgeous bodies," Javier added in a tone that made them all giggle.

"Javier, can you marry us too?" Whitney asked, batting her lashes at him. Javier laughed and leaned over to kiss Amanda once more on the cheek.

"Sorry, ladies, but I'm a one-woman man. I can't say the same about men, though." As he winked, the three of them laughed warmly, and they continued their breakfast as they chatted with one another easily.

"Are you coming to tonight's dinner service?" Amanda asked when they all started to clean up. Normally it was standard practice for them to go by reservation only, but with Javier, he had the rare golden pass that allowed him twenty-four-seven access.

"I want to," he replied, "but I'm just not sure yet. I'm working with Jason's crew later on today over at the Hilton. It's probably going to be a late night. Brunch tomorrow at the Kitten Café, though? My treat."

Jeanette, Amanda, and Whitney all readily agreed, and after he kissed them all on the cheek, he left. After breakfast, Jeanette went upstairs to get dressed. Each morning she went to the fisherman's market to pick out the mussels and clams for the dinner service, and it was a routine she really enjoyed. She liked how all of the fishmongers flirted with her and let her haggle.

With there no longer being a need for pantsuits and professional attire, Jeanette had quickly realized that most of the clothes she'd brought with her were no longer necessary. As she changed out of her blue and pink striped

pajama short set and into a pink and white sundress, she made a mental note to find a consignment store that would let her exchange her old clothes for some new ones instead of getting cash.

“Cute dress!” Whitney exclaimed as Jeanette came bouncing down the stairs. Jeanette beamed at her cousin as she finished her descent, and slipped on her sandals.

“Thanks, doll,” she replied warmly. “Do you need anything else while I’m out?”

Amanda popped out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

“Would you mind grabbing a couple of pounds of shrimp too? I think that’s what I’ll make us for lunch.”

“Sure thing,” Jeanette replied happily, heading out the door.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Since they made everything from scratch, their dinner prep took a lot of time. Before she knew it, Jeanette was opening the front door to their dinner guests and welcoming them inside. As she went to the door for the fourth time, she couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face.

“Hi there,” she greeted. Jeanette looked him up and down, taking him in. He was wearing a white button-up that popped against his tan forearms and face, and a pair of black dress pants with matching shoes. She had to admit that he looked really good all dressed up.

“Hi back,” Jason replied, stepping inside.

“I didn’t realize you were dining with us tonight,” Jeanette said as they walked together to the back deck.

“A pleasant surprise, I hope?” Jason asked with a chuckle.

Jeanette felt herself blush as she tried to get ahead of him so she could open the door to the back. Instead, Jason swooped around her and held the door open for her.

“I think you could call it that,” she replied softly.

“I was supposed to go out to a business dinner tonight, but they had to cancel,” Jason explained. “Luckily for me, though, Amanda could squeeze me in.”

“Well, I’ll show you to your table then,” Jeanette replied pleasantly. He followed her quietly to one of the small tables set up by the deck railing and took a seat.

“Whitney will be by shortly to take your drink order,” she assured him, already taking a step back.

“Wait a minute,” Jason said, leaning forward in his chair. “I’ve got a question for you.”

Curiosity sparked in Jeanette as she turned back to him with a raised brow.

“I may have an answer,” she replied coyly. Jason grinned at this, and once more she found herself blushing.

“What are you doing tonight? After the dinner service, I mean.”

“Cleaning up most likely,” she replied, a tinge of regret in her voice.

“Can I help?” Jason asked, holding her gaze.

Jeanette’s eyebrows flew up in surprise.

“You want to help clean up dishes for thirty people?”

Jason shrugged.

“I’m as good with a sponge as I am with blueprints,” he said cheekily.

Unable to help herself, Jeanette felt a wide grin spread across her face. She wasn’t expecting to see Jason today, but she had to admit, she enjoyed it. And if he would help her with the dishes, that would give Amanda and Whitney the night off from cleaning up.

“What’s the catch?” Jeanette asked, placing her fists on her hips. Jason grinned back at her.

“You might have to talk with me. Maybe have a drink even.”

Jeanette let out a slow whistle as she shook her head in jest.

“I don’t know, that’s a pretty tall order there, cowboy.”

“What if I threw in a pint of chocolate coffee crunch from Shelby’s Dairy?” Jason countered.

For a moment this brought Jeanette up short. Shelby’s Dairy was another local family-owned business that no doubt had been kept alive by the generations, and chocolate coffee crunch had been her favorite flavor when they were younger. They’d gone together as a group every now and then, but it shocked her that Jason remembered that.

“Will you bring a side of hot fudge too?” she asked, continuing with their conversation.

“Even if I have to steal it.” Jason smiled, looking pleased.

Jeanette laughed, then heard the doorbell go off again.

“Sounds like a deal,” she replied, stepping away. “Dinner service is over at nine.”

“I’ll be back by 9:05 p.m.,” Jason promised.



Jason was back at The Sea Glass Cottage by 8:55 p.m., with enough ice cream and toppings for Amanda and Whitney as well. Jeanette's cousins gladly accepted his offer of doing the dishes for them, and took their ice cream outside to enjoy on the back deck before they started gathering up the soiled tablecloths and napkins. Once Jason and Jeanette were alone, Jeanette went to the sink to start drawing the water. Jason bumped her out of the way with his hip and told her to sit at the table and enjoy her ice cream.

"Are you always this bossy?" she teased, popping the lid off her ice cream. She thrust her spoon into the smooth cream deftly and pulled out a small scoop. She sighed in happiness as she tasted the ice cream she enjoyed when she was younger, delighted that it hadn't changed.

"I suppose I am." Jason chuckled, depositing the first stack of dishes into the sink. "But I find that if I'm not, things don't get done." He turned to study her for a moment, then asked, "How's your ice cream?"

"Perfect," Jeanette replied happily, "just the way I remember it."

Jason nodded. "Good."

As Jeanette continued enjoying her frozen treat, she studied Jason's back. He'd rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing a thin layer of dark hair that covered his arms. As she watched, the muscles in his back rippled, visible through the white shirt he was wearing.

"You're staring," he said, not turning away from the dishes.

"Am not," Jeanette retorted, immediately looking down at her ice cream. "I'm pondering."

“Oh?” Jason asked, amused, “And what is it that you’re pondering?”

“You’ve been helping Amanda and Whitney a lot, haven’t you?” Jeanette asked. “And at quite a discounted rate.”

Jason nodded his head, still facing the dishes.

“I have,” he agreed matter-of-factly, “though they don’t need much help to be honest. They know what they’re doing.”

“Why?” Jeanette asked.

“Why what?” Jason countered.

“Why are you helping them?” she asked. “What’s in it for you?”

This caused Jason to freeze for a moment, but he stayed where he was with his back to her.

“Well, everyone needs help now and then,” he said after a pause. “Plus, they’re friends. I always give friends a discount when I can.”

Jeanette nodded, getting another spoonful of ice cream ready. When she finished, she popped the top off of the container of hot fudge and dipped the ice cream into it.

“Are you doing it so they’ll be more inclined to sell you the property?” It was a bold question, she knew, but before she got any friendlier with Jason, she had to know. She couldn’t stand another man in her life being deceitful.

At this, Jason put down the sponge, turned toward her, and leaned his hip against the sink as he crossed his arms.

“Is that the type of person you think I am?” he asked calmly, waiting for her to meet his eyes.

At first, Jeanette tried to avoid his gaze, but she ultimately looked up to meet his dark blue eyes. He didn’t look offended or amused, but simply curious. She swallowed her last bite of ice cream and put her spoon down.

“I don’t know what type of person you are, Jason,” she replied honestly. “I knew who you were, but time changes a person. Money changes a person. Your company owns almost every other vacation rental around us, save for the big chain hotels. For all I know, your chumminess is just a way to get a smooth deal out of them.”

Jason’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Well, no one can say you’re not honest,” he mused, “but to answer your question, no. Your aunt Miriam was a fine woman. When my mom ran off and my dad was busy with the station, I didn’t have anyone to watch over me. She always made sure I had a hot supper. Even when I was too ashamed to show up here myself, she or Amanda or Whitney would come over with a basket of food.”

“Amanda and Whitney are just like their mother, kind and strong,” he continued. “And with Joe getting a wild hair up his butt every few months or so and causing them trouble, I thought it was my turn to take care of them like they took care of me.”

“I had no idea,” Jeanette confessed, taken aback. Jason shrugged, turned, and went back to doing the dishes.

“Most people didn’t. They wanted to help me, not boast about their charity, and they had the grace to keep it quiet.”

“Jason, I’m so sorry,” Jeanette apologized, feeling foolish, “I didn’t mean to accuse you like that, I—”

“It’s okay,” Jason promised, cutting her off with a gentle tone. “You’re being protective, and I respect that. But I promise you, it’s not me that you have to protect them from.”

Jeanette pressed her lips together and nodded, knowing who he was talking about. For a moment, silence passed between them as Jason finished the dishes and moved on to the silverware. Not wanting any more ice cream, Jeanette put the container in the freezer, picked up a dish towel, and started drying the full rack of clean dishes.

“So, I ran into Joe at Morrison’s earlier this week,” she announced, hoping that she could change the subject.

Jason grunted and nodded his head.

“What did you think when you saw him again?” Jason asked.

Jeanette chortled. “Unlike you, time has *not* been kind to him.”

At this, Jason grinned and turned to her with a raised brow.

“Is that a compliment, Netti Spaghetti?” he teased.

Jeanette rolled her eyes and flicked him with the tail of her dish towel.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she replied. Jason chuckled and turned back to his work. A moment later he sighed and shook his head.

“It is a little sad, though,” he admitted, sounding remorseful, “I think we all had hoped that he would turn himself around at some point. Lord knows your aunt Miriam and uncle Howard gave him plenty of opportunities.”

Jeanette pressed her lips together tightly, not sure if she should say what she was thinking.

“What is it?” Jason asked, once more sensing her apprehension without looking at her.

“Okay, you have to stop that,” she retorted, “it’s getting creepy.”

“Then start telling me what’s on your mind,” Jason retorted right back,

his tone calm.

Jeanette's grin slowly vanished as she picked up another dish to dry.

"You don't...gosh, I sound like a frightened little girl, but, you don't think he'd do anything to try to take this place from Amanda and Whitney, do you?"

"I don't see how," Jason replied calmly, "he has no money or work ethic."

"That's never stopped him from trying to take things from others before," Jeanette countered.

Jason stopped washing the silverware, pausing before he got to the glasses and stemware, and dried his hands off so he could give Jeanette his full attention.

"Is this something you're really worried about?" he asked, meeting her eyes.

Jeanette nodded. "I know it seems silly, and frankly it's none of my business...but yes, I am. Joe...well, he just seemed so sure of himself. That he was going to own this place. I'm sure it was just him being cocky, but..."

"But something in your gut is telling you it's not," Jason said, finishing her thought. Jeanette nodded, not saying anything else. She looked at Jason, waiting for him to call her silly or paranoid. Instead, he looked deep into her eyes, as if studying her most inner thoughts, and suddenly nodded.

"Okay," he said, going back to the dishes.

"Okay? Okay, what?" Jeanette asked, frowning her brow.

"I've got a few security cameras I can spare. It'll take a little bit of work to get them routed to their own system, but I've got a guy on my crew who's pretty tech-savvy. I'll bring them over sometime next week and get them installed for you ladies."

"Seriously?" Jeanette asked, surprised.

"As a heart attack," Jason replied calmly. "I'm not saying that Joe will try anything, but if it makes you, Amanda and Whitney feel safer with some more protection, then it's worth getting the cameras installed."

THE KITTEN CAFÉ was not actually a coffee shop with cats roaming around, as Jeanette had thought it was. In front of the little breakfast and brunch

restaurant hung two, bright rainbow flags flying by either side of its bright blue door, and a colorful sign that read, "*Life is always better when there's champagne! Try our rainbow mimosa flight today!*" Jeanette liked the place immediately, and as they arrived, she happily followed Amanda and Whitney in, with Javier leading the way.

"How long has this place been here?" she asked once they were seated in the crowded restaurant. "This place used to be Henry's Hardware, wasn't it?"

Whitney nodded.

"Henry wanted it to eventually be Henry and Sons Hardware," she explained, "but Bobby got a big job as a scientist for one of those pharmaceutical companies, and Corey's a pilot now. Henry gave up on them wanting to take it over about ten years ago and sold it to some out-of-towners, and they turned it into this place. It's quite...*fabulous*, don't you think?"

"Fabulous indeed." Jeanette laughed.

"They really do have the best mimosas in town," Javier assured her, "and their salmon eggs benedict is to *die for*."

"Well," Jeanette said cheerily, closing her menu, "I know what I'm getting then!"

Once they had placed their order and received their drinks, Whitney crossed her arms on the table and leaned in close.

"So, I noticed Jason didn't leave until almost midnight," she said in a gossipy tone, her well-shaped eyebrows moving up and down provocatively. "What were you two talking about?"

"Jason Flaherty?" Javier asked, intrigued. "Gosh, he's gorgeous, isn't he?"

"Okay, you two," Amanda said, speaking in a motherly fashion. She gave Javier and Whitney a disapproving look and then smiled at Jeanette.

"If you see him before we do, please tell Jason we said thank you again for doing the dishes."

"I will," Jeanette agreed immediately, "and it's okay, really. And anyway, I wanted to talk to the two of you about some things Jason and I discussed last night."

She began to fill them in on the details of her and Jason's conversation, touching mostly on his offer to install some securities for them.

"Well, I have to be honest," Amanda sighed, after Jeanette finished talking, "that would make me feel a little better. As Jason said, it's unlikely

Joe actually has the drive to pull off a plan that would work well. But I think it would make me feel a little better to have a bit more security.”

“Me too,” Whitney agreed, losing some of her sassiness. “Joe can be... unpredictable.”

Jeanette felt her phone buzz in her pocket as they talked. Keeping it under the table, she pulled it out and looked at the screen. Daniel was calling. Again. He’d more or less stayed away when she was staying with Carmen and Franny, but now that she was back in Provincetown, he’d called at least once a day, oftentimes more, and left voicemails. As usual, she pushed the End Call button and sent Carmen a quick text to make sure all was well with her. If there was anything he needed from her, he could contact her divorce lawyer.

A second later her phone vibrated again, and she read the text from her daughter.

*Hi, mom! Thanks for checking in :)
Franny and I are fine.
Call us later and we’ll have a catch-up.*

JEANETTE SMILED DOWN at her phone and quickly responded.

*Sounds good.
I’ll call later this afternoon.
Love you. :**

PUTTING HER PHONE AWAY, Jeanette turned her attention back to the present and easily joined the conversation. Javier had been right about the mimosas and the eggs benedict, and as she ate up every forkful, she made a mental note to bring Carmen and Franny there when they came for the visit.

Excitement filled her as she started to think of how much The Sea Glass Cottage would be changed by the time they arrived. She couldn't wait to show them around and tell them funny stories from her younger days.

“Should we go home?” Amanda asked as they walked back outside after their brunch. “Or should we go get pedicures?”

“Pedicures!” Whitney, Javier, and Jeanette replied at the same time. Laughing together, they strolled down the main street arm in arm and headed toward *The Mermaid's Spa and Salon*.



With the work once more started on The Sea Glass Cottage, Jeanette felt her weeks begin to blur together in a happy haze. Every morning she awoke, there was something new to be done, whether it was helping the crews working on the interior, cooking for them, or helping Amanda and Whitney run errands. When she wasn't doing any of those things, she found herself enjoying Jason's company. It seemed that no matter how busy he was, if he saw her, he'd stop whatever he was doing, and take a few minutes to chat with her.

As for Daniel, his calls were still fairly consistent. But now, it no longer bothered her to see his name flash across the screen. In fact, she'd gotten into the habit of leaving her phone in her room all day, and only used to it call Carmen. In a week she and Franny would be on their way for the visit, as promised, and Jeanette was very excited to see them both again. She was proud of the work she was doing and wanted to show them her progress.

"Jeanette? Earth to Jeanette?" Whitney giggled.

Jeanette blinked rapidly as she pulled herself away from thoughts of their upcoming visit, and turned to her cousin with a smile.

"Sorry," she apologized, "I must have gone off to la la land!"

"That's okay," Whitney replied warmly, squeezing her shoulders. "You thinkin' about the girls' visit?"

Jeanette nodded as she picked up a dish towel and started drying her hands.

"Yeah. I'm just really excited for you both to spend some time with her.

It's way past due that she gets to know her family."

"Well, we are just as excited as you are," Amanda said, joining the conversation as she came into the kitchen with a tray full of dishes. "The guys said to say thank you for lunch by the way. They requested that you make that tortellini dish again as soon as possible."

Jeanette laughed and promised that she would as Amanda sat the tray down on the counter. Just as she was about to empty the dirty dishwasher and fill it with fresh suds, Whitney stopped her.

"We can take care of that," Whitney offered.

"No, it's okay, I really don't mind," Jeanette replied enthusiastically, already turning back to the sink.

Whitney laughed lightly as she playfully bumped her hip against Jeanette's, moving her out of the way.

"We know you don't, but you're needed elsewhere," she countered, "that's why I was trying to get your attention. Jason had asked me to come to find you and see if you were busy."

"But I am busy," Jeanette countered with a laugh.

"Not anymore," Whitney teased, depositing the dirty dishes into the clean, soapy water. "Go on, I've got this covered. He's in our office."

Jeanette flicked the towel across Whitney's backside playfully before she left, and went to go find Jason. As promised, she found him in Whitney and Amanda's joint office, staring at one of the computer screens with his eyebrows furrowed.

"You rang?" she teased upon making her entrance. Jason's look of concern vanished as he heard Jeanette's voice, and he smiled at her.

"I did indeed," he confirmed, motioning her to come over. "Come here, I want to show you something, and then tell me what you think."

"Is this one of those weird websites?" she teased as she came around to stand behind his chair. "Because if so, I'd rather not."

"Not quite," Jason chuckled, "but it's a little weird nonetheless. You remember when I installed those security cameras outside a week or so ago?"

Jeanette nodded as she looked at the screen and saw the several viewpoints of the cameras displayed in their own little boxes.

"Sure do. Did you see something?" she asked, leaning close to Jason's shoulder.

"Well, to be honest, I'm not sure," Jason replied. He hit a few buttons on the keyboard, and suddenly the multiple small boxes disappeared, and a

single, big one took up the screen.

“I was hoping you would take a look at it and tell me what you think. I don’t want to bring it up to Amanda and Whitney if it’s not important.”

“Of course,” she replied, her focus on the screen. Jason started the recorded video and then sped it up to the time stamp he’d marked. When he did, Jeanette saw a figure standing in front of the camera facing away from *The Sea Glass Cottage’s* front door.

“Do you recognize this person?” Jason asked, glancing up at her. Jeanette narrowed her eyes as she leaned in closer, studying the screen. From the build, she could make out that it was a man, but the bagginess of the person’s clothes made it hard to tell.

“I can’t tell,” she admitted. “Can you push play? Maybe it’ll show something.”

“It is playing,” Jason said dryly.

Surprised, Jeanette cast a quick glance at him before going back to the screen. The person wasn’t moving a single muscle and standing as if frozen in time. She waited for several minutes to see what they would do, and somehow, was even more disturbed when they just started to walk away.

“That’s just creepy,” Jeanette said, shaking her head. “I don’t recognize that person, not with their mask over their mouth like that.”

“So that’s not Daniel?” Jason asked calmly. At this, Jeanette let out a dry laugh and shook her head.

“Honestly, I don’t think so. Besides, he’s hundreds of miles away. Why do you ask?”

Jason shrugged as he rewound the tape and let the clip play again. “Well, I knew for sure it wasn’t Joe. This person is too small to be him. But I wanted to make sure it wasn’t someone else we knew before we addressed it.”

“Did they show up on any other cameras?” Jeanette asked. Jason shook his head.

“No, I checked. Whoever they were, they just walked up the front yard path and started staring.”

“Great.” Jeanette sighed, shaking her head. “Amanda and Whitney have enough to worry about as it is, now we have to add stalker to the list.”

“I’m not sure we should tell them just yet,” Jason countered. “It could have just been a tourist admiring the building for all we know. But I wanted to be sure there wasn’t going to be a harassment issue with your ex. Just like them, you have enough to worry about without him acting like a fool.”

At this, Jeanette laughed and patted Jason's shoulder.

"Well, thank you for looking out for me, but no, that's not him. And you're probably right. It was most likely a tourist walking back to his hotel after a night out. I'm sure it's all fine."

"Alright then," Jason said, closing out of the camera displays and turning in his chair to face her, "now that that's been taken care of, I've got another question."

"Shoot," Jeanette replied, nodding her head toward him subtly.

"What are your plans for tonight?" he asked with a small grin.

WHITNEY AND AMANDA popped their heads into Jeanette's room, their smiles spreading wide across their faces.

"Hey, babe," Amanda called, her voice tinged with excitement, "how's it going?"

"Need any help?" Whitney added, her tone matching her sister's.

Jeanette laughed, and let her strawberry hair tumble around her shoulders.

"Yes! I haven't done anything with my hair other than put it into a bun or ponytail for years. I have no idea what to do with it."

"Oh, that's my department," Whitney said enthusiastically, coming into her room. The two sisters walked over to their cousin, and Whitney immediately started toying with Jeanette's hair.

"Well, you've got a great curl going on," she praised, sweeping the brush through it. "We just got to get these combed out a bit and put in a twist, and we'll have a great look for you."

In an instant, Whitney's hands worked their magic, and in no time Jeanette's hair was in an elegant updo. Her bangs fell softly around her face, framing her bright green eyes and giving her a more youthful look.

"There, you see? Perfect." Whitney beamed.

From Jeanette's closet, Amanda came out holding a hanger with a long-sleeved white dress and a dark brown, thick, braided belt.

"This will be great for tonight," she urged, bringing it to Jeanette.

"Are you sure it's not too fancy?" Jeanette asked, accepting the dress.

"You said he's taking you to The Blue Room at the W?" Amanda asked. Jeanette nodded.

“Then, this is the one. They’re on the fancy side. Jacket and tie required and all that.”

“I can’t believe you’re going on a date with Jason Flaherty!” Whitney exclaimed as Jeanette changed. In response, Jeanette laughed dryly.

“I’m *sure* it’s not a date,” she replied, zipping the dress up.

“Well, either way, it’s nice to get dressed up once in a while,” Amanda affirmed, picking out some pieces from Jeanette’s jewelry collection. She handed them to Jeanette, who immediately put them on.

“True,” Jeanette acknowledged, slipping into some light brown suede pumps. “What do you think?”

Before either cousin could answer, they all heard the doorbell ring. As one, they quickly walked down the stairs toward the front door.

“Wow,” Jason said, his eyes moving up and down Jeanette as they opened the door, “you look beautiful.” He was dressed in his usual colors of black and white, once more sporting a white button-up with black pants, this time accompanied by a matching tie and jacket.

“Thank you.” Jeanette blushed, admiring how good he looked. “You look quite handsome yourself.”

Jason chuckled, shaking his head subtly, and then said hello to Amanda and Whitney.

“Bring her back in better condition than she left,” Whitney warned, “or there will be big trouble waiting for you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of anything less,” Jason promised. He turned his attention back to Jeanette and held out his arm.

“Do you mind if we walk?” he asked. “The W is only a couple of minutes away.”

“Not at all,” Jeanette agreed, taking his arm.

“Have fun, you two,” Amanda called as they started to walk away.

“We will,” Jason shouted back with a chuckle.

As promised, the walk to The W was not far at all, and they were walking into the lobby before they made it through their pleasantries. Jeanette was quick to notice that the Maître D’ recognized Jason right away, and they shook hands like old pals before he led them to their table. In fact, as they made their way through the maze of tables, several men stood up to shake Jason’s hand.

“Are you a local celebrity?” she asked as Jason pulled her chair out for her. He chuckled and shook his head as he came around to take his own seat.

“Not quite that glamorous,” he replied, “but I do pride myself in doing good business. So far, I haven’t made a single person regret investing in me.”

“Good to know,” Jeanette murmured as a young waitress in a tight, black dress approached their table with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I already reserved us for the chef’s tasting menu this evening,” Jason said as their waitress poured their wine.

“That sounds great,” Jeanette replied, lifting her glass to her lips as the waitress left.

“Wow, this is amazing!”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said with a grin. He looked her up and down again, his smile growing bigger. “Go ahead.”

Jeanette blushed. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked, feigning ignorance. Again, Jason chuckled.

“You forget I grew up with you and your cousins. You’re burning with questions. I can see it in your eyes.”

It was Jeanette’s turn to laugh, and she did so before taking another sip of her wine.

“Well, if you’re going to be blunt, then yes,” she replied coyly. “I guess I ___”

“You mean *we*,” Jason added, only making Jeanette’s smile grow bigger.

“*We* were wondering why you asked me out on a date.”

Jason leaned forward, grabbed his own glass, and began swirling its contents around. Jeanette noticed his posture seemed so easy and comfortable as if he were meant to be in such fancy places.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he said gently, “but this is not a date. This is a thank you.”

Jeanette felt a tinge of embarrassment as a pink blush colored her pale cheeks.

“Well then, this is a pretty hefty thank you,” she replied, trying not to sound disappointed. “What did I do to earn this?”

Jason leaned forward on his elbows, as if about to share a secret.

“Keeping my crew and the others happy and fed,” he replied. “According to them, it’s what’s been missing in their work days.”

At this, Jeanette smiled and waved her hand.

“It’s been my pleasure, really. I need to keep busy. It’s good for me.”

Jason nodded his head as if he understood.

“You know, I’ve been through a divorce before,” he said, his tone

changing subtly. "It's not easy feat for anyone."

Jeanette's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I had no idea. When?"

"Five or so years ago. And it still bothers me sometimes. Which is another reason why this isn't a date. I understand how much time it takes to deal with such things."

He paused and reached for Jeanette's hand.

"But, when you're finished dealing with those things, I would like to come back to the date conversation. If that would be alright with you."

Jeanette felt her smile return, this time wider than before.

"I think that would be great," she replied softly, squeezing his hand. As they sat in comfortable silence, taking a brief moment to take one another in, Jason's phone let out a chime from his pocket.

"I'm so sorry," he apologized, releasing her hand and pulling his phone out, "I forgot to turn the ringer off." His eyes barely grazed across the screen as he switched it to silent, then suddenly, he brought it back up again, his eyebrows drawing down in concern.

"What's wrong?" Jeanette asked, picking up on his stress. He looked back up at her with regret and concern.

"I'm so sorry," he apologized, standing up, "I'll need to owe you. We've got to go."

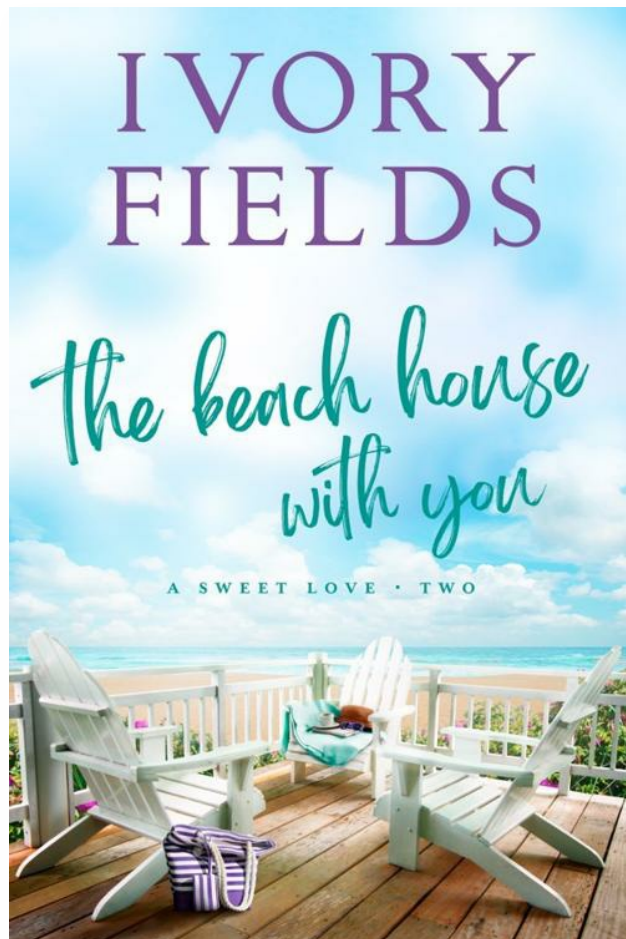
Immediately, Jeanette was up, taking his offered hand.

"Why, what's wrong?" she asked.

"That was the security camera app. Looks like our friend is back."

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