



Four Widows.  
Four Wishes.  
One Wild Adventure.  
...Again.

# THE WILDER WIDOWS

WALK ON THE WILDER SIDE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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HASTINGS

The Wilder Widows:  
Walk on the Wilder Side  
Katherine Hastings

THE WILDER WIDOWS: WALK ON THE WILDER SIDE

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***Four Widows. Four Wishes. One Wild Adventure ... Again.***

The Wilder Widows are heading out for round three! A few near-death scares haven't stopped the fabulous foursome from continuing their new tradition of a yearly bucket list adventure. With the world as their oyster, they pluck their wishes from the knitting basket one by one and embark on their next journey to fulfill their wildest dreams.

Sylvie, Alice, Doris, and Marge each have lofty dreams this time, and trouble has a way of following them wherever they go. Join them on their journey filled with laughter, love, and a whole lot of trouble!

*The Wilder Widows: Wilder Ever After is the third book in the Wilder Widows series and is meant to be read after the second book.*

**SYLVIE**

# CHAPTER ONE

Gritting my teeth, I leaned against the suitcase on the bed, squishing it down as best I could while struggling to move the zipper.

“Damn it,” I grumbled, leaning more weight onto it, hoping to close the bulging gap.

“Need some help, baby?” Tom asked, his deep voice sending a familiar flutter through my body. I wondered if the way he made me feel would ever go away.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw my husband leaning on the doorframe. The flutters increased as I soaked in the sight of him. Little butterflies took flight, dancing and twirling inside my stomach. Memories slammed back into me. I’d experienced the same feeling the first time I’d seen him at that bar over forty years earlier. The same feeling I got every single time I looked at him.

No. The feelings he invoked in me would never fade. Of that, I was certain.

My husband. My one true love was no longer a dream I clung to ... A youthful memory of a brief period in my life that I would revisit time and time again, remembering what it felt like in his arms. The feeling of his breath on my lips just before he’d kiss me. How my skin would tingle everywhere his fingers drifted. Those weren’t only cherished memories anymore. After forty years apart, he was mine.

His crooked smile lifted, and he pushed off the doorway, moving toward me with slow, steady steps.

“I can’t get it to zip,” I answered, my attention returning from my handsome husband to the bag putting up a championship fight.

Tom stopped beside me, planted his hands on his hips, and looked at my overstuffed bag. His eyebrows lifted. “Are you surprised? It looks like you’re trying to fit your entire closet in there.”

Blowing a puff of air that lifted the hair around my face, I collapsed on the bed beside it. “Well, it’s hard to pack for the Wilder Widows adventures. I have absolutely no idea what I’m going to need. I know how to pack for my wish, but what about the others? Do I need a swimsuit? Parka? Elegant dress? High heels? Hiking boots? It’s all completely up in the air since we have no idea what the wishes are until we draw them. All I know is what my wish is.”



“And you won’t tell me?”

I grinned. “Nope. No one but me can know until we pull it out of the knitting basket.”

He frowned. “Just a hint.”

I shook my head back and forth. “Nope.”

“Grr.”

“It’s tradition.” I ignored his sour face. “We don’t know what we’re doing until we’re out there. So, that means I need to pack for anything, and I don’t want to be lugging multiple suitcases with me if I don’t have to. So, I’m trying to fit it all in here.” I tapped on the suitcase that had popped back open without my weight on it.

Tom stepped in front of it, and when he leaned his much larger, muscular frame on it, the gap closed up.

“Oh! Stay there! It’s working!” I grabbed ahold of the zipper and tugged. After a slight struggle, the familiar *zip* accompanied the closing of my overstuffed bag. “Ha! It worked! Thank you!” I flopped back on the bed with a sigh.

Tom moved around and stood above me. “Happy to help. But what will you do without me around to close it later? You’d better not find some young, strong man to help you close it each time you move. I don’t want some other guy filling my shoes.”

I looked up at his arched eyebrow and playful smile. Those butterflies took off again.

“Never,” I answered, reaching up and grabbing the bottom of his t-shirt and pulling him on top of me. “You’re irreplaceable.”

Even though he easily could have resisted my gentle tug, he went with it, landing softly on top of me and placing his lips on mine in one of those deep, soul-bending kisses I never wanted to end.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispered against my lips.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” I whispered back, pressing my forehead to his.

He rolled onto his side and pulled me into the nook of his arm. “How long will you be gone?”

I snuggled my head onto his chest, breathing in the familiar scent of him, committing it to memory so I could try to remember it while we were apart. “At least a few weeks. Maybe a month. It’s impossible to say.”

He grumbled a little and squeezed me tighter. “It’s gonna feel so empty without you around.”

“I know. But we have a pact, and as much as I’m going to miss you, you have to part with me each year so the Widows and I can keep up on the wishes that brought us together ... and brought me back to you.”

After a long sigh, he ran his hand down the length of my arm. “I know. I wouldn’t dream of getting in your way. I hope you ladies have the time of your lives out there doing ... well, whatever it is you’ll be doing.”

A soft smile lifted my lips. “I’m glad you’re supportive. I love you, but I’d have to smack you if you got in the way of our Wilder Widows wishes.”

“Nonsense. I’d never get in the way. And let’s be honest, if I tried, Marge would kill me and feed me to the pigs to hide my body. She’s already threatened.”

I laughed, nodding against his chest. “That’s a good point. So, even though we’ll miss each other, you gotta let me go. I don’t want you to be pig food. I love you too much.”

“And I love you enough to get out of your way so you can go knock more weird stuff off your bucket list. Starting with the one wish we know about ... jumping out of a plane. You lucky, lucky girl.”

I cringed at the words.

*Go skydiving.*

Those had been the horrifying words written on Marge’s piece of paper when we’d drawn it from the knitting basket. Five months had passed since I’d gotten the shock of what our first adventure would be, and even the extra months hadn’t settled the idea in my mind any more than it had that first day I’d learned it. My stomach clenched against the wave of queasiness just thinking about the freefall of terror awaiting me.

Usually, we set right off on our journey after drawing the first wish, but this time, the day after we’d picked Marge’s wish and before we’d started booking our trip, I’d gotten a call from my daughter, Rachel, with the most amazing news. She’d met a man, Blake, at our wedding, and they’d been dating for the entire year. When she’d revealed she was two months pregnant, Tom and I had been elated.

But as excited as we’d been about Rachel and Blake’s upcoming bundle of joy, she’d also dropped the bomb that she and Blake would be getting married ... and soon, because she hadn’t wanted to be bursting out of her

dress with a huge, swollen belly. So, our Widows adventure had been put on hold while we'd planned a wedding in just a few short months.

The Widows had all leaped into action with me, helping me plan a magnificent wedding in a hurry, and last month, Rachel and Blake had said I do. Now she was two months from her due date, which left the Widows and me one month to go on our adventure before I came home to prepare for a different kind of adventure.

*Being a grandma.*

I warmed at the thought in the same way I'd warmed when I'd found out I was carrying my own child ... Tom's child. And though we hadn't been able to raise her together, it felt like we were getting a second chance now that we'd be grandparents together.

"Are you sure I can't come? Even just for Marge's wish? Man, I seriously want to jump out of a plane again. It's been years."

"Widows only. You know the rules." I rolled over and propped my chin on my hands, resting on his chest.

He furrowed his brow. "Argh. Fine. But when you ladies get back, you and I are going skydiving together sometime."

I pulled a face, scoffing as I shook my head. "No. Absolutely not. I'm jumping out of a plane *once* because it's Marge's wish, and we have a pact to do it together. But that's it. Then this girl is grounded."

"I bet you'll love it so much you'll be begging me to jump with you again." He arched an eyebrow. "Fifty buck says I'm right."

"I'll take that bet." I pursed my lips and matched his arched brows. Knowing full well how terrified I was to leap out of an airplane, I was confident I wouldn't be willing to do something so foolish twice.

"It's a bet," he said. "And one I'm going to win. Trust me. There's nothing better than that rush." For a moment, he closed his eyes, and I was sure he was reliving moments of his long military career as a special forces operator. No doubt he'd launched out of plenty of planes, but I wasn't a risk taker like him, and though he loved it, I was certain I'd be screaming bloody murder all the way down, vowing never to do anything so crazy again.

"You're going to lose," I said confidently.

"Right back at you." He smiled.

"I just hope I survive. Life is so good right now. I've got you. I've got the Widows. Our shoe business is booming and growing every day. Life is

perfect. And it's about to get even better because I have big plans for being a grandma. I can't wait until the baby is born."

"You'll be fine. It's really quite safe. And I'm as excited as you are about the baby. A couple years ago, I didn't even know I was a dad, and now I'm going to be a grandpa." He paused and tipped his head. "Although, I think I'm going with G-dog instead of Grandpa. Grandpa sounds old."

"G-Dog?" I practically spit out. "No one is calling you G-Dog."

"Why not? It's much hipper than Grandpa." He said the last word with a frumpy accent.

"How about Pawpaw? I'm gonna be Nana, so we can be Nana and Pawpaw."

He made a face. "It sounds like a dog."

"Didn't you just say you wanted to be G-Dog?"

"Yeah. Like hip. You know, G-Dog."

"Not hip. I like Pawpaw."

"I don't want Pawpaw."

I tipped my head. "What about Pappy?"

His face scrunched more. He pointed at the fading tattoos crawling up his muscular forearm. "Pappy sounds like scrappy. I'm no scrappy guy."

"No, you are definitely not." I traced a finger along his tattoos, that familiar longing starting inside me as I brushed his skin.

"Oh! I've got it! Pops. I'm gonna be Pops. It's cool. It's easy for the little tyke to say, and I think it sounds good. 'Nana and Pops.'"

"I like that!" I grinned. "Nana and Pops. Perfect."

He smiled and grabbed me around the waist, hoisting me on top of him.

A flurry of desire traveled through every nook and cranny of my skin as he gazed at me with that oh-so-familiar look.

"Hey, Nana. You want to take a last tumble with Pops before you go?"

I giggled and kissed him, memorizing the taste of his lips and the feeling of his breath against mine. The coming separation would be torture, but at the same time, I longed for an adventure with my best ladies.

Just as I started to lose myself in his kiss, the doorbell rang.

"Ah, shit," he grumbled. "They're early."

"Doris is always early," I said on a sigh. "Sorry, Pops. Nana needs to leave you longing until I get back."

"Damn you, evil temptress." He grabbed me tighter and pulled me against him.

“Tom!” I laughed as I struggled free. “I have to go! I don’t want to be late, or we’ll miss our flight to ...” I paused and tipped my head, then shrugged, “to wherever the hell I’m going.”

He grumbled, then kissed me again and let me go. “You really have no idea where this flight is going, huh?”

“Nope.” I stood and smoothed my shirt back down. “Marge insisted on making all the travel plans so it would be a surprise.”

“And you trust Marge to make travel plans? Didn’t she get you lost in the jungle and locked up at border patrol?”

“Yes, and yes.” I laughed. “But hopefully, she won’t bungle this up. She’s really excited about her wish.”

“Now remember, if you ladies get in any trouble, wherever you are in the world, I still have connections high up. All you need to do is get ahold of me, and I’ll come bail you out.”

He stood, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, levering up on my toes. “I know you will. I love you, Tom.”

“I love you, too.” He lifted me off the ground and pressed his lips against mine so hard it hurt, but I relished the exquisite pain.

The doorbell rang again, and Tom groaned, then set me down. “I’ll walk you down.”

I smiled as he grabbed my bag, and together we headed to the front door. When I opened it, the three familiar faces of my best friends grinned back at me.

“We’re here, dear!” Doris said with a giant smile that caused her rosy cheeks to swell.

“Hello, ladies!” I opened my arms and pulled them all in for a group hug.

They all squeezed me back, and when I let go, Marge stepped back and grinned widely from beneath her silver bowl cut, the one that hadn’t changed since the first day I’d seen her on this very step.

She waved a hand at the limo parked on the street behind her. “Ta-da!”

“A limo? Really?” I asked.

“I’m going all out for us this time. You ladies are gonna love my wish!” Marge stood proudly.

Alice arched a silver eyebrow. “Are we though? Because we know you’re making us jump out of a plane. And the fact we have no idea where we’re going and haven’t been allowed to help you plan it has me feeling like I’d be

safer running through the streets of Pamplona again with nothing but red panties on and a herd of bulls on my ass.”

I chuckled at the image. “Yeah. I’m a little scared too.”

Marge waved her hand in the air. “Ack! Nothing to worry about. I have an amazing adventure planned for us!”

“A funeral for us is more like it, knowing you,” Alice deadpanned, running a manicured finger through her perfectly smooth hair.

Marge shot her a look but then turned back to me, beaming. “It’s gonna be awesome.”

“Just make sure I don’t die,” I said with a laugh. “That’s my top priority.”

“Mine too,” Doris agreed. “So, this had better be safe.” She waggled a finger at Marge’s nose. “Your last wish almost got me eaten by a shark.”

Marge swatted it away. “You ninnies will be fine. Skydiving is perfectly safe. Right, Tom?”

He shrugged. “As long as your people know what they’re doing, you ladies will be fine. I’ve jumped out of a plane at least fifty times and I’m still here.”

“See. We’ll be fine.” Marge crossed her arms and gave a sharp nod.

“Just make sure it’s a good company,” he said. “Check the safety stats, and if you need me to vet them, say the word. Jumping is safe, and it will be an incredible experience, but *only* if you have good people and equipment.”

“I did the research. Safety record is spot on. Top place in ... well, I’m not telling you where they are, but they are the top place to jump from at our destination.” Marge lifted her chin. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this under control. I’ll bring your wife home safe and sound.”

Tom looked at me and smiled. “Good. Because we have a new adventure of our own starting soon, and I don’t want her starting off being a grandma in a body cast.”

“A nana,” I corrected. “But yes. Safety first. I promised Rachel I would be back by her side for the birth.” I paused and looked at each widow in the eyes, giving them a stern stare. “So, no one is getting us locked up abroad or killed. I made a promise to my daughter. Nothing and no one is standing in the way of me being there to welcome my first grandchild into the world. Capeesh?”

“Capeesh,” Marge answered.

“Of course,” Alice said. “We wouldn’t dream of making you miss such an important event.”

“It’s a magical experience.” Doris smiled sweetly. “I’ve been at several of my grandchildren’s births, and I wouldn’t want you to miss it either. We won’t get you locked up abroad. I’ll say extra prayers.”

“Good,” I answered. “But I mean it, ladies. This time I’m leaving you high and dry and sprinting for freedom if you get us in trouble. Rachel and this baby are my top priority right now.”

With Rachel being over forty, the risk of pregnancy complications were increased, and as much as I loved my Widows and would do anything for them, being there for my daughter was the most important thing in my life.

“I swear it on my honor,” Marge said, straightening up tall. “No matter what, we are getting you back in time for Rachel’s birth. We will all be there like we told her we would be. You have my word.”

I reached out and took her hand. “Thank you, Marge. And thank you, ladies. I know you are all mothers, so you understand the importance of this to me.”

“We do.” Doris nodded quickly. “I would do anything for my children. Anything. And we won’t let you down.”

Now that I’d gotten that off my chest in an attempt not to end up wasting away in some foreign prison or coming home in a body bag, my excitement for our journey started swelling up inside me. “Well, now that that’s settled, I’m ready for this adventure!”

“Whoo-hoo!” Marge punched a fist in the air. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

I turned to Tom. “I’ll miss you, Pops.”

His face softened at the term. “And I’ll miss you, Nana.”

He pulled me into his arms, kissing me so deeply that I nearly ran out of air.

“Alright, you two, pervs. Watch the hands. Keep it PG,” Marge teased.

I laughed against Tom’s lips. “I gotta go. I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Be safe, my love. And have fun.”

“We always do,” I answered, then kissed him quickly one last time and hurried away before I dragged him back to bed like I wanted.

The limo driver opened the door and took my bag, and we all piled in. Once we got in our seats, I looked out the window one last time, rolling it down to blow Tom a final kiss before our driver started away.

“I love you!” I called out the window.

“I love you more!” he called back.

As the limo turned the corner, I settled back into my seat. “So, are you going to tell us where we’re heading?”

Marge shook her head. “Nope. You’ll find out when we get to the airport. Everyone has passports and vaccines and stuff, right?”

“Yep,” I answered.

Since we had no idea where we were going, and we’d had time to plan, we’d all agreed to get travelers vaccines, so we were free to go where any Widows’ wish would take us.

“I’m all set. I hate shots, but I did it,” Doris said.

“I’m ready for anything,” Alice answered, then lifted her finger. “Except death or jail. Or dismemberment. Or worse yet, disfiguring. But I’m ready.”

Marge shimmied in her seat. “Then let’s start this adventure off right!” She reached into her bag and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

“Whiskey for the limo ride? Not champagne?” I asked.

“It’s tradition,” Marge answered, popping off the top. “Now, everyone, drink!”

This time we didn’t argue, and instead, I grabbed the bottle, took a long swig, and let the fiery liquid burn a trail down my throat. Each widow did the same, and when the bottle got back to Marge, she took an extra gulp.

“Ah!” she said with a smile. “Now it’s time for us Widows to walk on the wilder side!”

“To walking on the wilder side!” I agreed, grabbing the bottle from her.

“To walking on the wilder side!” Alice and Doris echoed.

With the whiskey already easing my tensions about what lay ahead, I let out a whoop and laughed as the limo whisked us off to our first destination.



**MARGE**

## CHAPTER TWO

The limo made it out of our little suburban town and hit the freeway for the thirty-minute drive to the airport. Every mile we grew closer, my heart raced faster. All my life, I'd wondered what it had been like for my dear departed Percy to jump out of a plane during 'Nam, and now I was finally going to get the experience myself. An experience he'd often told me was a highlight of his life.

It was also one of the last things he'd done before he'd been injured in battle ... The battle that had killed our two best friends, Stiltz and Manns. Though that day had ended in heartbreak, Percy always said those moments he'd spent in the air with his two best buddies were some he'd cherish always. They'd loved every second of drifting over the world together, and now I was going to experience the same thing with my best buddies... my Wilder Widows.

I glanced around at the three women surrounding me, sharing stories and laughing as we headed to our first adventure—my wish. The one still giving me butterflies. Just once, I wanted to feel the adrenalin rush they'd felt that fateful day, and I hoped when I leaped out of the plane and the world dropped out from beneath me, it would make me feel close to them once again. Just thinking about it tightened the knot in my stomach, a poignant mix of anxiety and longing.

I pictured the vast expanse of the sky above, a boundless canvas of freedom and risk that they had braved countless times. When I stepped to the ledge, their comforting presence would be beside me. I just knew it. As I visualized the world spiraling beneath me, a pang of connection surged through me.

It was as if, through this one wish, I could reach across the chasm of years and mortality to touch their spirits. Doing this felt like a shared tribute and a deeply personal act of remembrance that echoed their brave souls, bringing me closer to them. Just like I hoped it would bring me and my Widows even closer, too ... if that were possible.

“Are you sure Fran can hold down the fort while we're gone?” Alice asked Sylvie as the limo sped up to pass someone on the freeway.

“I'm sure. I briefed her on everything she needed to handle while we're away. She's been training for two months and seems to have the hang of

things. Our orders are caught up, press and marketing are scheduled, and she's been an excellent manager. I trust our little company is in good hands, and we won't be bankrupt when we get home."

*Our little company.*

In all my wildest dreams, I'd never imagined my path in life would lead me to being a co-owner of a shoe company, much less a wildly successful one. But here I was in my golden years with three business partners and a flourishing shoe company catering to us older gals. Our business grew monthly and soon exceeded what the four of us could handle. So, we'd hired a woman, Fran, to help us manage it.

"I know she's doing a good job, but you're sure she can handle it *solo* for a full month?" Alice arched an eyebrow. "It's a lot of work."

"It is a lot of work, and I feel so bad no one will be around to bake her fresh muffins. I know how much she loves my banana nut muffins, so I made her extra to freeze, but it's not the same as fresh." Doris frowned.

"I'm sure. I did a lot of prep work to make sure things would run smoothly while we're gone. Fran is good at what she does. She managed big Fortune 500 companies before. She's more than qualified to do this. Hell, she's more qualified than us. Plus, we'll be available by phone and email if she needs us." Sylvie paused. "Well, at least I think we will. Hopefully, wherever we end up will ensure we're in cellphone range at least every few days."

"Yeah. Wherever we end up needs to be within cell phone range." Alice leaned forward, eyes leveling on me. "And that means no sending us to the afterlife with one of your hair-brained wishes, Marge. There are definitely no cellphones in the great beyond."

Chuckling, I shook my head. "I'm sure we'll have cell phones available. And none of us are plunging to our deaths. Okay? I've done the research, and I'm certain we will have an amazing jump experience. Just you wait. You ninnies will all be thanking me when we're done." I shook a finger at each woman as I passed a glance over their nervous faces.

"An amazing jump experience in ...?" Doris asked, her drawn-out word begging the answer to the question I wouldn't announce yet.

"I'll tell you when we get to the airport." I grinned.

Alice tossed up her hands. "It's a volcano. I know it. That's why you won't tell us. You're going to make us jump into a freaking volcano, aren't you? Well, I will not. No. A line is drawn in the sand, Marge. Throwing my

perfectly good body out of an airplane is already horrifying enough, but if you think I'm going to risk drifting anywhere near molten lava that will slough off this skin I've spent a *fortune* keeping youthful, you've got another think coming, sister."

"A volcano?" Doris's voice lifted into an ear-piercing octave. "We're jumping into a volcano?"

"You wouldn't," Sylvie said, then her eyes widened. "You would! You definitely would! Is it a volcano?"

With a soft shake of my head, I doused their fears. "It's not a volcano."

They let out a collective sigh of relief.

"I mean, I did research that, and it was in the running, but I decided after choosing a river for rafting that was too hard, perhaps I shouldn't make skydiving expert level, too."

"Well, thank you for that, Marge," Sylvie said. "We are most definitely not experts at skydiving."

Doris's eyes bulged. "Yeah. We don't want anything like that river rafting fiasco to happen again."

I tossed a hand in the air. "I got you all out of that jungle unscathed, and I'll get you through this wish fine too. Now relax, ya ninnies."

I sat back against the black leather seat and crossed my arms. "Now, what were we talking about?"

Sylvie launched back into a conversation about her daughter's pregnancy complications, and we all told our own pregnancy horror stories as the limo drove us to the airport. When we arrived, we piled out one by one. Our driver handed us our bags, and the Widows and I filed into the busy airport.

"Keep a close eye on your bags," I warned as we started through the crowds. "You don't want someone slipping drugs in your bag and turning you into a drug mule."

"What?" Doris turned to me, wide-eyed. "People are going to try to put drugs in my bag?"

Sylvie shook her head. "People are usually trying to smuggle drugs *into* the country, not out."

"I'll take some drugs in my bag." Alice grinned.

Sylvie looked at her, then paused and shrugged. "Well, we did have some fun in that Mexican jungle. Maybe someone slipping us a little something isn't the worst thing in the world."

“That’s what I’m saying.” Alice click-clacked on a pair of our fancy orthopedic heels as she strode beside us. “If someone slips something in my bag, to hell if they are getting it back. Finders keepers.”

“That was a one-time thing,” Doris said, her voice just above a whisper. “It was fun, but drugs are bad.”

“You liked it the most,” I countered, looking over as Doris’s body shrunk at my accusation. “You can admit it.”

“I ...” Her face bloomed in colorful shades of reds and pinks. “I did, but I’m not doing that again. It was bad.”

“It was fun.” Sylvie grinned. “But yeah. No drugs on this trip, ladies. The rule is not to get thrown in prison abroad. Getting busted with drugs is a surefire way to end up on *Locked Up Abroad*, and I have a daughter and grandchild who need me. So, no drugs. Keep an eye on your suitcases.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, knowing how serious she was about us not getting into trouble this time. And I didn’t blame her. If my daughter were having a baby, I would move mountains to be there for her at the birth. But Martha had chosen a career over having a family, and now she was in her forties with no plans to marry or have children. Part of me was thrilled she didn’t tie herself down, free to do whatever and go wherever with no one to answer to. The other part of me felt sad that she may never experience the joys of a relationship with someone she loved like I did. Twice. Once with Percy and now again with Roxie. Though the relationships were vastly different, I treasured them both with all my heart. And she’d never know the love you could have for a child ... the earthshattering feeling you get when they set that little baby in your arms. At least it had been that way for me. But I loved watching her live her best life on her own terms ... just like I was doing now.

“Okay. We can’t go any further without knowing what airline we are on.” Sylvie slowed to a stop in front of the lines crawling out of every airport terminal check-in. “It’s time, Marge. Spill.”

“Yes. Please put us out of misery. Where in the hell are we going?” Alice planted a hand on her hip.

“Please don’t be a volcano. Please don’t be a volcano,” Doris whispered, pressing her hands together.

They stood staring at me, expectant, fearful eyes waiting. I couldn’t deny the guilty pleasure it gave me to see their pained expressions. The anticipation that I’d gone and done something horrible. Though I’d spent the

past few months relishing in drawing out the suspense and making them fear the worst, in fact, I'd picked a perfectly wonderful place to kick off our adventure.

"We're going to ..." I paused. They leaned forward, inching closer and closer as they awaited me spitting out our destination. "Australia, mates!"

Sylvie's face lit up. "Australia? Really? I've always wanted to see Australia!"

"Oh, how marvelous! I loved *Crocodile Dundee*! And they have kangaroos!" Doris clapped her hands, a little squeal slipping out as she bounced up and down.

"She didn't say it isn't a volcano in Australia." Alice paused. "Wait. Are there volcanos in Australia?"

"It's not a volcano," I answered. "It's a beautiful place right off the coast. They have everything to give us a full Australian experience. Beaches, tropics, wildlife preserves ... all of it. And after our four-day stay, we finish it by skydiving in what is considered one of the most beautiful jumps in the world! And the best part is that it's winter here, which means it's summer there! Warm, tropical weather, here we come! Eh? Not bad, ladies? Right? Not bad!"

Sylvie tipped her head. "Not bad at all, Marge! I mean, I could still live without jumping out of an airplane at the end, but a trip to Australia? I'm in!"

I looked at Doris.

"That sounds wonderful, Marge! Although I, too, could live without jumping out of a plane." She cringed, crinkling her nose.

"I'll believe it's a nice place when I see it." Alice pursed her lips and stared at me with those distrustful eyes. "Until I confirm we aren't living in some hovel in the outback surviving off snakes and crocodiles, I'll hold my opinion."

"It's a nice place. I promise."

"Running water?" Alice asked. "Electricity? Decent food?"

I rocked back on my heels and nodded. "Yep, yep, and yep. Don't worry, gals. I've got you covered."

Alice tipped her head. "Okay. As long as we aren't roughing it in the outback, then I'm in." Finally, her concern turned into a smile. "Have you seen the men in Australia? I went to *Thunder from Down Under* several times, and yum. Australian men are something spectacular. I mean, that alone should make this trip worthwhile."

“Alice!” Sylvie laughed and smacked her on the arm. “You’re married now!”

Alice shrugged. “Oh, I know. And I love my Alejandro, but that doesn’t mean a girl can’t look at the local scenery every now and again, does it?”

Her playful, sinister grin stretched across her face, and we all burst into laughter as we shook our heads.

“Oh, Alice. You never do change.” Doris tsked then giggled.

“And aren’t you lucky I don’t. Why mess with perfection?” She lifted her chin and winked.

We chuckled with her, and then I pointed to the Australian airline. “This is us. And before you say anything, Alice, yes, I upgraded us all to first class. Now that I’ve got all this money from our shoe sales, I’m not sparing any expense. You’ve treated us more times than I can count, and it’s about time I can pay you back. First class all the way. You won’t be disappointed!”

Alice stared at me like I’d grown three heads. “You mean I don’t have to fight you not to spend the next umpteen hours squished into coach because you were too cheap to splurge?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm,” she answered, then shrugged. “Maybe this trip won’t be so bad after all.”

Excitement about my wish rose inside me like the volcano they worried we were jumping into. “It’s gonna be awesome, ladies! Now, let’s get this show on the road, or should I say ...” I slipped into an Australian accent and repeated myself. “Let’s have a g’day and get this show on the road, mates!”

Sylvie cringed. “For the love of God, don’t start talking weird the whole time.”

“Amen to that. Let’s not say the wrong thing and offend the locals, Marge.” Alice grabbed her bag and spun on her little pink shoe.

“Crikey, mates! Stop having a whinge!” I trotted off after her. “That’s Australian slang for stop worrying. See? I know my stuff. I’m only giving you a little taste of what awaits us in Australia!”

“Australia! How exciting!” Doris squealed and pattered along after us.

With excitement fluttering inside me for the adventure awaiting, I followed along to the check-in terminal, and after we were done, the four of us headed to the security line.

“Why do they make us do this every time?” Doris asked as she put her purse and small carry-on bag in the plastic tub at the security checkpoint. It

started down the conveyer belt along with the rest of the bags. “I hate having to take my shoes off in public like this. It’s so unsanitary.”

“You’re telling me,” Alice huffed. “It’s undignified, is what it is.”

“It’s for security and safety,” Sylvie answered.

“But why my shoes? It’s not like I have a bomb in my shoe,” Doris said too loudly.

We all gasped as we looked at her and then at the concerned faces of the surrounding travelers ... and the security guard now staring at her like she was America’s most wanted.

“Doris,” I whispered harshly, “you can’t say the B-word at the airport!”

“I didn’t. I mean, I did, but I said I *don’t* have a bomb. I didn’t say I *have* a bomb. That’s not illegal. I think you only can’t yell, ‘I have a bomb.’”

I slapped my head. “Doris! For cripes sake, stop saying the B-word!”

“Doris!” Sylvie leaned over. “Would you be quiet! Security is staring at you, and that guard is coming this way!”

Doris huffed, her face scrunching as she argued back. “But I didn’t do anything wrong! I just said I *don’t* have a bomb. That should be a good thing!”

The security guard closest to us said something into his coms and placed his hand on his hip, covering what I imagined was some kind of taser or weapon.

Alice pressed her hands to her hair. “Oh, Jesus. Now you’ve done it, Doris. We’re not even out of the state yet, and we’re already going to jail.”

“What? Who’s going to jail? Me? Why would I go to jail? I don’t have a bomb!”

“I’m pretty sure he thinks you do,” Sylvie said with a sigh as she pointed to the guard. “Stop talking, Doris. Please.”

Doris spun around to face the large man striding our way, his eyes narrowed as he beelined straight toward her.

“Ma’am, please keep your hands where I can see them,” he said loudly.

Everyone around us looked at Doris like she was a criminal mastermind about to blow them to smithereens, and they quickly moved away, leaving us standing alone in the security line.

“What? Me?” Doris said, her eyes bulging as she pointed at her chest.

“Keep your hands up!” he commanded.

“But I said I don’t have a bomb! I don’t have a bomb!” Doris shouted at him. “That’s what I keep saying! I *don’t* have a bomb!”



“Doris, for cripes sake, stop saying that! Stop speaking!” I blurted, raising my own hands high. “Sir, she’s a harmless old woman,” I told him as he closed the last distance between him and his perp ... Doris. “She’s as harmless as a fly. Right now, about as smart as one, too, but harmless.”

“Keep your hands up!” he commanded.

Doris lifted her hands, and big crocodile tears started streaming down her face. “I don’t have a bomb! I don’t have a bomb!” she kept saying, only making things worse.

“Don’t resist, Doris!” Sylvie said. “Just do what they say, and they’ll sort this whole thing out. You’re okay, Doris! Everything is okay!”

Though her words said everything was okay, the panic in her voice said the exact opposite.

Two other security guards descended on Doris like velociraptors, and she wept as they ziplocked her wrists.

“Where are you taking her?” I demanded. “She’s an American! She has rights!”

“She’s coming with us for questioning,” the small female guard responded.

I noted that it looked like I could take her. Easily.

I cracked my knuckles.

But then my gaze lifted to the guard who looked like he spent half the day pumping iron in the gym and the other half shooting up steroids. The veins on his bulbous forehead bulged as he gripped Doris’s wrists.

*Nope. I can’t take him.*

Knowing there was no way to fight our way out of this, I took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. “If you answer their questions, Doris, it will all be fine. You didn’t do a damn thing wrong. You’ll be alright. We’ll be right out here waiting for you. They’ll quickly see just how wrong they’ve got this.”

“Is this her bag?” the guard at the X-ray machine asked.

“Yes,” Doris answered, her voice trembling with her tears.

“There’s something suspicious in here,” the guard said, eyeballing his coworkers.

The Hulk of a guard tightened his grip on Doris. “You’re coming with us.”

“There’s nothing in there! I swear there isn’t a bomb!”

“Stop saying that!” I shouted in unison with Alice and Sylvie.

Doris burst into full body sobs as they took her away, leaving the three of us standing stunned in the line, watching her go.

“This time, it wasn’t me,” I finally said. “I didn’t do a damn thing wrong. If Doris gets tossed in the clink, I’m not taking the blame this time.”

“What do we do now?” Sylvie asked, staring at the door that slammed shut behind our wailing friend.

“We drink,” Alice sighed and reached for her purse. Then she grumbled. “Shit. I forgot I had to toss my booze to get through the security line. We need to get to the bar.”

“We’re waiting for Doris.” Sylvie scolded her with a glare. “We’re not leaving her here alone.”

With a hefty sigh, Alice closed her eyes. “Fine. Let’s get through this checkpoint and go get Doris so I can get a freaking vodka.”

“You three,” the man at the scanner said when we approached. “Step through one at a time, and then you need to come with us.”

“Us?” I pointed at my chest. “What the hell did we do? We weren’t the ones yelling the B-word!”

“Just do as you’re told,” he said, scowling.

It wasn’t in me to concede quickly, but I looked to Sylvie and remembered the promise I’d made to make sure she didn’t get arrested and miss the birth of her first grandchild. Starting a rumble with a security guard may get us all tossed in the slammer.

With a grumble, I answered, “Fine. But I’m Sergeant Margherita Morretti, United States Army. I know my rights.”

Giving me an unimpressed eye roll, he gestured for us to follow. “Yeah, yeah. Just step through one at a time.”

We did as he asked and followed him to the chairs lined against the wall outside the interrogation room. A large German Shephard was brought in and sniffed over all our bags, and then they took the large dog into the room with Doris. For over a half hour, we sat outside waiting for them to realize Doris was as far from a terrorist as humanly possible, but each minute continued ticking by, and still, she wasn’t released. Every now and again, I could hear her loud wails.

“What the hell are they doing to her in there?” Sylvie whispered.

“Probably pulling out her fingernails,” I answered.

Alice and Sylvie spun to look at me.

“Kidding. I’m kidding. It’s Doris. She cries at the drop of a damn hat. They’re likely just trying to suss out if she’s a threat to national security, and she’s a wreck because she thinks she’s going to Alcatraz. She didn’t do anything wrong. She’ll be okay. But cripes, this is taking a long time.”

“I hope they get done soon. She must be terrified. Poor Doris,” Sylvie said.

Alice slumped back in the orange vinyl chair. “And poor me. I can literally smell the vodka from here. There is a bar right around this corner. I know it.”

“Oh, can it, Alice. You’re not a vodka-sniffing bloodhound, you lush. They told us not to move. And we told Sylvie we weren’t going to jail on this trip. So, we stay put, and we wait for Doris. And hell, your liver is probably thrilled for this reprieve.”

Alice scratched the side of her face with her middle finger.

A voice came over the loudspeaker announcing our flight was boarding.

“Oh, cripes,” I grumbled. “We’re going to miss our flight!”

“They have to be done soon, right?” Sylvie asked. “I mean, it’s Doris! How can they not have figured out she’s not a threat by now? This is ridiculous!”

“For crying out loud. I need a drink, and we need to get the hell out of here,” Alice snapped her fingers at the nearby guard. “Excuse me, ma’am?”

The woman gave her a look of disdain and then walked over. “What?”

“Our flight is boarding. How much longer will it take to realize that the woman behind those doors is basically the least dangerous woman on the planet? Literally.”

“We’re only doing our due diligence and investigating all the potential threats.”

“She said the B-word. We know. That’s bad,” Sylvie reasoned. “But she didn’t know any better. Surely, this must be sorted out by now.”

“It wasn’t just her strange behavior and use of the forbidden word. We had to take extra precautions because of the suspicious material in her bag. We don’t take any chances.”

“Suspicious material? What are you talking about?” Alice asked.

The guard stood up. “We saw something in the X-ray machine that looked potentially dangerous.”

“In Doris’s bag? What? A rolling pin? She likes to bring her own, that ninny,” I grumbled. “Is this over her rolling pin?”

The guard shifted her feet and then scratched behind her ear. “It, uh, it looked like possible C4 in her bag, but it turned out it was only some bars of fudge.”

“Fudge?” The three of us asked in unison.

“Yes, fudge,” the guard said.

A small laugh started in my throat, choking its way up until it burst out my nose. “Fudge? You thought her fudge was a bo—B-word?” The laughter exploded out of me, and my whole body shook as I squeezed my eyes tight against the tears forming behind them.

The guard didn’t join in my hysterics, instead furrowing her brow. “You’d be surprised how similar C4 and fudge look on an X-ray. But we’ve inspected it, and it’s just homemade fudge.”

The guard kept a straight, stern face as I rolled with laughter, Alice and Sylvie soon joining me.

“Only Doris would get cuffed because of fudge,” Sylvie said between gasps for breath. “Fudge.”

Alice’s whole body shook along with ours. “Fudge. Are you freaking kidding me? This is all happening over a baked good?”

“And her suspicious behavior,” the guard defended. “It’s our job to take threats seriously.”

“No, we know. We know,” Sylvie agreed. “It’s just ... If you knew Doris, you would laugh too. Fudge.”

We laughed harder, our breaths petering out as we struggled to catch the next one. Finally, the door to Doris’s interrogation room opened, and she stepped out.

Her swollen eyes, which looked like she’d been crying the whole time, clapped right onto us. “Oh, thank goodness you’re still here! I thought you may leave me behind!” Her face pulled tight as she fought more tears.

We could barely muster the strength to stand and hug her as we continued sobbing with laughter and tears.

“You’re okay,” Sylvie finally managed out as the four of us stood hugging in the airport.

“Why are you all laughing? It was scary!” Doris whimpered. “I thought I was going to jail!”

“Yeah ... for fudge,” I said, then rolled harder with laughter.

Doris frowned. “I made it for us to enjoy on the plane ride. I can’t believe they thought my fudge was a bom—”

I slapped my hand across her mouth, stopping her from saying the word that got us in this pickle in the first place. “For cripes sake, Doris! Erase that word from your vocabulary!”

She stopped moving her mouth under my hand, so I pulled it away.

“I was really scared,” she said as we all finally stopped laughing.

“I know, sweetie.” Sylvie squeezed her shoulder tight. “But we knew you wouldn’t get in any trouble. You could never do anything wrong. A simple misunderstanding.”

“Yes. A misunderstanding,” Alice said, then grabbed her bag from the guard. “A misunderstanding that is now resolved, and we are free to go to the plane. The one with the vodka on it. Ladies?”

Without another word, Alice started off through the airport.

“I guess that’s our cue,” Sylvie said with a shrug.

We all grabbed our bags, and with one last look at the grumpy guards, we hurried away.

“Hey! I was right! There *was* a bar right where I thought it would be!” Alice shouted over her shoulder as her strides quickened toward the bar that was, as she’d predicted, right around the corner.

“Last call for flight 1862,” someone announced over the loudspeaker.

“Cripes! That’s us! We gotta board that plane! Hurry, ladies!” I sped up. “Let’s move! Gate C5!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!” Sylvie puffed behind me.

“Slow down, Marge!” Doris called.

“I’m not slowing down. You girls need to speed up! Knees to chest! Knees to chest! Hustle soldiers, hustle!”

When I caught up to Alice, she paused at the entry of the bar. Before she could say a word, I caught her by the back of the shirt and dragged her along with me. “Nope. No time.”

“What? I wasn’t going in. I was only looking. Let go of me!” she argued, her little feet hurrying to keep her moving so I wouldn’t drag her.

“Likely story. You’ll have to wait until we’re on the plane. Let’s *move!*”

I released my grip on her shirt when I felt certain she was committed to the goal of reaching our gate. We turned the last corner to our gate, the four of us puffing as we slammed to a stop in front of the door separating us from our plane.

“Tickets?” the woman holding the scanner asked.

We pulled them out, then after quickly scanning them, we rushed down the jetway to the plane. The flight attendant pointed us to our seats in first class, and one by one, we collapsed into the soft, oversized leather chairs. Before I'd met Alice, I'd never even peeked my head inside the luxurious first class of a plane, but since she insisted on traveling in style, we always flew first class on our adventures. And now that I'd flown that way, I hated to admit I couldn't imagine going back to being squished like sardines in coach ... even for this short connecting flight to the long one awaiting us that would take us to Australia. The Widows were in for an even bigger treat when they saw what I splurged for on that flight.

"Cripes. We made it," I breathed out.

"We made it," Sylvie repeated as she slouched beside me. "That was close."

"I can't believe we made it! I almost went to jail!" Doris whimpered. "I didn't know I couldn't say ..."

"Out of your vocabulary," I warned her sternly, stopping her from finishing that sentence. "That word is no longer in your vocabulary. Forget that word exists, Doris."

Doris pinched her lips tight. "Sorry. It's out of my vocabulary."

Sylvie gestured to all of us, and with a big smile, she said, "We're all here. We're safe. No one is in jail, and we're officially heading off on the start of our new Wilder Widows adventure."

"I can't believe we're going to Australia," Doris said. "How wonderful."

"And jumping out of a plane. I cannot wait!" I bounced in my seat.

"Maybe don't put that kind of juju out into the world while we're in a plane. We don't want to jump out of a plane *yet*." Sylvie arched an eyebrow.

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Good point. But man, I am so excited. This is gonna be an amazing adventure."

"I'm so glad to be sharing it with you all." Doris sighed sweetly.

"Me too," Sylvie agreed.

We all looked at Alice.

She shrugged. "I'll be happy to share in this adventure once I have some freaking vodka. Where the hell is the flight attendant?" She looked over her shoulder at the busy woman preparing everything for the flight.

"Do you want some fudge to tide you over?" Doris asked, gesturing to her purse.

Alice glanced at the purse that had gotten us in so much trouble. “Does it have vodka in it?”

Doris shook her head. “No. No vodka. Just sugar, butter, milk—”

Alice stopped her with a raised hand. “Then, no thanks. That fudge is the reason we didn’t have time to unwind at the bar.” Alice arched an eyebrow, and Doris shrunk.

“It’s good, though,” she said.

“I want vodka,” Alice countered. “You know I need a little something to take the edge off when I fly.”

“What you want is these compression socks.” I reached into my bag and pulled out four pairs of tall, stretchy socks.

“What the hell is that?” Alice recoiled.

“Oh! Compression socks!” Sylvie reached over and grabbed a pair. “That’s a great idea! Thanks, Marge!”

“Don’t need my best ladies getting blood clots. We’ve got this flight for an hour, then a two-hour wait for our flight to Australia, then a long flight there. By the time we’re done, we’ll be traveling for over twenty-four hours. We need protection.”

“Oh! They give these to you after surgery!” Doris grabbed a pair, and I threw a pair into Alice’s face.

She swatted them onto her lap like they were a pesky fly. “Never. I’m not wearing ghastly compression socks like an old lady.”

“You are an old lady,” Sylvie said as she kicked off her shoes and started pulling on the socks. “Marge is right. Unless you want to get a big blood clot in those beautiful legs, you’d better put these babies on.”

Alice lifted them up and looked at them like they were made of dog poop, then looked over at us as we struggled to pull ours up.

“These are so tight! I can barely get it over my calf!” Doris struggled, and then her hand slipped, and she elbowed me in the ribs.

“Ugh,” I grunted out, losing the grip on my own socks, and they snapped back around my leg. “Ouch!”

“Sorry.” Doris sucked the air through her teeth.

Alice watched in horror as the three of us pulled and struggled, finally ending with three sighs as we lodged the socks into place.

“Your turn.” I looked at Alice.

She pointed her nose into the air. “No.”

“Alice. No one cares if we’re wearing compression socks. Just put them on,” Sylvie coaxed.

“I don’t want compression socks. I want a freaking vodka.” She spun in her seat and looked at the flight attendant hurrying around preparing for the flight.

“We were late to board. She’s busy now. Could be awhile. Maybe even after we get in the air,” I said. “*Or* put on the socks, and I’ll get you a vodka right now.”

Alice arched an eyebrow.

“Come on, Alice. All the cool kids are wearing the socks,” Sylvie teased.

“They are supposed to help a ton,” Doris agreed. “We don’t want you to get blood clots, dear.”

I lied when I said, “If you get one, they will have to slice your leg wide open to cut it out. Gonna be a huge scar. Twelve inches, at least. Maybe bigger.”

Her eyes flew open wide. “What? A scar? On *my* legs?”

“Unless it’s so bad they have to amputate.” I shrugged. “But your choice. Skip the socks if you want.”

After a long moment, Alice huffed, kicked off her heels, and started yanking on the tight socks. “Fine. But go get me a drink to help numb the pain of losing my dignity.”

“Good girl. Now, I’ll go get you a treat.” I patted her on the head like a dog, but when she turned and glared at me, I yanked back my hand, worried she might bite. I unbuckled my seatbelt, then looked quickly over my shoulder. When I saw the flight attendant busy with another passenger, I stood and hurried to the beverage cart parked a few rows back. While keeping an eye on the flight attendant, I quickly grabbed four small bottles of liquor, then hurried back to our seats. “Here. This should do the trick.”

“Oh, hallelujah!” Alice finished pulling up her sock and then beamed as she caught the bottle I tossed at her.

After giving everyone a bottle, we unscrewed the caps.

“To the Wilder Widows,” I said, then we clinked them together.

“To the Wilder Widows!” they responded in unison.



## CHAPTER THREE

“Oh, man. If ever there was a time to spring for first class, this was it,” Sylvie said as we filed off the plane. “Almost twenty-four hours of travel, and my back isn’t even sore. Those in-flight suites with beds were worth every penny. Thanks, Marge.”

“You said it.” Alice paused to slip her sunglasses on as we approached the bright lights of the terminal. “I’ve been telling you and telling you ... First class is the only way.”

“I don’t mind coach,” Doris replied, “but I gotta admit, I can’t imagine twenty-four hours stuck in a tiny seat. This was a wonderful treat, Marge. I felt like a celebrity. And those compression socks were wonderful. No blood clots!”

“Thank God I finally got to take those ghastly things off.” Alice looked down at her nude legs. We’d all pulled our socks off while we were awaiting unboarding.

“I told you, gals. This time, I’m not gonna be pinching pennies. We’re going all out. My treat.”

In all my years, I never thought I’d have the kind of dough to splurge on first class tickets to Australia. But, thanks to our booming little shoe business, neither the Widows nor I would ever have to worry about covering bills again. Not that I was frivolous with it. In fact, other than spending some big bucks on this wish of mine, not much had changed around my place. It still had the old décor Percy and I had picked out umpteen years ago, and I hadn’t even bought the big TV I kept saying I was gonna spring for. The only thing I ever spent our money on was buying gifts for my sweet little Roxie.

Seeing her gorgeous grin when I’d bring her home some new shoes, or clothes, or some newfangled gift I knew she’d love was about the only damn thing I cared about. Not that she needed money, either. She hadn’t ever had more than what she could make waiting tables at a casino. We’d been perfectly happy without a ton of cash when we were together in Vegas, and she loved me before I had a penny to my name. But boy, did she appreciate when I’d spoil her a little.

“It’s so bright. Why is it so bright?” Alice asked as we stepped out into the airport, and the bright sunshine flooded through the large windows.

“Because it’s winter back home, and we haven’t seen the sun in weeks. Then pairing that with being in a metal tube for twenty-four hours; it’s freaking bright.” Sylvie reached into her purse and pulled out her sunglasses.

“Oh, I missed the sunshine!” Doris hurried to the window, pressing her face against it and grinning wide as she watched a plane take off. “We’re in Australia! Australia! Can you believe it? I need to call Axel and tell him where we are! I didn’t have time with everything going on back at the airport.”

“I should call Roxie, too. I didn’t tell her where we were going because she can’t keep a secret. She’s gonna be so jealous we’re in Australia. She loves kangaroos,” I said.

Alice nodded. “I already miss Alejandro. I need to call him and tell him Marge hasn’t killed us yet.”

As Alice started reaching into her oversized purse, Sylvie planted her hands on her hips. “Hey! Hold it on the calling the spouses.”

We all paused and looked at her.

With a shake of her head, she let out a breath. “Okay, I know we’re all married now, and we have to let our spouses know we’re safe, but this is a Wilder Widows trip. The point of this trip is to experience amazing new things together. Can we just take a moment and be present here in Australia? Really let it sink in that we’re at the start of our new adventure in this amazing place?” She waved a hand toward the window. “Let’s not forget that even though we are technically wives and not widows anymore, this is a Wilder Widows trip, and first and foremost, we’re spending time in the here and now with each other and not with our heads back home with our spouses.”

I tipped my head. “Wait. You’re right. We’re all wives now. Does that make us the Wilder Wives?”

Everyone looked at each other, but Sylvie quickly shook her head. “No. I mean, yes, we are wives, but we are, and will always be, the Wilder Widows. We found each other only because we were widows, so we should always honor that memory and remain the Wilder Widows. Right?”

“Definitely,” I agreed. “Wilder Widows forever.”

Alice and Doris nodded in agreement.

“Good,” Sylvie said. “We’re the Wilder Widows always. And we need to remember that while we’re out traveling. Do I miss Tom? Oh, God, yes. It’s killing me. But I’m putting that aside to focus on this experience with all of

you. So, we can text them that we're safe so they don't worry, but no one is calling home until we're all settled in, and we've had time to appreciate the start of our trip. Together. The four of us."

"That is a really good point," Doris agreed. "Just because we're all remarried doesn't mean the reason for being together has changed. We should take a little time to appreciate where we are. The spouses can wait. I mean, we're in Australia! How amazing!"

"Yeah. You're right," I agreed. "I'll call Roxie later. For now, let's enjoy this moment together. I'm so excited about this! We're in Australia, ladies!"

"I'll be excited when I confirm we aren't sleeping in a dirt hut." Alice gave me the side-eye.

Chuckling, I gestured for them to follow me to the baggage claim. We grabbed our bags and then headed outside. The moment the door slid open, we were hit with the smell of the salty summer air. I paused and took a deep breath, the moisture of the hot, humid day soothing my lungs after not breathing fresh air in over a day.

"Oh, that feels nice." Doris tipped her head back and let the sun beam on her face. "You forget how much you miss the sun in winter. It's so rare this time of year back home."

We all followed suit, tipping back our heads and relishing the warm sun and the fresh air surrounding us.

"Wilder Widows? Is that you?" A man's deep, Australian accent asked.

We all opened our eyes and looked toward the sound. A muscular young man with sandy blonde beach waves leaned against an old blue jeep holding a sign that read, "Wilder Widows."

"That's us!" I called back as I waved. "He must be our guide for the week! It's part of the package."

But instead of jumping forward with me, the other three Widows stared at him, slack-jawed.

"I'm a married woman. I'm a married woman. I'm a married woman," Alice chanted as her eyes raked his chiseled frame that the tank top did nothing to hide.

"Holy smokes. He looks like a movie star," Doris whispered.

"You weren't kidding about the Australian men, Alice. Damn," Sylvie whispered back.

I looked between their frozen bodies and the undeniably handsome man grinning and waving at us. "All right, you old dirty pervs. He's in his

twenties, and you broads are all old and married. So, keep your panties on, and let's go."

Sylvie and Doris giggled and then started after me. Alice stood frozen for another moment, and then I heard, "I'm a married woman," whispered under her breath several more times before she started after us.

"G'day, ladies!" He opened the door of the old, vintage Jeep. "I'm Bryce, and I'll be taking you to the resort. It's about a two-hour drive and a beautiful day, so I thought we'd take the scenic route instead of the main roads and get you gals a little fresh air and good 'ol Australian scenery. Whaddya say? Scenic route or highway?"

"Scenic route!" we all answered in unison. Well, all of us but Alice, who was still staring at him, mouthing, "I'm a married woman," over and over again.

"That's what I like to hear!" He grinned wider, his flashy white teeth bright against his suntanned skin. "Hop on in and get comfy. I'll get your bags loaded, and we'll get you off to our resort."

Sylvie hopped in the passenger seat, and the rest of us climbed into the back. Bryce got our bags loaded, then a few moments later, he fired up the old engine, and away we went. He chattered at us throughout the drive, but the farther we got from the city, the less I could talk. The scenery was incredible. The aqua blue ocean. The vivid blue sky. Trees were so green and lush that they looked practically painted on a canvas.

"It's so much greener and more tropical than I imagined," I finally said as we turned off the main road onto an even smaller one, taking us away from civilization.

Bryce looked at me in the rear-view mirror. "A lot of people think of Australia and think of the outback. That's accurate, of course, but that dry desert is only part of Australia. The rest is a lot like this. Lush and tropical."

"I watched videos and stuff," I answered, "but they don't even begin to capture how incredible this place is!"

"Absolutely stunning." Sylvie looked back at me with a smile. "This was a great idea, Marge. It's gorgeous here."

"I'm taking you a bit out of the way, but this route to the resort will show you a few different climate zones," Bryce said as the Jeep hit a bump. "We're in the tropical part now, but shortly, it's going to turn into grasslands, and then we'll dip a little into the outback so you can get a feel of them all."

“This is so neat!” Doris squealed, her hair blowing in the wind as the Jeep picked up speed.

Alice remained fixated on a different scenery—watching Bryce like a big cat stalking its prey.

“Careful there, cougar,” I whispered in her ear. “You keep looking at him like that, and you may cause his head to burst into flames. You know, with all the *heat* in your laser gaze.”

Alice broke her stare and rolled her eyes. “I’m only looking. Nothing wrong with looking.”

“Mmmhmm,” I responded, giving her a nudge. “Well, you’re missing a hell of a gorgeous view out here.” As I pointed to the open lands surrounding the dirt road we traveled on, I spotted a small creature hopping across the grassland. “Look! A kangaroo! A kangaroo!”

“Where?” Doris gasped, spinning to look at my pointing finger. “I love kangaroos!”

Sylvie did the same, and soon we were all staring at the little family of kangaroos hopping around together.

“Actually, those are wallabies,” Bryce said. “Kangaroos are bigger. You’ll see plenty of both where we’re going.”

I couldn’t help but grin wide. I was in Australia. The start of my wish ... A wish that would end with me sailing above it, free-falling with wild abandon. With a happy sigh, I sat back and went quiet, enjoying the rest of the sights all the way to our resort.

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“Marge, I still can’t believe your wish has us sipping cocktails on the beach in Australia,” Sylvie said after taking a long swing from her fruity drink, a gesture from her hand sweeping toward the ocean waves crashing on the shore in front of our lounge chairs situated beneath an oversized umbrella. “It’s not at all what I would have imagined you’d come up with.”

I took a deep breath of the fresh, salty ocean air and closed my eyes for a moment. “This is the life.”

Alice sat up and lowered her sunglasses, giving us all a passing gaze. “Um, are we forgetting the actual wish involves us jumping out of a freaking plane above this ‘beautiful world’ around us?”

Sylvie grimaced. “Oh, yeah. I forgot about that for a moment. Damn it, Marge! Why can’t ‘Sip cocktails on a beach in Australia’ be your wish? How about that? Huh? This is your wish!”

“Oh, I like that wish,” Doris agreed.

Alice nodded and sat back against her lounge chair. “Be a hero, Marge. Make this your wish.”

“The plane jumping is the wish. Sorry, ladies. This was just my gift to thank you for supporting me in something I know you have no interest in doing. Call it a tradeoff.”

Alice grumbled. “There is no tradeoff for chucking me out of a plane, Marge. Well, maybe you waxing those ghastly legs of yours would be a small step toward balancing the scales. Forever. If you wax them forever and never allow this horrifying forest to sprout up once again, we’ll get closer to even.” She pulled a face and waved a hand over my unkempt legs I still refused to trim.

“No deal.” I crossed my arms. “I like ‘em this way.”

Alice covered her eyes and looked away. “Well then, we’ll never be even. No matter what crazy wishes the rest of us come up with, none of them will *ever* be even with you making us plummet to our deaths.”

“We’re not gonna die. It’s very safe.”

They all looked at me, eyebrows raised. I slunk a little lower in my chair. “Well, no one is putting a gun to your heads. You can sit this wish out.”

“No. Nope. No way.” Sylvie shook her head hard, her sunhat almost flying off with the force. “As much as I absolutely, positively, in no way, shape, or form want to jump out of a plane, it’s our duty as Widows to jump with you. The whole point of this is to push ourselves out of our comfort zones and support each other’s wishes. You jump, we jump. That’s the rule.”

The comradery these women showed me made me smile, lighting me up from the inside out. Part of me felt bad for forcing them to do something they were so adamantly against, but the other part of me knew they’d be thanking me after we landed safely on the ground. It would be an experience none of us would ever forget.

“Thank you for doing this with me, ladies.” I paused and took a long swig of my tropical cocktail. “It’s going to be amazing. You won’t regret it.”

“You’re right,” Alice answered. “We won’t regret it.”

When I began to smile at her finally coming around to my idea, she finished her thought.

“We won’t regret it because you can’t regret anything after you’re *dead*.” Doris whimpered. “I don’t want to die.”

“We’re not going to die.” Sylvie took the words right out of my mouth. “We’re going to be scared, traumatized, and terrified beyond all measure, but I’ve done the research, and all signs point to us surviving this horrifying wish.”

I frowned. “Well, it’s not *that* scary.”

“To you,” Sylvie answered back. “To us? This is a nightmare.”

As I stared at their concerned faces, for the first time, I started to rethink my wish. I didn’t want to traumatize my best and only friends. I wanted this to be an incredible experience for us all. Until now, I had gotten a kick out of their reluctance to jump, but I hoped my excitement would rub off on them once we’d arrived. Instead, it seemed the closer we got to the jump, the more fearful they became.

After a long pause, I set down my drink. “I’m sorry, ladies. I thought you would get into this wish, but it sounds like you may be more scared than I’d expected. If you want, I can go by myself, or I can pick something else.”

Before anyone else could answer, Doris sat straight up. “No! This is your wish, Marge. And we *will* do your wish. The whole point of our adventures is capturing the dreams we’ve always wanted to do, and to heck if our prattling on and on about being scared will stop us from fulfilling your dream. No. We’re going—all of us. And we’re gonna stop whining about it. That’s that,” she ended with a huff, crossing her arms tight over her pink, flowered suit.

We all stared at Doris, blinking. Her unusual outburst and the force of her words were so out of character that none of us seemed to know how to respond. Finally, Sylvie spoke.

“You’re right, Doris. You’re absolutely right. We have been really unsupportive of Marge. And I say from this moment forward, we all get our heads wrapped around the idea that we *are* jumping out of this plane, and we are going to stop bitching about it.”

Alice huffed. “Ugh. Fine. I’ll stop. But let me make one last statement before I go quiet. If I do plummet to my death, I’m coming back to haunt you, Marge.”

I grinned. “I’ll be thrilled for the company, Alice. I’ll even get some clay, and we can reenact the *Ghost* scene together.” I mimicked the romantic scene pretending Alice’s ghost was sitting behind me.

After a moment, all three women burst into laughter, Alice tossing her head back and laughing with such abandon that she caught the attention of all the other guests on the beach.

“We’re causing a scene,” Sylvie said as her laughs petered off. “Everyone is staring.”

“Good. Let them stare,” I answered. “They’re just jealous they aren’t having as much fun as us. Because no one out there has better friends than me. Thank you, ladies. For the laughs and for supporting my wish. It means the world to me.”

“And you mean the world to us,” Doris answered, reaching over and touching my shoulder.

Warmth flooded every inch of me while I looked across the faces of my truest friends ... the ones willing to launch themselves out of a plane just to support me.

“G’day, ladies!” Bryce said from behind us.

We all spun toward our suntanned, shirtless guide walking up with a surfboard tucked beneath his arm.

“G’day, Bryce!” I answered back.

The other three sat staring with goofy grins stretched across their faces.

Finally, Alice answered in a slow, sultry tone. “Hello, Bryce.”

“Any of you ladies care to surf? I’d be happy to teach you.”

His large, muscular frame blocked the sun when he paused and looked at us so I didn’t have to squint at him. “Maybe in a little bit,” I answered. Learning to surf could be a fun way to spend the day.

“Right on.” He grinned. “I’ll be out there. Wave me in if you want to take a spin. I can grab another board no problem. Enjoy your day, ladies.”

When he flashed that pearly white smile, the one that deepened the dimples in his face, I heard the collective sigh beneath the breaths of the other three Widows and a soft “I’m a married woman” come from Alice’s direction.

“Bye, Bryce,” Sylvie crooned, giving him a little wave as he walked off.

“I hate to watch him go, but I love to watch him leave,” Alice whispered.

Doris giggled and turned a shade of red that made her look like we’d left her baking on the beach for a full day without sunscreen.

Bryce jogged toward the ocean, and that collective sigh repeated.

“I’m a married woman, I’m a married woman, I’m a married woman,” Alice repeated like a skipping record.



“You three are terrible!” I tossed a pillow from my lounge chair and hit Alice square in the head. The blow broke her deadlocked stare at the young man now jogging into the ocean waves.

“Hey!” she yelled, then tossed the pillow back at me.

“You three are dirty pervs.” I stuck the pillow behind my head and slid my sunglasses back down.

“Just because he’s not your type doesn’t mean we’re monsters,” Alice argued. “If he were some hot, young blonde woman parading around in front of you, you’d be looking, too.”

“Nope. Not me. I’m a married woman. I only have eyes for Roxie,” I answered.

“Oh, please.” Sylvie snorted. “We’re *all* married women. Just because we got married doesn’t make us blind. We’d be lying if we didn’t all admit Bryce is one ridiculously hot male specimen. Hell, even you have to admit that.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. I guess I can see what all the fuss is about.”

“It’s not a sin to look,” Doris whispered. “Only a sin if you act.”

“The visions going on inside my head right now are sinful. Definitely sinful.” Alice grinned like the Cheshire Cat, causing Doris to wave the air at her and then fan her face.

“You haven’t looked at *anyone* since you met Roxie?” Sylvie arched an eyebrow. “You two are still so hot and heavy that you can’t even imagine *imagining* being with someone else? Really, Marge?”

Her penetrating stare burned right through me, and I glanced away toward the ocean.

“I, uh ... Roxie and I are good. Great. Perfect. No need to be imagining being with anyone but her. Ever. Since she retired and we moved home, she’s been with me all the time. All. The. Time. I mean, when would I ever get the chance to ogle some other broad when she is always—*always*—there? Always. Yep. Always. I mean? Is it great we’re together all the time? Sure. Yeah. It’s great. She’s great. We’re great. Yep. Great. Totally great. No problems. None at all. Everything is great.”

As the words poured out of my mouth like verbal vomit, I noticed the wide-eyed, shocked stares of the three Widows staring back at me.

“Marge? Is everything okay with you and Roxie?” Doris asked.

“What? Yes, of course. Of course. We’re great. I just said we’re great,” I answered, though deep down, I didn’t know if that was a lie.

“Really?” Alice arched a brow. “Because that was a lot of ‘greats’ and not a lot of conviction behind them. Is there anything you want to talk about?”

My gaze flickered between them. “Me? What? No. Nothing at all. Things are great. Super great. Hell, stupendous even. Yep. Stupendous. Super great stupendous.”

Three sets of eyes kept blinking at me.

“Marge? Why are you acting so weir—” Sylvie started, but before she could finish, Bryce called from the shore, looking ready to plunge in.

“You sure none of you ladies want to try surfing?” he called. “My buddy is done, so I have an extra board!”

As I stared at the probing faces I wasn’t ready to talk to, I jumped up from my lounge chair. “I’ll do it! I want to try surfing!”

“You do?” Doris asked. “In the ocean? With the sharks?”

“I love sharks, remember? We survived a feeding frenzy with Great Whites. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Any of you in?”

Doris shook her head fast. “Swimming once out in the wild with them was enough for me. I’ll stick to the cages in any shark-infested waters now.”

“I’ll pass. I’m too comfortable.” Sylvie crossed her arms behind her head and settled back against the soft cushion.

Alice lifted her cocktail. “As much as I would love to get all wet and sweaty on a board with Bryce, my cocktail is fresh, and it will be all melted and warm by the time I get back. It would be a crime to waste it. I’ll sit this one out too. Enjoy the ride.”

“Okay. I’m going.” I hurried off, not wanting to answer any other questions. “I’m in, Bryce! Let’s do this!” I called, and he whooped and tossed a hand in the air.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The ocean waves lifted me up and down as I lay prone on the board.

“Wait for it, Marge. The right wave is coming. Patience is part of surfing,” Bryce said from where he floated beside me on his board.

No doubt he’d seen the frustration lines deepening on my face as I’d tried to stand on multiple occasions since we’d started an hour ago. Each time had ended with me tumbling into the ocean before I’d even reached standing. Surfing, it seemed, was even harder than it looked. At least it was for this old broad.

My face scrunched with my frown. “I’m never going to get this.”

“A lot of people don’t catch a wave their first, even second or third try,” Bryce said, trying to make me feel better. “It can take a few days of attempts. Don’t get put off, mate.”

“I suck at this,” I answered, then a wave hit the side of my board, sending a salty spray of water splashing my face, causing me to squint and wipe my eyes. “It’s okay. You can say I suck at this, and we can give up and go in.”

“Nonsense!”

He grinned that sparkly smile at me. It was a good thing I wasn’t straight, or I’d have turned into a melty pile of goo like the other Widows. No doubt I’d be too distracted by the pretty man to even think about getting up on my board.

“You’ll get it, Marge. I know you will. And it’s gonna be awesome when you catch your first wave. An awesome rush. You’ll see.”

“One more try, then I’m giving up on this crazy idea,” I answered, looking to the beach and the three Widows lounging in the sun, sipping the cocktails I started to regret I’d left.

I was all about trying new things, but honestly, surfing had never been on my mile-long list of things I wanted to do before I died. But it was better than sitting on the beach being interrogated by the three curious cats who’d homed in on my issues with Roxie like they were a bunch of problem-sniffing bloodhounds. Instead of talking about problems I didn’t want to talk about, problems I didn’t even know if I *had*, I’d bolted into the ocean to tango with the waves instead of the meddling widows staring at me from the beach.

“Oh, wow! Check out this wave! This one is looking good.” Bryce pointed behind us.

I looked over my shoulder back at the huge wave he stared at ... a wave much, *much* bigger than I'd attempted so far. "Uh. That one looks bigger than the others." A little slither of fear snaked up my spine as I appraised the looming wave barreling toward us.

"It's easier to catch when they are a bit bigger. It'll give you more time to get to standing. Just remember what I told you, and you've got this! Let's do it, Marge!"

Before I could argue, Bryce paddled toward shore. "Paddle! Paddle!" he called to me.

I took one last look at my three friends sitting on the shore sipping cocktails and started paddling like hell toward them.

"Keep paddling, Marge! When I say 'up,' then jump up and ride this baby! You can do it!"

*Just keep paddling. Just keep paddling. Just keep paddling.*

Even though my arms burned from the strain of pushing through the water, I kept at it, keeping pace with Bryce only a few yards away. Our speeds increased as the growing wave approached, pushing us forward as it started to lift.

"Up! Up! Up!" Bryce shouted as he leaped onto his feet like a springy ninja.

My creaky joints and sore muscles didn't move like his, so instead, I clamored awkwardly to my feet on the board moving beneath me. Every other time I'd tried, I'd lost my balance before I even got halfway up, but this time, I caught myself before I went ass over teakettle into the ocean. When I reached full height and realized I was standing, I shrieked with excitement.

"Holy cripes! I'm doing it! I'm doing it! I'm surfing!" I shouted as I teetered and wobbled on the board that lifted with the wave pushing me forward.

"You're doing it, Marge! You're surfing! Atta girl!" Bryce cheered.

As I stood on the board feeling the power of the ocean beneath me, I couldn't stop grinning, my face splitting in two as pride swelled within me. I looked to the beach to see my Widows leaping off their chairs, cocktails in hand as they raced toward the beach, screaming my name.

"Go, Marge!" I heard one of them say through the sounds of the waves crashing around me.

They jumped up and down, waving and screaming as I got closer and closer to them.

“I’m surfing! I’m surfing!” I screamed to them, to myself, and to all the other surfers surrounding us riding this wave. I screamed my accomplishment to anyone who would listen.

I was surfing!

The salty water sprayed in my face as I rode the board, still stunned that I’d stayed upright for more than ten seconds. I couldn’t help pausing to think of my sweet Percy. Was he watching me right now, cheering for me as well? This wasn’t part of my wish I’d wanted to do for him, but if he was still alive, no doubt he’d have been cheering louder than everyone else on that beach for me. Always one to encourage me on.

Then I thought about Roxie and how much I wished she could see me now. How she would look on that beach, her beautiful smile radiating the whole world around her like it always did. The smile that lit up my whole life. I closed my eyes briefly, her face flooding my mind and filling me with a warmth I never wanted to dissipate. My imagination put her on the surfboard with me, my arms wrapped around her waist as we rode the wave together, our smiles matching before she turned over her shoulder and kissed me. The image of us starring in our own surfing version of *Titanic* sent my stomach up in flutters like it always did when I thought of her.

*Roxie. I wish you were here,* I thought as I squeezed my eyes tighter and pulled her into this experience in my mind.

“Look out!” Bryce shouted, shattering the peaceful bubble I’d found myself in.

My eyes snapped open, and suddenly, I was back on a surfboard alone, not kissing Roxie and holding her in my arms like I’d just drifted off and imagined. Instead of Roxie standing on the front of my board, I saw a different woman ... A woman on a surfboard I careened straight toward. Her eyes went big as she tried to swerve out of my way.

“Look out!” she cried, trying to avoid the collision, but it was too late.

“Oh, cripes!” I shouted before I smashed into her.

A sharp pain radiated through my head before another one slammed into my face. I opened my mouth to cry out, but water flooded in instead of words coming out. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth, but the saltwater I’d inhaled quickly erased it. The giant wave I’d been riding swallowed me whole, pulling me beneath it and tossing me around like a ragdoll.

Saltwater stung my eyes as I opened them to get some bearing on what was up and what was down. When the sun’s rays poked through the water, I

paddled toward them, but the churning wave twisted and turned my body, turning up into down and down into up. As seconds turned into long moments, true fear erupted inside me as the pressure in my chest from holding my breath turned to burning pain.

*Holy shit. I'm going to drown.*

As that realization settled in, flashes of Roxie's face appeared in my mind. I'd just found her. I wasn't ready to part with my love already, even though I knew my Percy would be waiting for me if I didn't make it out of this and crossed over to the other side. But as the wave continued assaulting me and dragging me under, I realized how much I loved my Roxie and needed to be with her—to stay here with her. Even though every muscle in my body wanted to give up the fight and accept I was going to see Percy again today, I had to fight with everything I had to stay.

Roxie was here.

My Widows were here.

My life had just started again, and I wasn't ready to give up on it.

Not yet. Not today. No. Today was not the day I was going to be reunited with Percy. Today was the day I was going to tell death to suck it.

*You're not getting the best of me, you old bitch,* I thought as I regained my strength and restarted my battle with the wave that was winning. I fought and pushed, my body aching as I took it to the limits to break free from the unyielding hold the ocean had on me. Finally, when I couldn't hold my breath any longer and I started choking on water, the end feeling only moments away, I clawed my way to the surface.

Spitting out a mouthful of water with a giant gasp, I popped out of the ocean. The sunshine radiated on my face like a beacon of light, and not the bad kind I'd almost swam into. While I coughed out water and inhaled the incredible air, I heard my name being screamed over and over, the panic in the Widow's voices palpable.

"Marge! Marge! Where is she?" Sylvie screamed. "Oh, my God! Marge!"

"Marge! Marge!" Doris's voice cracked as she called me. "I don't see her! Someone find her!"

"I forbid you to drown! Get your ass up here *now!*" Alice shouted, her voice filled with terror.

I opened my mouth to call back as the wave pushed me onto the shore, but more water poured out of my mouth. Choking and gagging, I dug my fingers into the sand and pulled myself toward dry land.

“It’s Marge! Over there! She’s alive!” Sylvie called.

Doris’s sobs grew louder as the ladies raced toward me. Flopping onto my back, I lay with my feet in the surf, staring at the sun wondering how in the hell I’d managed to get out of there.

“You’re alive!” Sylvie breathed as she slid to a stop beside me, landing on her knees.

Doris kneeled beside me and took my hand. “Praise the Lord! You’re okay! I was so scared!”

“You son of a bitch!” Alice barked, dropping to her knees on my other side. “Don’t you *ever* scare me like that again! *I’m* supposed to die first and haunt *you*. Don’t you *ever* forget that! I die first. I do the haunting! Not you! I forbid you from dying!”

“Crikey! That was close!” Bryce’s face appeared in the circle of heads blocking out the sun above me. “Are you alright? Are you injured?”

All I could do was lay there and thank God I’d survived. I’d stayed here. I’d fought to stay for Roxie. I looked at the faces of the Widows above me. I’d fought to stay for them. And in that moment, as I lay there truly appreciating how close I’d been to death, I vowed never to waste a single moment of this time I’d been given.

“Are you hurt? Can you speak?” Sylvie gripped my hand tighter.

“Ouch,” I finally mustered out, more water coming out of my mouth as the simple word caused me to start coughing.

Four relieved sighs echoed around me.

“She’s okay. She’s okay,” Sylvie said.

I looked up at their concerned faces. “I did it. I surfed.”

“Right you did!” Bryce blew out a big breath. “And you nailed it! Well, until you crashed and almost drowned.”

“But I did it. I was surfing. Then I fought the ocean ... and won.” I tried to grin but realized my mouth hurt, so I frowned instead. “Ouch. My face hurts.”

“You hit the other surfer’s board with your face, Marge. I bet it’s gonna sting,” Bryce said. “Do you feel dizzy or queasy?”

“Is anything broken?” Doris asked.

I checked in with parts of my body, wiggling them as I went limb to limb, the nurse in me taking over and assessing any damage. When I got to my head, I noticed the pain around my mouth, and more of that coppery taste of

blood tickled my tastebuds. “I think I’m okay. I think I got whacked in the mouth, though. Do I have a fat lip?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sylvie said. “It’s swelling up. You hit that board hard.”

“Good thing you’ve got such a hard head.” Alice smiled above me.

“I knew my hard head would come in handy someday.” I opened my mouth in a big grin, pushing through the pain of my swollen lip telling me to stop. As I beamed up at the four faces hovering above me, instead of grinning back at me, every set of eyes bulged wide with horror.

“Oh, hell no.” Alice covered her mouth.

“Oh, good Lord.” Doris sucked the air through her teeth.

“Blimey!” Bryce twisted his face. “That’s not good!”

Sylvie gasped and cringed.

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked, fear taking hold at the horrified faces looming over me.

They all looked at each other and then back at me.

“Uh, you, uh ... You knocked out a tooth.” Sylvie grimaced and pointed to her front tooth.

“What?” I gasped, touching my face. My fingers found my teeth and then the hole where one should be. “No! My tooth!” I sat up quickly, everyone tumbling back on their heels to give me room. “My tooth! It’s gone! We have to find it! We have to find my tooth!”

Panic clutched me as I rolled onto my knees, my search for my missing tooth starting in the surf crashing onto the shore.

“Where is it? We need to find it! Get it in milk right away! They always say to put it in milk to keep it alive! Someone go get some milk while the rest of us hunt for my tooth!”

Instead of leaping into action and scouring the surf with me, they all stood silently watching me scurrying around on my knees, my fingers digging through the sand, hoping my little lost tooth would miraculously appear.

“Hurry up! We need to find it!” I begged, visions of what I must look like with a missing front tooth invading every inch of my mind.

Sylvie stepped closer to me. “Marge, you likely lost it when you got hit. Out there. In the ocean. We’re never going to find it.”

I ignored her and kept searching. “It’s got to be here somewhere. Would you broads get your asses down here and help me find my damn tooth?”



“Marge, dear. Sylvie is right. It’s gone. There is no way we will find it,” Doris soothed.

Refusing to accept that my amazing surfing experience had ended with me looking like an NHL hockey player sitting in the penalty box after a fight, I ignored them and kept digging. The sunlight caught a white object lodged in the sand, and I gasped as I grabbed it. “Ha! My tooth!” I ripped it out of the sand and hoisted it up. “I found it! I knew I would find it!”

But as I held up the little white object and saw the pitiful looks on the widow’s faces, I realized I wasn’t holding up my own tooth. I was holding up a shark tooth.

“Oh, crikey. Close, but no cigar,” Bryce said.

“Well, you do love sharks,” Doris said, tipping her head. “Maybe you could have one shark tooth. I bet that would look neat.”

“Doris! Do *not* give her any ideas!” Alice smacked her forehead. “You are *not* getting a shark tooth implanted in the gaping hole in your mouth, Marge. Don’t even think it. Don’t even entertain it. Under no circumstances will I ever hang out with you again if you have one weird shark tooth beaming back at me when you smile.”

I looked at the tooth and then tipped my head. “I dunno. Maybe it would look kinda cool. It would make me look pretty tough, I bet.” I shrugged as I envisioned myself snarling and showing off my new shark tooth. The thought took away the sting of accepting my own tooth was long gone.

“Throw it into the ocean, Marge. Please,” Sylvie begged. “I’m with Alice—no shark tooth implants. Let’s get you back to the resort and see if we can find a dentist or something to patch you up. Okay?”

“And not with a freaking shark tooth,” Alice added. “With a human-looking tooth. Because I’m not going to be your friend if you are walking around beaming that gaping hole at me all the time or snarling at me with a shark tooth. I’ll only be your friend if real human teeth greet my eyes when you smile. Come on. Let’s go. We’re finding a dentist. Now.”

“It’s gone? It’s really gone?” Still trying to come to terms with the quick change of events that had ended up with me looking like Mike Tyson, I sat back on the beach, staring out into the ocean that would now be the home of my beloved tooth.

“You sure you’re alright?” Bryce asked. “I feel terrible this happened to you.”

After taking one more moment to grieve the loss of something that had been part of me since I was a child, I bid goodbye to my tooth and rose to standing. “I’m okay. I mean, other than my missing tooth, I don’t think I lost anything permanent.”

“I’m just really sorry about that,” Bryce said.

I walked a few steps forward and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Bryce, it was absolutely awesome, and I don’t regret it for a second. Getting to surf was incredible, and sometimes we have to pay a steep price for amazing experiences. This time, the price was, unfortunately, my tooth.” I shrugged. “But what’s done is done. No sense crying over spilled milk.”

“Or missing teeth,” Doris added.

“Or missing teeth,” I agreed.

“Atta girl,” Bryce said, grinning with his completely intact smile. “I love your spirit.”

“Thank you for giving me this new experience I’ll remember forever. Especially when I look in the mirror and see the new fake tooth it seems I’m on my way to get. Oh! Think they could give me a gold one?” I asked, then I lit up even more. “Or a diamond one! Like those rappers! How hip and cool would I look?”

“Marge! No!” Sylvie laughed.

“Oh, come on! If I’m gonna get a new tooth, and I’m not allowed a shark tooth, let’s at least make it something cool!”

“No weird teeth.” Alice pressed her fingers against her temples. “We already have to endure your hairy legs on these trips. Don’t make me stare at some monstrosity in your mouth as well. Bryce. Dentist. Now. And one that won’t give her a weird tooth I’m stuck looking at for eternity.”

My shoulders sagged in defeat. “Fine. Alright. A normal, boring tooth. Let’s go to the dentist.”

He jutted his head toward the resort. “Come on, ladies. Let’s go to the Jeep, and I’ll give you a ride to the dentist. There’s one not thirty miles from here.”

“Thank God,” Alice breathed. “If I have to look at that horrifying business much longer, I’m going to hurl up my cocktails.”

Knowing I wouldn’t have much longer to traumatize her, I turned to Alice and gave her my best grin.

“Marge! Stop!” she cried out, lifting her hand over her eyes. “Put that thing away! It’s still bloody for crying out loud!”

“Don’t you want to touch it? Huh? Give it a little feel?” I asked, moving closer to her, my smile awkwardly wide as I stuck part of my tongue through the hole.

“Stop! Marge!” she spun on her heel and raced down the beach.

I took off after her. “Who’s haunting who now? Huh, Alice? I’m gonna touch you with it and really give you something to be terrified about!”

“No! Stop! Get away!” she screamed as she zig-zagged back and forth down the beach with me hot on her tail.

Sylvie, Doris, and Bryce laughed behind me as I chased Alice all the way back to the hotel.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I gripped the Jeep wheel tighter when we hit a bump as we pattered down the dirt road winding through the animal sanctuary.

“This is so neat!” Doris said from the passenger seat beside me. “Look at all the wild animals!”

“Now, is that a wallaby or a kangaroo?” Sylvie asked.

I looked across the open grassland to a herd of marsupials and answered, “Wallabies. Remember, Bryce said they were the smaller ones.”

“They are so cute!” Doris squealed like she’d done over every animal we’d seen for the past hour while we’d explored the sanctuary. Koalas, dingoes, sugar gliders, and many other animals inhabited the several hundred-acre spread Bryce had recommended. It had been a great suggestion, and after spending the past two days soaking up the sun by the ocean and touring the little Australian towns surrounding our resort, it was nice to get out and see a little bit of the Australian outback.

“This looks like a good place for our picnic lunch.”

I looked at the lone sprawling tree Sylvie pointed toward. “Yeah. That does look nice. Hold on. I’ll pull to the side and park.”

“Are we sure it’s safe to get out?” Doris asked after we rolled to a stop. “I like looking at the wild animals from the safety of the Jeep. I don’t know how I feel about getting out.”

“They said it’s perfectly safe.” Sylvie grabbed the little cooler full of sandwiches and snacks the wonderful staff at our resort had packed for us. “The dingoes and dangerous animals aren’t loose out here. It’s just kangaroos and other vegetarians. The only thing getting gobbled up out here are these sandwiches. And I’m starving.”

“I could eat, too,” Alice answered. “But I’m not eating facing Marge. If I see one more thing get stuck in that hole in her face, I will pack up and fly home.”

I instinctively ran my tongue over the empty space in my mouth. Since I’d lost the original tooth somewhere in the ocean, we found out it would be weeks or months before my mouth would be ready for an implant. So, instead of finishing our trip with a cool diamond tooth to flash around, I was stuck

looking like the Grand Canyon had been rebuilt inside my mouth. They'd offered to make a fake "flipper" tooth to hide the hole a little, but it would take longer than we had in Australia to complete. We'd be long gone on our next adventure by the time it was ready. Not to mention, after I realized how much it freaked Alice out, I decided maybe it wasn't the worst thing in the world to live with what I had until I could get a real replacement.

Still loving the horrified look on her face every time she saw it, I spun in my seat and grinned at Alice.

"Ugh." She shielded her eyes. "I'm never going to get used to that. Can't we get her a mask or something? Like that thing they put on Hannibal Lecter's face? I think that would help."

"We're all going to have to get used to it." Doris pinched her mouth in that sympathetic way she did every time someone brought up my missing tooth. "It's not Marge's fault they can't fix it yet, so let's not make her feel bad about it."

I grinned wider. "I don't feel bad about it. In fact, the longer I have it, the cooler I think it is. I look tough. No one is gonna want to mess with us now." I flexed my arms and growled, showing off my missing tooth.

Alice lifted her hand in front of her face, blocking her view of mine. "Marge! Close your lips and put that thing away!"

Sylvie laughed when I snapped my teeth together like chompers. "Okay, okay. Enough. Stop torturing Alice. Let's go have lunch."

"We're sure it's safe?" Doris asked.

"Safer than being in a car with Marge. Let's go," Alice said.

Doris scrunched up her face, but after a quick check to ensure we weren't surrounded by dingoes, she opened the door and hopped out. Alice and Sylvie jumped out from the back seat, and the four of us marched across the small opening to the beautiful tree that would be our dining room.

After spreading out the soft blanket, we all pulled up a spot and settled down for our meal.

"This is really cool." Sylvie handed out sandwiches and snacks.

"It is beautiful here, I'll admit," Alice agreed. She pulled out a bottle of wine and the four plastic glasses from the bag.

"Is there vodka in that, or is it actually wine?" I grabbed an empty cup.

"I drink more than vodka." She rolled her eyes, then stopped and shrugged. "Well, sometimes."

Doris shook her head and took a cup as well. “A glass of wine and lunch in the outback. What a wonderful way to spend a day!”

“Our last day,” Alice added as she popped the cork.

We all spun to look at her.

She paused, noting our shocked expressions. “Well, tomorrow is jump day, where we all splat to our deaths. May as well enjoy this last one here.”

Sylvie chuckled and swatted her on the shoulder. “Stop. We all agreed no more raining on Marge’s wish. We pull up our big girl panties and leap together.”

“To our deaths,” Alice mumbled under her breath. “We leap to our deaths.”

Instead of sparring back at her like I normally would, that tightness in my chest returned, and my heart revved up to racing. I didn’t dare admit it out loud, but ever since my near-death experience almost drowning several days ago, my normal gusto for adrenaline-inducing experiences had suffered. Instead of the all-out excitement I’d had about leaping out of that plane, a new voice in the back of my head whispered, “But what if your chute doesn’t open? What if you die?”

I tried my hardest to muzzle the voice and get back to my love of grabbing life by the horns, but try as I might, it wouldn’t be silenced.

“You okay, Marge?” Sylvie asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“Huh? Me?” I pointed to my chest and then cleared my throat. “No. I’m fine. Totally fine,” I lied.

“You do look a little weird,” Doris agreed.

“She’s missing a front tooth. Of course, she looks weird,” Alice added.

Sylvie never broke eye contact, tipping her head as she stared at me. But before she could prod me anymore with her laser-sharp observation skills that would put Sherlock Holmes to shame, the rumbling of an engine pulled all our attention. A Jeep bumped down the road, but this time it wasn’t four old widows sitting inside. This Jeep held four young, shirtless men taking in the scenery.

“Holy shit. It’s like *Thunder from Down Under* is driving through the park,” Alice said breathlessly as she stared at them like a dog salivating over a steak.

“Wow. Those are some hot guys,” Sylvie agreed. “Like, wow.”

“I’m married, so I need to stop looking at other handsome men.” Doris quickly diverted her eyes, then peeked back at the men, waving as they

passed.

“My God. The universe is trying to tempt me into cheating on Alejandro. Just tossing hottie Aussies in my path left and right.”

“You wouldn’t, though.” Sylvie turned her attention from the men now heading away. “Cheat on him, would you?”

“No. Definitely not,” Alice sighed. “But my God, sometimes it’s hard to remember I’m not single and ready to mingle anymore. I spent years doing whatever and whoever I wanted. Now I have to keep reminding myself I’m a married woman.”

“Which is a miracle in itself.” Doris smiled.

“I didn’t spend much time single after Bruce died.” Sylvie paused and took a sip of her wine. “I haven’t been in anything other than a committed relationship since college. I can’t even imagine adjusting from that much freedom.”

Alice sighed and glanced back at the dust trail left by the Jeep, now out of sight. “Honestly? The thought of being with another man now makes my stomach turn, but seeing those young studs has me wanting to race back to Alejandro’s arms and jump his bones again, and again, and again.”

“I second that,” Sylvie said on a sigh. “I mean Tom’s bones, though. Not Alejandro.”

Alice gave her a sly grin. “I would hope not.”

“Nope. My man. I want to jump the bones of my man,” Sylvie added.

“It makes me miss Axel, too.” Doris frowned.

When I didn’t answer, all three eyes spun to stare at me, waiting for the words to echo their own. When they didn’t come out, Sylvie set down her wine glass.

“Okay. That’s it. Something is going on with you and Roxie. You need to tell us what’s up, Marge. Whatever it is, we can help.”

Biting my lip, I tried to find the words to say what I didn’t want to admit out loud ... the thing that made my heart nearly shatter from sadness.

“Marge? What’s going on?” Alice asked.

Doris reached forward and touched my hand. “You can tell us anything, dear.”

Finally, with a heavy sigh, the truth came out. “I think Roxie and I have lost our spark. We’re on our way to becoming a platonic relationship, just like me and Percy were. I’m cursed, it seems, to sexless marriages. You guys are all over there having hot sex and lusting after your partners, and I am

trying to remember the last time Roxie and I got it on. We didn't even have goodbye sex. I planned on it, but then we fell asleep in front of the TV our last night and never even made it to the bedroom. We're roommates now. Just like me and Percy. And I don't even know how it happened."

"Oh, honey," Sylvie soothed as she scooped closer to me. "Just because you're not having hot sex all the time doesn't mean your relationship is doomed to friendship. Relationships wax and wane all the time!"

"They do?" I asked sincerely. "Because I have nothing to compare it to. Percy was the only relationship I ever had besides Roxie. Considering neither of us was straight or attracted to the other, it made sense we lived as best friends. When we married, I didn't expect that there would be explosive romance or passion. But Roxie? I thought since we were both attracted to each other, *in love*, that we'd go on as hot and heavy as we started. Man. We used to set each other on fire, and now? Now it seems we're just smoldering ash. Every day things seem to get closer and closer to the relationship I had with Percy. Pretty soon, I'm gonna find myself living with a roommate again and not a lover." My shoulders slumped with the weight of my admission. "I don't want a roommate again. This time around, I want something different. I want passion. Kissing. Touching. Romance. But I guess that's not how things are for me. People don't marry me for romance. They marry me to be a friend. A roommate."

Sylvie let out a deep breath and then smiled. "You're not cursed, silly! This happens to every couple everywhere! I don't care how hot and heavy a couple is when they get together, the passion will eventually fizzle. No couple can sustain that new love kind of heat long term. It's not possible. You can set the whole world on fire with the heat between you, but the longer you're together, the more the flames die down. It's normal. Natural. But it doesn't mean it has to stay that way. It only means you have to work at it. Fan the flames. They won't burn without someone tending to them. When they say marriage is work, this is part of the work."

"Oh, yes," Alice said. "The longer you're together, the kinkier things need to be to keep things hot on the home front. In fact, last month, Alejandro and I—"

Sylvie stopped her with a hand. "We don't need details, Alice. We can all imagine."

Doris blushed red. "Oh, Lord. I don't want to imagine those things."



“Don’t be a prude, Doris,” Alice countered back. “We know that cowboy of yours is no slouch in the sack after hearing about your hooties.”

Her crimson deepened. “Well, that’s true, but what Sylvie said is right. Even though he’s so darn handsome, and yes, things are” —she paused and cleared her throat— “good in that department, sometimes I’m not in the mood. Doesn’t matter how great he looks. I’m just tired. It seems to happen more and more these days.”

“Same here,” Sylvie agreed. “I think Tom is the most gorgeous man on the planet, but sometimes I’m tired or I’m just not in the mood. But if I push through that, I’m always surprised how much I end up enjoying it when I wasn’t that into it to begin with. I don’t want our passion to die, though, so I always try to keep things going even when we’re being lazy, and it takes more work to get going than it did when we first met.

My heart lifted at their words. “So ... this is normal? It’s not just me? I’m not doomed to a life of platonic relationships?”

“No!” Sylvie answered. “It’s normal, and it’s every relationship everywhere! You absolutely cannot find a long-term married couple who doesn’t have to work hard to keep the spice up. And not only the sex. Romance, too. Making each other feel loved and needed. That’s work in and of itself. Sometimes we forget to show it after we’ve been together for a while.”

“So ... she still loves me?” I almost choked back a tear uttering the words I’d started to question.

“Of course, she still loves you!” Doris said. “I see how she looks at you.”

“I’d ... I’d started to doubt we had romantic love anymore. That we were just becoming friends. And I don’t want that.”

“You can have that again,” Sylvie said, tipping her head softly. “You two got lazy about working on romance like so many of us do. What you had with Percy is very different than what you have with Roxie. You two started with attraction. That doesn’t go away completely. But you do have to find ways to remind yourself of that heat and spark you used to have. Every couple has to make an effort to keep the fire going.”

“It can come back?” I perked up. “You mean the romance isn’t over for us?”

“Of course, it can! Marriage takes work to keep the spark going. And now that Roxie is home so much, that can definitely make it easier to fall into a rut.”

Alice leaned back on her elbows. “I don’t care how hot and heavy you start. Every marriage fizzles out if you don’t work on keeping those home fires burning. Alejandro and I still go at it like rabbits, but part of that is because we work to keep that passion alive. Marge, you’ve built fires from a couple of sticks in the dirt before. Once you got the flames going, it didn’t keep burning by itself, right? No. We had to keep adding things to keep the flames crackling. And when they started to go out, as they will if we don’t tend them, we had to blow gently on the embers to get the flames rising once more. You and Roxie let the flames get too low. Now you need to start blowing on the embers again. Needing to fan the flames is normal, darling. And sometimes they burn brighter than other times.” She paused. “Well, for other people, not for me. I know how to keep that baby burning like hellfire itself.”

My heart lifted at their words. “This is really normal for a relationship?”

Sylvie chuckled. “I forget you’ve never been in a romantic relationship before. Yes. It’s normal. There isn’t a couple in the world who doesn’t go through this. I mean, do you still love her?”

“Yes. Oh, yes,” I answered quickly.

“And you’re still attracted to her?” Alice asked.

I blew out a breath. “I still can’t believe someone like her is with someone like me.”

“And do you still feel like she loves you?” Doris asked.

I paused, then answered confidently. “Yes. I do. I can still feel she loves me, but I thought she didn’t love me romantically anymore. You ladies are convincing me that’s not the case. But I miss all the stuff we had before. The passion. The kissing. The sexytime. That’s gone. And I don’t want it to be. I miss her. I know we’re older, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still have the romance, right?”

Alice scoffed. “Nonsense. I’m the oldest widow here, and I bet I have the hottest romantic life. Age has nothing to do with it. As long as you still have the love, the rest can be fixed. It’s just gonna take a little work.”

A huge weight lifted off my shoulders at her words. “Holy cripes. I thought I was doomed to another platonic relationship. I loved what I had with Percy, a best friend for life, but I don’t want that again. I want heat. Romance. Sex! I want what everyone else has, and then it happened. I finally had it. But since Roxie retired and started staying home, we are *always* together. It’s like that excitement I used to get when we’d get back together

after spending the whole day apart is gone. I mean, I love spending time with her, but I also miss missing her. You know? Ice cream is great, but I don't want to eat ice cream all day, all the time. Then it's not a treat anymore!"

"That makes a lot of sense," Sylvie said. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder is a saying for a reason. It's true. When you're together all the time, it can make keeping that excitement alive harder."

"Oh, yes," Doris answered. "When Axel has to be gone for a few days at a time out on rides in the summer, I can barely stand it! I feel like a giddy schoolgirl when he comes home."

"I try to make myself sparse regularly to keep Alejandro missing me." Alice looked at her nails and then smirked. "If I feel things slipping, I tell him I have important business somewhere and leave for a night or two. By the time I get home, he's all over me again."

"So, I need to make time away from her?"

"That helps for sure," Sylvie said. "But you also need to actively work to keep the spark alive. Take her on dates. Special dinners. Candles. Music. Romance! If you only sit in front of the TV every night, passion is gonna pack up and leave! You've got to woo her. And she needs to step it up and woo you too."

I could barely believe what I was hearing. My love hadn't died. Roxie and I were only in a rut. They were right. This time it wasn't the same as it was with Percy. He and I had loved each other, but always just like friends. Roxie and I had romantic love, and I *had* gotten lazy. We didn't do dates. I never lit candles or put on music. Every night we curled up on the couch together and watched marathons of our favorite shows just like I had with Percy all those years. By the time the shows were over, we were yawning and crawling to bed. It was the only way I knew how to be in a long-term relationship. But Roxie wasn't Percy, and finally, I realized *I* had to be different if I wanted a different outcome.

"Well, hot damn!" I clenched a fist and pumped it in the air. "When this trip is over, I'm gonna step things up! I'm gonna woo that girl of mine, and I'm not going into the friend zone without a fight!"

"Way to go, Marge," Alice said. "If you need tips on bringing more passion into your relationship, you know I'm your gal. I've got everything you need to crank the heat to scalding. If you need sex toy tips, I have tried them all. We recently got this swing, and let me tell you we—"

"Stop!" Doris covered her ears. "Too much, Alice! Too much!"

Sylvie cringed. “Yeah. Too much, Alice.”

Closing my eyes tight, I scrunched my face. “Burned into the brain for eternity, you bastard. I’ll never unsee it.”

“Well, I’m stuck staring at your gap tooth. That’s more traumatizing. We’ll call it even,” she responded.

When I opened my eyes, I saw her sly smile. I matched it with a toothy, or should I say toothless, grin.

“Ugh!” She held up a hand and turned away. “See! I can’t unsee that! And I’ll be seeing it for the next few months until they can put in an implant.”

I kept grinning, but this time not just to freak Alice out. This time I grinned because the fear that the passion in my romance was gone for good dissipated. Instead of accepting my fate of having another roommate instead of a lover, I felt inspired to get home and fight to bring our romance back to life. I loved her. And she loved me. And now that I knew this was normal in a relationship, I was determined to drive us straight back out of the rut.

“You know,” Sylvie said. “Alice is onto something about making ourselves sparse more often. Tom was all over me before I left, and I know he’ll be all over me when we get back, but eventually, things will fizzle out to normal. What do you all say to making a pact to help each other keep the passion going in our relationships? Instead of a Wilder Widows pact, this one is a Wilder Wives pact. Every month, we all go out of town for a night or two together. Leave our spouses at home, missing us a bit.”

Doris lit up. “Oh! I love that idea! We get extra girl time, and our spouses will remember how much they love us while we’re gone!”

“I’m in,” I said. “I love seeing Roxie all the time, but damn. We need some time apart to miss each other. Like right now, I’m going *crazy* wanting to see her when this time last week, I was hiding in the bathroom for a few moments of alone time.”

“It works for me,” Alice said. “And I’m happy to share the wealth. A monthly Wilder Wives weekend sounds perfect.”

“Then we make a pact right now,” Sylvie said. “We are going to keep the passion going in our relationships, and we’re going to help each other do it. None of us will succumb to being the couple who falls asleep in front of the TV every night and only gets intimate on birthdays. Not us. We earned this second chance with our loves, and we’re not gonna blow it.”

“Hear, hear!” I cheered. “We are gonna spice things up!”

“Oh!” Doris clapped. “We could call ourselves the Spice Girls on those weekends.” She blushed, then finished on a whisper, “Because we’re spicing things up.”

Alice’s face went flat. “I hate the Spice Girls. I’m not a Spice Girl.”

Sylvie chuckled. “Let’s stick with the Wilder Wives. I think that works great. We’ll have our big Wilder Widows trip every year and a monthly Wilder Wives trip.”

“Perfect!” Doris grinned.

“Works for me,” Alice agreed.

Sylvie put her hand forward, and we all placed our hands on top of each other.

“To the Wilder Wives who will keep the love in their lives wild forever,” Sylvie said.

We all grinned, then lifted our hands with a whoop.

“Thanks for the talk, ladies. I’m so glad I opened up to you. I feel so dumb that I had no idea this was normal.”

“How could you?” Sylvie asked. “You’ve never been here before. But you have us now, so don’t keep these things to yourself. If you have relationship questions, we want you to ask us.”

“I will.” I smiled. “Thank you.”

“We always have your back,” Doris said. “That’s what friends are for.”

I was always grateful for my Widows, but now, even more so.

We packed up our lunches and started back toward the Jeep. I took one last look at the beautiful scenery surrounding us, pausing to let it sink in that I was in Australia. After spending so many years watching travel shows with Percy but never going anywhere, I truly appreciated my Widows and how much they’d changed my life.

A cloud moved across the sun, and when it popped back out, I squinted against it. “Oh, cripes. My sunglasses.” I patted my chest where they should have been. “They must have fallen out over there somewhere. Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

The Widows stopped and waited as I hurried back to the tree we’d dined beneath. As I got close, a kangaroo hopped out of the bushes beside it.

“Oh! A kangaroo!” Doris nearly jumped out of her skin.

I froze in my tracks, shocked to see the animal under five yards away. “Oh, wow!” I whispered, my eyes bulging as it stared back at me.

“Look how close it is! So cool!” Sylvie said quietly from where she and the other Widows were—about thirty feet behind me.

“Careful, Marge,” Alice said. “Don’t get too close. That’s a wild animal.”

“You’re a wild animal, and I get close to you all the time. I’ll be fine,” I whispered back. I didn’t need to turn around to feel her glare. I stood in silence, watching the furry creature watch me. Its large brown eyes roved over every inch of me, and then suddenly, it hopped one step closer.

My breath caught in my chest as I stood immobile, waiting to see what it would do.

Another hop brought it closer. Then another.

I barely breathed as the curious creature closed the distance to me, each cautious hop bringing it closer and closer. Finally, it was only a couple yards away.

“Holy shit,” I whispered out the side of my mouth. “I’m taming a wild animal. I’m a freaking Disney princess.”

“You? A Disney princess. Oh, right,” Alice snorted, and the sharp sound made the kangaroo tense up.

“Quiet,” I whispered back, now determined to prove to her I *was*, in fact, a Disney princess.

With visions of little birds fluttering around me as squirrels scurried around my shoulders, I carefully stepped toward the creature. It tensed but relaxed once I stopped moving.

“Marge, this isn’t a good idea,” Doris called softly. “It’s a wild animal.”

I didn’t respond, ignoring her and taking this once-in-lifetime opportunity to interact with a wild kangaroo.

Another slow step brought me within touching distance of the animal.

*Holy shit. I am a Disney princess*, I thought as I stood immobile, letting it adjust to my close proximity.

I stared straight into its eyes while the feelings erupting inside me were unlike any I’d felt before. I felt so connected to nature, so calm, so peaceful as I stood watching it. Its large, muscular body moved with its breaths, and I started to breathe with it, connecting in a different way. Like me and the kangaroo were the only two beings on the planet.

My breath hitched in my chest when it hopped one step closer, and we were now only feet apart.

“Marge, get back,” Doris’s soft plea trembled with fear.

I ignored her words, knowing she couldn't understand my connection with this animal. There was no danger from this kangaroo. He was my friend, and as I looked deeper into his soulful eyes, I felt our connection deepen.

Slowly and carefully, I lifted my hand toward him. He didn't move away, instead leaning closer as I reached out to touch him. The world fell away when my fingers brushed against the thick brown fur on his face. The feeling of being granted permission by this wild animal to touch him was such an honor that I nearly burst into tears from the power of the moment we shared.

It was him and me. Me and him. Our souls twisting together in this beautiful moment I would cherish forever.

"Hello, my friend," I said, stroking his face.

The moment I spoke, his eyes flashed wide, and before I had a second to react, his huge forepaw swung and connected with the side of my face.

"Oh!" The girls screamed as my ears rang from the pressure of the blow.

Before I could recover from the first hit, another landed square on my eye, sending me tumbling backward with a grunt.

"Oh!" They shouted in unison again as I fell out of the perfect bubble I'd been in with the creature and back into reality ... a reality that included me being told one thing repeatedly since we'd arrived.

*Don't touch the wild animals.*

I started to catch myself and prevent a complete fall when I looked to see the angry kangaroo rock back on his tail and launch a powerful blow to my stomach that sent me flying backward into an awkward heap.

"Marge!" someone screamed, but I couldn't tell who because of the ringing in my ears and the sounds of my loud, guttural moaning as I tried to inhale a breath that wouldn't come.

"Get away from her! Go! Shoo!" one of the Widows screamed before they all dropped to their knees and surrounded me where I lay rolling on the ground, clutching my stomach.

"Marge!" Alice's face appeared over mine first. "Are you okay?"

I tried to answer, but all that came out was deep gasps that sounded like a groaning, dying animal.

"It knocked the wind out of her. Breathe, Marge! Breathe!" Sylvie grabbed my hand and held it as I tried to do the simple task of breathing.

And failed.

Seconds felt like hours while I lay there moaning and choking in the little bits of air my spasming diaphragm would allow.

“Is she dying? She’s dying!” Doris whimpered above me, tears pouring down her face. “Don’t leave us, Marge! We love you!”

“Come on you, Sally! Breathe! Now!” Alice commanded.

Like a valve suddenly turned on inside me, a whoosh of air filled my depleted lungs, and I gasped with a sharp breath. Then another. And another. Finally, the air flooded through me once again.

“Thank you, God!” Doris pressed her hands together and prayed over my pulverized body.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Alice sat back on her heels, shaking her head as she stared down at me, her eyes rolling repeatedly. “You dumbass.”

“Are you okay?” Sylvie asked, squeezing my hand tighter.

After taking a few more even breaths, I struggled back to sitting. Sylvie rubbed my back, and as I got upright, I saw the kangaroo that’d walloped me grazing calmly across the field.

“Marge? Are you okay?” Sylvie asked again.

I leaned my weight back onto my hands and looked at the kangaroo a little longer, then finally, knowing I had enough air to speak, I looked at the faces of my concerned friends.

“That. Was. Awesome!” I grinned widely. “I touched it! I touched a wild kangaroo! Told you I’m a Disney princess!”

They sat silently for a moment, then Alice let out a long huff. “You are *not* a Disney princess. I’ve never seen a Disney movie where the wild animals beat the shit out of the princess. That kangaroo straight-up pummeled you.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. But *before* that, we were one. We were connected. Our souls united. It was awesome.”

“Well, what’s not gonna be awesome is that black eye you’re already starting to rock.” Sylvie arched an eyebrow and pointed at my eye.

I touched it, wincing when my fingers brushed the already swelling skin. “Oh, yeah. That’s gonna be a shiner for sure.”

“This is why you aren’t supposed to interact with the wild animals,” Doris scolded. “They’ve told us multiple times not to, and you did it anyway. Now look what happened.”

“Totally worth it.” I rolled onto my knees, pressing my hands to my thighs to help myself up. The kangaroo saw me stand and stopped eating,



giving me one last glance before hopping away. “One hundred percent worth it. I touched a wild kangaroo. A story I can tell over and over again.”

“No,” Alice said as she clasped a hand on my back. “You got your ass kicked by a kangaroo. *That’s* the story I’ll be telling.”

“Fair enough. But still a cool story.” I waggled my eyebrows at her but winced at the pain from the movement. “Ouch.”

“Good. Serves you right for being such a dumbass.” Alice gave me a gentle shove toward the Jeep, and I chuckled as I moved along with them.

Sylvie stepped beside me. “Get in the car, Marge. And no more touching wild animals on this trip. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I won’t. Once was enough for me.”

I looked over my shoulder at the fading silhouette of the kangaroo.

“Goodbye, my friend,” I whispered, pausing to wave at him.

“He’s not your friend, Marge. He straight-up tried to kill you.” Alice shook her head.

“Whatever. He’s my friend.”

“Well, if kicking the crap out of you is what friends do, then sign me up. I’ll slap you around a bit.” Alice grinned.

“Try it, sister. I’ll take you.”

We pushed each other playfully until we got back to the Jeep. One by one, we climbed in, and I gave one last look over the beautiful scenery surrounding us.

Alice slid her sunglasses on her face. “Okay. Time to get back and get some sleep so we can be well rested when we die tomorrow.”

“Oh! My sunglasses! I never got them! Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

“No!” They shouted in unison loud enough that I jumped.

“Last time you went for your sunglasses, you got beat up by a kangaroo. Just freaking drive, Marge!”

“Okay, okay,” I conceded and started the engine. “But just so you know, it was a beautiful moment, and I don’t regret it at all.”

“Well, I’m gonna regret that black eye I’m now going to be staring at on top of your missing tooth.” Alice gave me the side eye. “It’s like you decided to make yourself as horrifying as possible for the duration of our trip.”

“Don’t tease her, Alice. She can’t help the tooth,” Doris defended. “They eye, well, she could have avoided that, I suppose.”

“Whatever, I look cool. Tough.”

“You look like an idiot.” Alice pointed forward. “Now drive us home, and don’t stop to play *Fight Club* with a wallaby.”

Chuckling, I gave in and pressed the gas, giving it enough oomph to make the Widows shout obscenities at me as they scrambled for their seat belts.

## CHAPTER SIX

Nerves and excitement rapid-fired through every muscle in my body when we stepped into the room with the jump gear. After spending forty-five minutes in a safety lesson and answering enough questions to prove we wouldn't get ourselves, or our tandem jump guides, killed, it seemed this last step was all that separated us from the big plunge.

"G'day, ladies!" A grinning man sporting tattoos wrapping around his arms and an upper lip covered in a mustache that would have made Magnum PI jealous stepped toward us. "I'm Lucas, one of your tandem guides today. You've already met Bryce." He paused and gestured to Bryce, who we knew would be taking one of us down. "Then this is Brody, and that's William. You'll each be assigned to one of us who will join you on the greatest day of your lives! You ready, mates?"

"Who!" I cheered, raising my fist in the air.

The other three Widows stood silently, looking like they'd been delivered a death sentence.

Lucas grinned back at me and pointed. "I've got this one!"

"Yes!" I pumped my fist again.

He clapped his hands together once, then planted them on his hips. "Alright, then. Everyone pair up, get geared up, and let's get up there!"

His energy matched mine, so I was thrilled to be partnered with the guy that looked as excited as me even though he'd likely done this a thousand times. With slumped shoulders, the Widows walked toward the other men. Alice hurried to claim Bryce, who she'd called shotgun on once she heard we had to sit on the laps of our tandem jump partners near jump time.

"What's your name?" Lucas asked when he reached me.

"I'm Marge," I answered, sticking out my hand to shake his and giving him a welcoming smile.

He froze briefly before our hands met, his eyes widening as he took in my messed-up face.

"Blimey. What happened? Get in a bar fight?"

I pointed to my missing tooth first and then my eye. "Surfboard. Kangaroo."

"Well, crikey! You really know how to have a good time, don't ya, Marge?"

I smiled wider, not caring about the way my face looked with the missing tooth and the huge shiner making me look like I should be screaming, “Adrian!” after the big fight.

“You bet your ass I do. And now I’m ready to have an even better time and jump out of that plane with you. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

“It’s gonna be the time of your life. I promise.” He started strapping on my gear, and with excitement oozing out of every pore, I tried not to hop up and down in my little jumpsuit and harness as he worked on the rigging. “Now, tell me about the surfboard and kangaroo injuries.”

“Two separate incidents,” I said, giving him the rundown as he got me secured.

After I finished the story about the kangaroo, he sucked the side of his cheek. “No one realizes kangaroos can pack a punch! Everyone thinks they are so cute and cuddly, but no. You’re not the first person I know who got walloped by a kangaroo, and you won’t be the last.”

“Gotta admit, I was not prepared for that force,” I said as he finished tightening the last of my straps. “That baby put Muhammed Ali to shame.”

“I believe that.” Lucas stood and gave me one last check over. “All set. You’re snug as a bug in a rug. Now, all you gotta do is follow my lead, and I’ll get you back down here safe. Probably safer than squaring off with a kangaroo again.”

I chuckled at his joke. “You got it, Lucas. I was in the Army. I’m good at following orders.”

“Then we’re gonna be just fine, soldier.” He stood tall and gave me a salute.

I gave it right back, and when my hand snapped to my forehead, those vibrant memories of my time in the Army flooded back into me—my time with Percy, Manns, and Stilts.

*I couldn’t jump with you that time, boys. But I’m going to now.*

Touching the little dog tags dangling beneath my jumpsuit, I gave them one last thought before Lucas called us outside to the waiting plane.

“Alright, ladies. You remember the drill. Just listen to your partners, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“I can’t do this,” Doris whimpered as she walked single file behind me. “I’m too scared.”

“We’ll be okay,” Sylvie soothed. “I did a bunch of research last night, and the chances of us getting killed are less than driving a car. In fact, only

one in every five hundred thousand jumps has a fatality.”

“What if this is the five hundred thousandth?” Doris’s voice cracked with the question.

“Then we’ll die in the most spectacular fashion,” I answered, marching forward to the white and blue plane sitting on the runway.

“Yes. We’ll die spectacularly,” Alice said from her place behind me. “We’ll die screaming, flailing, pissing ourselves and end up in a puddle of organs and goo somewhere in the outback. Spectacular indeed.”

Doris gasped, and Sylvie smacked her in the arm. “Alice! We said no more death talk! We’ll be fine!”

Sylvie said the words confidently, but when we reached the plane, she slowed her steps along with the others. “So, we’re really doing this?” she asked.

I spun around. “I’m really doing this. None of you have to. It was something Percy, Manns, and Stilts did together on their last day alive, and Percy always said it was the most incredible feeling in the world, floating down with his best friends. I want to experience what he experienced with them, and I want to experience it with my best friends ... you girls. I know I’ll feel closer to him while doing it. But I also think I’ll feel even closer to you. This ... this is important to me.” I paused, swallowing over the words that got stuck in my throat. “You’re all important to me like they were. I couldn’t jump with them back in ‘Nam, and they aren’t alive now to do this with me. And you ladies? You’re my best friends now. You’re the ones I want there with me, holding hands as we soar across the sky ... feeling what Percy, Manns, and Stilts felt that last day of their friendship. I know it’s scary, but I hope you’ll come and share this memory with me. But I’m not forcing anyone.”

They stood side by side, each staring at me with tears in their eyes.

“Well, shit. When you put it that way ...” Alice sighed and stepped forward, pulling me in for an incredibly rare hug.

The other girls followed suit, and the three of us stood beside the plane, squeezing each other tight until Lucas called us in.

With a deep still breath, Sylvie said, “Okay. We’ve got this, ladies.”

“I’m so scared, but I have to trust God will keep us all safe.” Doris lifted her chin high. “I trust Him. I really learned that last year when I fell in with the sharks. He kept me safe then, and He showed me my friends were always there for me no matter what. Marge, you dove headfirst into danger to be

with me in that water. Now it's my turn to face the danger so I can be there for you. And I trust God will protect us until we are safely back on the ground."

Alice shrugged. "I'm freaking out, so I had a few sips of vodka. Okay. More than a few. I'm a little drunk, so whatever. At least I won't feel pain if we spla—"

"Alice!" Sylvie gave her a gentle shove.

"We'll be fine. Let's go," Alice corrected, then led the way up the steps onto the plane.

We got into our seats and strapped in while they readied us for takeoff. Unlike a commercial flight, it only took minutes before we barreled down the runway and launched into the air. My stomach dropped as the plane lifted, and that excitement I felt on the ground soared as high as the plane climbing into the sky. When we got closer to jump height, Lucas stood and gave us one last rundown of the rules before it was go-time.

"Now, it's extra important you all follow my directions to the letter. We don't normally do group tandem jumps at the same time because it's more difficult, but we four are experienced enough to accomplish it since it was your wish," Lucas said. "And we're all about granting wishes here!"

When we'd found out we would have to jump one at a time, which was standard for first-time jumpers, we'd all balked and been ready to cancel. My dream wasn't just to jump ... it was to jump with my best friends. Together. After telling Bryce the story of Percy, Manns, and Stilts, plus the pact the Widows and I had made about our adventures, Bryce made some calls and got the best jumpers in the area to help give us our dream of jumping together. They'd gotten us a bigger plane that would allow us to jump within seconds of each other so we could experience the freefall together. It was more difficult for them, but they were as excited now as we were to help us accomplish our wish.

"This is it, ladies! The moment you've been waiting for!" Bryce said as he stood. "I'm so excited to be part of your journey! Now, everyone, find your partner and get hooked up!"

Alice practically launched across the plane to get hooked up to Bryce. I moved over to Lucas and backed against him so he could attach us. When the pilot announced we were nearing the drop zone, they moved us toward the open doors, with two Widows at each one.

“Alright, ladies! This is gonna be the best day of your life!” Bryce shouted from beside me, where he was attached to Alice.

The door opened, and the wind slammed into me, nearly taking my breath away. Then I saw the ground looming below, and it actually did take my breath away.

Completely.

Like when the kangaroo had punched me in the gut, I struggled to take my next breath. But I couldn't. My lungs simply refused to inflate.

The same panic I'd felt when I'd been sucked under that wave, unable to get up for air, overcame me, paralyzing every muscle in my body. My chest contracted and spasmed as my body trembled so hard my knees almost gave out. Blood whooshed through my veins like a racecar and revved my heart so fast it felt as if it might burst.

*What the hell were you thinking?* was all I could process as I stared out into the vast open space separating me from the ground below ... the ground I imagined hurdling toward after my chute didn't open and my body hit and shattered into a million pieces.

The fear amplified to unbearable when I realized how close I'd been to death in that ocean. How much I had wanted to live and to get home to my Roxie. How stupid I had felt nearly giving up everything I finally had for a fleeting thrill.

And now I was about to do it again.

*No. No, no, no, no, no.*

“Wait!” I screamed, pushing back against Lucas with enough force to step him further into the plane. “I can't do this! I can't! I don't want to!”

“Oh, thank God!” Alice breathed.

“What? What's going on?” Sylvie asked from behind me.

I shook my head hard, leaning into Lucas as the fear crippled me. “I changed my mind! New wish! I want a new wish. This isn't it. This isn't what I want.”

“Whoa, now. You're okay,” Lucas soothed. “Let's take a break for a second.”

He called something to the pilot and moved with me to turn us toward my three best friends, all still hooked up to their tandem partners.

“Just take a deep breath,” he said.

Grateful I was no longer staring into the abyss I was now certain would lead to my unwanted demise, I finally took my first deep breath.

“Talk to us, Marge. What’s going on?” Even through the plastic goggles, I could see the concern in Sylvie’s eyes.

“I ... I can’t do it,” I admitted, relief and regret twisting inside me in a confusing ball of emotions. “I don’t want to do this.”

“But this was your wish, dear,” Doris said.

I pulled my goggles onto my head. “I’m changing my wish. I don’t want to do this anymore. My new wish is only to live a long, happy life with Roxie and you gals on Wilder Lane. That’s it. That’s my wish, and I won’t do anything stupid like jump out of a plane and endanger that wish.”

“I’m on board with that wish.” Alice pulled up her goggles, swiping a finger up her eyes to fix her thick, faux lashes.

“Well, I’m not!” Doris announced with a surprising amount of gusto.

“What?” I spun toward her, Lucas moving his body to stay with mine.

She stamped her little foot. “No! You’re scared. We’re *all* scared, but we are willing to jump anyway because this is your wish. *This*. Not living some boring, safe life on the couch, waiting to die. We did that already, remember? This is our pact. To help each other fulfill our dreams *and* live this life with everything we’ve got. We don’t back down because we’re scared. You ladies taught me that. And just because we’re scared now doesn’t mean we stop. We’re doing this. We’re jumping.”

Hearing those words started the palpitations in my heart again. “I ... I can’t,” I admitted on a sigh.

“What’s going on, Marge? You’re never scared,” Sylvie asked. “You’re the one leaping headfirst into danger every time it comes around, dragging our kicking, screaming bodies behind you. This isn’t like you to be the one balking at danger.”

“I know,” I sighed. “But I came so close to dying in that ocean. I don’t think you understand how scary it was. How certain I was that I had chosen to do something stupid and give up this amazing life I finally have for a few seconds of thrill. And now that I realize Roxie and I are only in a rut and not doomed to a platonic friendship, I’m even more hellbent on getting home to her. I’m not going to do anything to jeopardize that goal. I want to live this incredible life we’ve all built, not end it fast before I even get to enjoy it.”

“But it’s only incredible *because* we’ve done all the crazy things we’ve done. Without pushing ourselves way past our comfort zones, none of us would have what we have,” Doris said. “Without our crazy wishes, we would



have no spouses. We wouldn't have a flourishing company. We wouldn't have each other."

Her words hit hard. It *was* true that I had gotten the life I loved so much *because* of doing stupid crap like this. But still, I couldn't imagine risking it now. The horror I would feel if my chute didn't open and I had all that time while plummeting to my death to think about everything I threw away just for the rush of jumping out of a plane.

"It's true," Alice admitted. "Even though I have zero desire to jump out of this plane, I can't let you wimp out on your wish because you're being yellow."

"I'm not yellow." I narrowed my eyes at the insult she always used to get my blood boiling.

"You're a little yellow right now." Sylvie sucked the air through her teeth. "But it's okay. It's scary. We're scared, too."

I glanced over my shoulder at the blue sky behind me. "I don't want to die. I want to get home, grab Roxie, and kiss her so hard she feels it right down to her toes. I want to rekindle that fire between us and keep stoking the flames for the rest of our lives."

"You'll have that," Alice said. "As much as I gripe, we aren't going to die. We'll be fine. Won't we, Bryce?"

"I've done this jump hundreds of times. We all have," he said, gesturing to the guys. "It's going to be okay. We've got you, ladies. Promise."

I chewed on my lip, glancing behind me at the open door separating me from the world below.

*You can do this, Marge.* Percy's familiar voice echoed in my head with the comforting tone he always used to convince me to do things I didn't want to do.

But I *did* want to do this. Deep in my heart, it truly *was* my wish. I was just so damn scared to feel that close to death once again.

Sylvie reached out and took my hand. "I swore to my daughter I am getting home to be with her when she has the baby. You know how serious I am about keeping that promise. If I actually thought there was a chance we would die, I wouldn't do this. But we won't. We will be okay. I know it. Don't let fear take away this wish from you. You'll always regret it if you don't jump today."

Even though the fear still coursed through me like poison, I thought about the sadness I would feel in not accomplishing this wish I'd been so excited to

undergo. How heartbroken I would be not to experience those feelings that Percy, Manns, and Stilts had gotten to share. I tried to work them into every one of my wishes, my tribute to my best friends of a life past who couldn't be here to do these things, and I realized then how disappointed they would be if I packed up and went home to a boring life being too scared to live it. To *really* live it.

With renewed gumption washing through me and feeling like all three were standing on this plane beside me, beside my Widows, I lifted my chin.

“Okay. You're right. I'm not chickening out and turning into a big yellow canary today. Almost drowning in that ocean was scary, and I really thought I was going to die. But it helped me realize how incredibly lucky I am in my life and how much I want to *live*. You're right. For me to live, I have to *really* live. And that means launching my ass out of this plane! Let's do this!”

“Yes!” Doris clapped quickly while she bounced as much as possible in her little harness still attached to her partner. Then she slowed her clapping. “Oh, jeez. Now we actually have to do this.”

Sylvie pulled a scared face, then, after a moment, composed herself and lifted her chin. “We're scared too, but we're with you, Marge. We can do this.”

“Well, shit. I'm gonna regret calling you yellow to talk you into this, but here goes nothing.” Alice slid her goggles back down, and I did the same.

“Bring her back around!” Lucas called to the pilot.

The plane did some maneuvering until we were back over the drop zone. When it was time, Lucas took me to the door. This time, when I looked down and saw the looming space below me and the panic started, I closed my eyes and took a breath. The only panic I should be worried about was living a boring life, waiting to die on a couch somewhere. I should panic about not giving this life everything I had and sucking every last drop of joy and excitement out of it. I should panic about giving up on my dreams instead of going at them with everything I had.

I opened my eyes, harnessing the crippling anxiety and channeling it into excitement.

“On three!” Lucas shouted.

My heart sped to racing.

“One ... two ... three!”

With a push, the ground dropped out beneath me. A scream ripped from my throat as we catapulted out of the plane, the wind whipping in my face so

hard I could feel my skin pulling up. My heart was in my throat when we hit speeds so fast that I wondered how we wouldn't hit the ground in seconds. But after a few moments of pure panic ripping through me, I gave in to the experience and let go of all that fear. All that anxiety. I let it all go and sank into the fall.

I had done it. I'd jumped. My body filled with sheer joy floating above it all. Before I could really take my time and appreciate the view below, movement to my left caught my eye. Alice and Bryce flew toward us, her mouth wide open in what I was fairly certain was a scream, but the wind in my ears howled too loud to hear anything. They made it over to us, and I reached out, grabbing Alice's hand and squeezing it tight. When I saw movement to my right, Sylvie and Doris sailed towards us, both mouths wide open like Alice's in silent screams. I opened my other hand, catching Sylvie's in it while she grabbed Doris's hand, who locked onto Alice.

As the four of us pulled into a circle, my heart nearly exploded, but not from the fear of death that had it racing before ... it nearly exploded from the happiness I felt soaring through the sky with my best friends at my sides. My Widows and I, hand in hand, soaking up every drop of joy from this life that we could. In all my years, I never would have guessed that when Doris knocked on my door that fateful day, opening it to her would open a whole world of adventure waiting for me. The life I'd always hoped for was no longer only a dream because these three women pushed me out of my comfort zone and into the great, wide world I'd always wanted to see. The ones I now floated above holding hands with them.

"This is amazing!" I shouted, but I didn't think they could hear me.

But that word didn't fully encompass how I felt as we soared across the sky together. There was no word to encapsulate the feelings swirling inside me like a tornado of emotions. Excitement. Fear. Wonder. They were twisted up into a new emotion I had never experienced, and an emotion I wanted to remember always.

The skin on their faces flapped and sucked upward, and when Sylvie opened her mouth to shout something back, the wind caught her lips and moved them like depleted sails in a windstorm. When I looked over and saw the same thing happening to Alice and Doris, I nearly fell into hysterics at the sight of their distorted skin. The ridiculous looks on their faces caused me to explode with laughter, and when the air caught my face as well, I felt the same damn happening to me.

With flapping faces and huge grins, we squeezed hands for a few more seconds before our partners gave us the taps on the shoulders that meant it was time to separate. We gave each other one last strange, stretched, flapping smile, then let go and drifted apart. Lucas veered us off to the east and pulled the chute when we were the right distance away.

It felt like getting sucked straight back into the air when the chute pulled open. The straps around my body went taut, and I gasped from the jarring feeling. Seconds after the abrupt change in speed, the world around me quieted, and we soared softly toward the ground.

“You okay?” Lucas asked, the winds now quiet so I could hear, though my ears still rang from the wind that had been whipping through them for the last forty-five seconds of free fall.

“I’m amazing!” I shouted, opening my arms and enveloping the open air surrounding me. “This is incredible!”

I looked over and saw the three other chutes a slight distance away, and I hoped all the Widows were feeling the same awe and wonder as me as they floated softly toward the ground.

“I knew you’d like it. Enjoy the scenery on the way down.”

Lucas went quiet as if he knew I needed a moment to soak in the experience in silence. The world below was a canvas of colors cocooned beneath the bright blue sky I sailed across. The greens looked so green, and the ocean looked such a vibrant shade of aqua blue. Everything seemed brighter. Better. Maybe it was a deepened appreciation for life and the world after that exhilarating and terrifying freefall, but this was the most incredible sight of my life as I swung gently through the Australian sky. My heart surged with the wonder of how amazing it looked from this height ... how small the world below seemed.

*Did you see me, Percy? Did you see me, Manns and Stilts? I did it, too.*

I reached up and touched the tags beneath my shirt, closing my eyes and drawing them into my heart as I imagined them floating lazily beside me. I tried to picture the huge grins that must have been on their faces the day they got to jump and I had to stay back at the hospital ... the same one they’d arrived at later that night with Percy badly injured, Manns barely alive, and Stilts already gone. I’d been so jealous to hear they would get to parachute together, and I’d spent the whole day excited for their return so they could tell me about it. But, so quickly, things had changed. In an instant, life had changed. Only Percy had remained the next morning, our friends gone

forever, and a friendship between Percy and I was forged so deep that we'd vowed to marry one another to take care of each other for always.

And we had.

Percy had been my person for over forty years, and I'd loved him every minute of every one of those days. And then he'd left me. In the blink of an eye, he was gone, and I was the last man standing.

Alone.

I looked over at the silhouettes of my three Widows floating in the distance. Doris looked over and waved wildly.

But I wasn't alone anymore. I had them. I had Roxie. I had so many incredible things in my life that I'd never dared to dream before. Sometimes, I felt guilty that it took losing my best friend to gain this new life I lived, but I knew Percy had sent them to me to ease the grief of his loss. To help me move forward without the one person I'd depended on almost all my life.

And it was a life I wasn't done living. But that didn't mean taking the easy way out and hiding out on the couch, terrified to lose it all. No. The Widows were right. To live this life and enjoy this gift I'd been given meant I needed to keep pushing myself as far out of my comfort zone as possible. Grabbing ahold of my dreams with both hands and refusing to let go.

I refused to stop leaping into the unknown.

I refused to give up on a relationship filled with passion.

I refused to go quietly into the night when it was my time.

I was a fighter and intended to go to war for what I wanted. And I wanted a full, adventurous life filled with amazing friendship and burning, incredible love.

"Isn't it beautiful? I do this all the time, and it never gets old," Lucas said as we turned across the sky, circling toward the airport below.

"I'll never forget this. Never."

As we drifted toward the ground, I tried to memorize all the feelings inside me and etch them into my soul so I could call on them whenever I wavered from my goal of living an incredible life. Anytime I got scared to push forward into the unknown, I could reach inside myself and pull them out, remembering how it felt to do something that had scared me so much I'd nearly backed out. But I hadn't. I'd stared fear straight in the face and gave it a punch as hard as that damn kangaroo had punched me. I'd leaped anyway.

"Lift your legs! Don't put them down!" Lucas shouted as he aimed us toward the ground.

I tightened my abs, lifting my legs with his as we closed the last of the distance to the soft grass below. We hit at exactly the right angle and slid to a stop on our butts. Quickly, he unhooked us, and I clamored to my feet, my weak, shaky legs wobbling as I tried to get my balance.

“Well done, Marge!” Lucas stood and lifted his hand.

I pulled off my goggles, beaming at him as I gave him a high five. “Thanks for the amazing experience!”

“We did it! We did it!” Sylvie screamed.

I turned to see her rushing toward me, her smile so wide it could have split her face in two. Doris and Alice came rushing in from my other side, and in moments, we were in a leaping, screaming circle of wonderful Widows.

“That was incredible!” Doris squealed as she hopped up and down while we all held hands.

“I can’t even lie. That was freaking amazing,” Alice breathed out, her normal stoic expression replaced with one of sheer joy.

“We jumped out of a plane! We did it! I can’t believe we did that!” Sylvie leaped with Doris. “Oh, man. Tom wins the bet. He’s right. I so want to do that again!”

“I believe it,” I said, slowing our enthusiastic hopping. “I can believe it because, with you ladies at my side, we can do anything. Thank you for pushing me. Thank you for finding me and making me your friend. Thank you for making this life we have worth living. Thank you, my friends. I love you.”

They stopped jumping, too, and with teary eyes, we folded together into a group hug. We stood on that grassy patch of Australia, embracing each other while we took a moment to appreciate the incredible life we got to live because we had one another.

“I think this is what you requested?” Bryce said from behind me, breaking up our little earth-bound reunion.

We gave one last squeeze and turned to see him holding our knitting basket.

“Oh! That’s right! I gave you the basket!” Sylvie broke apart the hug and hurried over to grab it.

“And the wishes are in here?” He flashed that swoon-worthy grin, pointing at the colorful little basket we’d carried all over the world.

“Yep. That baby holds all our dreams. One down, three left,” I answered when Sylvie hoisted it up.

He shook his head, giving us each an appreciative glance. “Freaking awesome, ladies. I’m so glad I got to be part of this. I hope you had fun.”

“Thank you for everything, Bryce. This has been an incredible journey. Even if I do have to leave my tooth behind in Australia.” I pointed at my mouth, then shrugged.

Bryce laughed and gave us a little wave. “I’ll be over in the hangar with the boys. You ladies take your time and come get me when you’re ready. I’ll drive you back to the resort.”

“Thanks, Bryce,” we echoed, then all turned to face Sylvie holding our beloved little basket.

“Okay, Marge. Your wish, your pick.”

I opened the lid, closing my eyes while I reached inside, excited to head out on the next adventure I knew would make our amazing life even better. When my fingers brushed the pieces of paper, I grabbed one and pulled it out. Everyone held their breath while I flipped it over to see the name.

*Alice.*

“Oh! It’s me!” she clapped, then gave a little shimmy.

“What is it? What are we doing?” Doris asked.

“Probably swinging,” I answered, giving Alice a glance and an eye-roll.

“Nope.” She shook her head. “Better.”

“Now I’m scared,” Sylvie said.

With one last breath, I opened the paper, and my eyes widened with my smile.

“What is it?” Doris’s voice squeaked as she started bouncing.

I held up the paper, truly excited for this next adventure. “We’re going on an African safari, ladies!”

**ALICE**



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Our Jeep bumped along the dirt road cutting across the Zambian plains. The open-air top allowed the warm sun to shine down on us, but my large brim hat and sunglasses blocked out the rays. I wanted to take off my hat and enjoy their warmth, but I knew they would wreak havoc on my skin. I may have started to embrace the aging process this past year, but that didn't mean I was going to cook my skin into something resembling the leather handbag sitting in my lap.

"Are we there yet?" Doris asked from the seat behind me.

With a sigh, I turned around. "For the seven hundredth and sixty second time ... No."

"Just enjoy the view, Doris. Isn't this incredible! We're in Africa!" Sylvie opened her arms and gestured to the amazing views surrounding us, including the herd of antelopes grazing off to our left.

"It's just that I have a small bladder. I have to tinkle." Doris crossed her legs tighter.

"Ndungu already offered to pull over and let you piss in the dirt," Marge said. "Offer still stands, right, buddy?" She directed her question at our driver, Ndungu, who had picked us up from the airport and introduced himself as our personal guide through the entire safari experience.

"I can pull over anytime," he answered, his English perfect but his African accent thick. "Just say the word."

"How much longer?" Doris asked, shifting her weight.

"About ten minutes," he answered.

With a little whine, she blew out a frustrated puff of air. "I'll make it."

When we hit a bump, she grimaced, squeezing her thighs together tighter.

We made it the last ten minutes without Doris asking, "Are we there yet?" again, and when the road veered off the plains into some thick foliage and trees, I knew from the photos I'd seen online that we were close.

"Wow. It really is isolated out here," Sylvie said. "I'm still shocked you chose a safari as your wish, Alice. I never imagined you'd want to rough it, but I'm not complaining one bit. I love this stuff."

I hid my smirk the same way I'd hidden the type of accommodations that awaited us in Zambia. But it only took another few turns for our Jeep to arrive at the luxurious resort nestled right against the Zambezi River.

“Whoa!” Marge let out a whistle. “That’s not a tent!”

I smiled. “No. It’s not. In fact, it’s one of the best resorts in the world and the playground of the rich and famous. Nothing but indulgence awaits us. Private suites. International cuisine from some of the finest chefs. Infinity pools in every room. A luxury spa. It’s all here for us to enjoy.”

“Oh, geez! It looks so fancy!” Doris’s mouth remained agape as we made the final drive to the front.

“I can’t believe you thought I’d want to sleep in tents.” I snorted. “Ridiculous. I wanted to go on a safari and see the big cats in their natural habitat, but to hell if I’m sleeping in a tent. Alejandro told me about this place on our second date. He heard about it from some of his cruising guests who stayed here. They said it was the most incredible place they’d ever been to, and they traveled constantly. Ever since I heard about it, I knew I had to come.”

“This is insane!” Sylvie leaned out of the Jeep, her eyes raking over every luxurious inch of the rustic yet chic resort.

“I’m glad you ladies like it,” Ndungu said with a bright, white smile. “You each have your own personal suite overlooking the river with a private dip pool, and I’m here to cater to your every need. We’ll get you settled into your rooms, and then tonight for dinner, we will have our chef prepare you a coursed meal served out on the floating dining area on the river. It’s beautiful. A fire, sparkling lights, the open air. You’ll love it. Tomorrow we’ll go on a river cruise, and then the following day, your safari journey awaits including a trip to Victoria Falls. You’re going to have a wonderful time.”

“I’m never leaving.” Sylvie pressed her hands onto her head as the Jeep pulled to a stop. “I’m calling Tom and telling him we’re moving here. This is incredible.”

“I’m glad you approve.” I slung my purse over my shoulder and hopped out.

Several staff members came out to greet us, and after exchanging pleasantries, we followed Ndungu to our suites. After spending the whole day traveling, my skin and hair begged for a hot, clean shower.

“Get settled and rested,” I said to the ladies before I went into my room. “I need to clean up and take a nap, then in two hours, why don’t we meet out in the lounge outside. We passed it on our way through.”

Doris peeked her head into my suite, and her eyes bugged. “Does mine look like this too?”

I looked around at the impeccable blend of traditional African décor mixed with chic modern lines and amenities. “Yep. They are all the same.”

“Wow.” Sylvie and Marge echoed.

“Your rooms are this way.” Ndungu gestured for them to follow him farther down the hall.

“I’ll see you ladies in two hours.”

With a quick wave, I bid them goodbye, then walked to the giant sliding glass door that overlooked the river. After sliding it open and letting the fresh air waft into my suite, I walked to the bed, drifting my fingers over the sheer, white material dangling all around it. It looked so beautiful, yet a pang of sadness twinged inside me while I appreciated the luxurious bed. Alejandro wouldn’t be here to share it with me. Such a romantic place perfect for a night of incredible passion, and yet, I couldn’t indulge in that fantasy. Alejandro was thousands of miles away, and now that I was married, I couldn’t be the big cat I’d been for years, stalk some prey and find a young, sexy stud to curl my toes beneath the soft linens.

With one last pained look at the bed I would only use for sleeping, I stripped down and took a shower. After cleaning up and taking a nap, I got dressed and headed out to meet the widows in the outdoor lounge area.

“Over here!” Doris waved from the hanging rattan chairs they each occupied, a fruity drink clutched tightly in their hands.

“We saved you a swing!” Sylvie gestured to the swinging chair beside her dangling from the large tree branch suspending all the chairs in a row.

I waltzed over, taking my time to really appreciate the gorgeous surroundings. The river flowed right beside the stoned patio, and tiki torches lined the landscaped path I sauntered down. A fire crackled in the sunken firepit surrounded by rattan chairs with a few other guests occupying them. Everywhere my eyes roved met incredible natural beauty paired with perfect luxury.

“Get your ass over here!” Marge swung softly in her chair. “I got you a cocktail.”

I made my way over and grabbed the chilled martini from her, then slid into the last chair they’d held for me. The soft cushions and the rattan cocooned me inside of them.

“Holy cripes, Alice. This place is awesome!” Marge reached over and held out her hand for a fist bump.

As she stared at me with her big, black eye and her messed up smile, I let out a groan, but I indulged her. “I’m glad you enjoy it. It’s exactly what I was hoping for.”

“I was planning on sleeping in tents and fending off wildlife,” Sylvie said. “Which was so confusing because this is *your* wish and not Marge’s.”

“Actually, ‘go on a safari’ was going to be one of my next wishes, so thanks for saving me having to spend it!” Marge grinned. “And mine would have been tents and roughing it.”

“Then thank God I went first.” I sipped my martini feeling extra grateful I hadn’t waited on this wish and got stuck in Marge’s version of her safari wish ... which would be my version of hell.

“Isn’t it incredible how God has created so many amazing places?” Doris dangled her feet that were too short to reach the ground. “I mean, first we were in Australia. Now we’re in Africa. We’ve been to Paris. Spain. Mexico. Home. Every place so different, and every place so incredible! It boggles my mind how amazing this earth can be.”

“It is pretty insane how different all these places are. The landscape. The wildlife. The cultures. I’m so grateful we get to experience so many of them.”

“The view sure is beautiful,” I answered, but my eyes weren’t on the gorgeous surroundings. They were on the couple by the fire kissing each other so deeply I could feel it right down to my toes.

I watched them for several long moments before Sylvie cleared her throat. “Something caught your eye?”

“Huh?” I blinked fast, dragging my eyes away from the couple whose passion had my own revving to go ... with nowhere to let it back out.

“She’s talking to you Pervy McPerverson. We see you eyeing up that couple. Don’t tell me you’re envisioning a threesome.” Marge tossed an ice cube from her drink at me. “Here. Put this between your thighs and cool it, sister. You’re married.”

I swatted the ice cube away, and it clinked on the stones beneath my feet. “I don’t want a threesome. I was just appreciating the young love over there. They are new. You can tell by the way they kiss and touch with such passion.”

“Newlyweds I bet. So romantic. I remember being a newlywed with Axel. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other either,” Doris sighed,

finishing with a giggle.

“This place really is romantic,” Sylvie said. “The perfect place for a honeymoon.”

It was the perfect place for romance to be sure. The more I realized that, the more I started regretting my decision to come here without Alejandro. My need to feel his touch and his kiss swelled to overwhelming when I glanced back over at the young couple still enthralled in each other’s arms. Then Ndungu came out to check on us, and when his muscular arms flexed under the drink tray he carried, I practically salivated at the thought of having them wrapped around me. Before I was married, I’d have already captured him with my lethal cougar claws and dragged him back to my lair to have my way with him. As my gaze drifted over his muscles flexing and swelling with each movement, I fought the old urges that still lived just beneath the surface. I started internally chanting the words I’d recited every time I saw a handsome young man on this trip ... the handsome young men I could no longer sample. It was my first widows trip as a married woman, and I hadn’t realized how difficult it would be to break my old habits.

*I’m a married woman. I’m a married woman. I’m a married woman.*

“Hey, eyes over here, you ol’ horn dog,” Marge teased.

I quickly looked away from Ndungu and straight into her accusatory stare. “What? I was looking at the drinks.”

Sylvie snorted. “And did he have drinks at the airport? Or on the ride over? Oh, no. You’re eyeing up Ndungu. You have been since the moment you clapped eyes on him. Go on. Admit it.”

With a groan, I pushed my feet against the ground and started my little chair swinging again. “Fine. I’m appreciating the view, okay? Nothing wrong with that. I may be married, but I’m not blind.”

“As long as you don’t cheat.” Doris frowned. “You took vows. You can look, but you can’t touch.”

I stiffened. “I would *never* cheat on Alejandro. Cheating is for the unhappy and the weak, and I am anything but. I’m far too powerful to be a cheater.”

“What does that mean?” Sylvie asked.

I took a sip of my martini then continued rocking in my hanging chair. “It’s simple, really. Happy people don’t cheat. They just don’t. If you’re happy with your partner, you’re not tempted to cheat on them because, well, you’re happy. It’s when you become *unhappy* that cheating becomes a risk.

That is where the difference between the powerful and the weak come into play.”

I paused to take another sip of my drink, all three sets of eyes watching me intently and waiting.

“If you’re unhappy in your relationship and you aren’t strong enough to admit it, or you can admit it but won’t do anything to change it, then you’re at risk for cheating. If you’re unhappy in your relationship but you’re powerful, then you have the balls to confront your partner and tell them. You give them the opportunity to fix things. And if they won’t change things, then you have the strength to tell them you’ll leave them if they don’t change because, well, you’re powerful enough to be okay on your own. You don’t stay in unhappy relationships because you’re scared. You demand what you need from your partner, and if they won’t give it to you, then you leave them. *Then you go find yourself a man to scratch your itches.*”

I wagged my eyebrows. “Or a woman. Or both. Or two or three of each. Whatever floats your boat.”

“Alice.” Doris waved a hand at me. “You’re bad.”

I smirked. “Bad, yes. A cheater? No. As I said, powerful people don’t cheat. If they are unhappy in their relationship, they have the balls to confront the problem or leave. They have the power to control their urges even if they are otherwise happy and just want to get a little something on the side. Like me right now. I’m happy with Alejandro but being away from him is hard. If I were a weaker person, I may give into my desire to find out if Ndungu’s lips taste as good as they look.”

I glanced at him again, imagining a powerful kiss, then I pushed those fleeting desires back down inside. “It’s the people who are either too weak to confront their spouse and tell them they are unhappy or too weak to control themselves, and that ain’t me, ladies. You see? I’m not a cheater. I’m far too powerful.”

“Wow. That’s actually a really good observation.” Sylvie looked shocked.

“She’s not wrong.” Marge shrugged. “Happy people don’t cheat. And powerful people don’t give into lustful urges. They can control them.”

“Exactly.” I sat up straighter. “And I’ll have you know that I’m not only very powerful, but I’m *very* happy with Alejandro, so I’m not at any risk of cheating. So, you see? I can stare at the Bryce’s and Ndungu’s all day long without any risk of actually acting on those fantasies.”

“Hmm.” Doris shrugged. “I guess that’s okay then. You’re not doing anything wrong in the eyes of God by looking at them. But no touching.” She wagged a finger at me.

“Even though I like to look, I truly have no desire to touch them. I do, however, wish my husband was here so I could get some of this pent-up sexual frustration out. My vibrator isn’t cutting it.”

“Ew!” Doris cringed, sucking her head back into her swing cocoon like a turtle.

Sylvie shook her head. “TMI, Alice. TMI.”

“Told you you’re a dirty perv.” Marge snorted.

“A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do. I haven’t been away from Alejandro this long since we got married. It’s not natural going this long without a hootie.”

I looked at Doris and she blushed a deep crimson and sucked farther back into her chair cocoon.

“Oh, come on. Admit it, Doris. You’re missing Axel too.”

Doris peeked out from the dome of her wicker chair. “Oh, I do. I really do.”

“Okay. We’re doing it again. We’re focusing on our spouses and not on ourselves. Enough about the spouses back home,” Sylvie said, pointing a finger at us all. “We’re spending our trip with half of our minds back home. Let’s all refocus back to here and to each other. We’re in Africa!”

She opened her arms and gestured around us.

“You’re absolutely right,” I agreed. “Let’s stop talking about the spouses and talk more about what we have planned for this part of our adventure.”

The four of us got jabbering about the boat ride the next day and the safari trip planned for the following until Ndungu came and escorted us down to the beautiful, private, candlelit dinner on the floating dock. It felt like a magical fairytale meal as I sat with my three best friends, laughing and talking beneath the dark African sky.

When our delicious, coursed dinner was finished, we made our way back to our rooms. After bidding the other ladies goodnight, I climbed out of my clothes and into the empty bed. My hands drifted over the soft sheets where Alejandro would normally lay. Every inch of my body missed him.

My lips. My skin. My soul.

As much as I longed for his presence beside me, another part of me started filling up with a new emotion he’d never inspired in me before.

Rage.

As I lay alone in that bed feeling desperate and longing for his presence, I raged against the need in me he'd created ... a need I'd never had before. In the past, I'd never needed a man for my happiness. They were simply icing on an already fabulous cake. I couldn't have cared less if Ed slept beside me or not, and after he'd died, I'd filled my bed with a lengthy list of lovers I'd enjoyed, but I hadn't *needed*. When I'd slept alone in the past, I hadn't felt sad about it. I had chosen to be alone that night, and I'd enjoyed spending time with myself.

Tonight, I didn't want to be alone, and because of the ring around my finger, I had no choice but to endure the empty feeling I couldn't fill with a hot tryst.

I looked over at the empty pillow, and that pang of longing deepened.

Then my irritation about the longing itself caused me to glare at the innocent pillow, and I gave it a little smack.

"Ugh." I rolled over, turning my back toward it and hoping it would stop taunting me.

It didn't work.

I rolled over, grabbed the pillow, and wrapped myself around it pretending it was him, missing him so much I had to fight the tears as I clung to the Egyptian cotton. We'd never spent this many nights apart since we'd been married. I ached for him.

*Absence makes the heart grow fonder*, I consoled myself. But at this rate, I didn't think I could be any fonder of my love. I had made it over seven decades of my life never really needing anyone else, and now I needed Alejandro so badly I could barely breathe without him. I'd been married for years, but I'd never *needed* Ed. He'd been a good provider and husband, but that was the extent of it. With Alejandro, I loved him straight down to the center of my being ... a love I never dreamed existed. Something I had thought was a fairytale made up by idiots turned out to be real.

Love.

It was infuriating, and yet I was so grateful for this new feeling he inspired in me that it caused a dizzying blend of emotions.

Excitement about my love for him and his love for me.

Anger about feeling so helpless without him.

Trapped. I felt trapped. I had a need to be filled and I wasn't free to grab Ndungu and drag him back to my lair to have my way with him and find out



if his lips tasted as good as they looked ... something I'd have found out already if I wasn't married.

Guilt assaulted me for even thinking about another man. It wasn't that I wanted to cheat. I didn't. I would never betray Alejandro that way ... betray myself that way. I was too powerful to give in to a fleeting need to fill the space beside me. It was just that I hated it was no longer an option for me. And without him here to scratch all my itches, they seemed to itch so badly I wanted to tear off my skin.

That trapped feeling resurfaced again in the dizzying blend of emotions that erupted in me each night I went to bed alone on this trip. Each night away they only seemed to worsen. And tonight, in this beautiful, romantic place, I lay here with no husband to hold me and a ring on my finger stopping me from finding someone else. Stopping me from indulging in that thrill of a first kiss ... a first touch ... the excitement of melting into someone completely new. There was nothing like that feeling of the unknown, and as I struggled to quell the growing urges, I swore I would explode.

"Ugh!" I flopped over again, tossing the pillow to the side. "I hate this."

Just when I thought the longing I'd been feeling since I'd kissed him goodbye would drown me in its bottomless depths, I remembered the three little widows all sleeping right down the hall. The widows who filled up the rest of my heart not occupied by my beloved, and the ones I was here to spend time with on this incredible adventure we found ourselves on once again. With Sylvie's words to try to remain focused here and not on my spouse, I took a deep breath and tried to let go of all the emotions surging around inside me.

As I thought about the excitement of the days to come, it eased the ache of not having Alejandro's arms around me as I fell asleep, and the anger of the bottomless pit of need for him I wouldn't be able to satiate until I was back with him. As much as I missed him, I was excited about my time with them.

I glanced back at the discarded pillow, and with a deep sigh, I pulled it back into my arms and curled around it as I drifted off with the soft breeze blowing against the linens dangling around me.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“A giraffe! Look! A giraffe!” Doris squealed in the back seat of the open-air safari cruiser.

“Where? Where?” Sylvie spun around, lifting the brim of her khaki hat that matched the khaki clothes we all sported on our safari.

We all spun to look in the direction Doris pointed.

“Oh! I see it! There!” Marge pressed a pair of oversized binoculars to her eyeballs. “Oh, wow! I could count every hair on its ass with these babies!”

“I would hope so since you insisted on buying the biggest pair of binoculars that resemble a NASA telescope.”

“Yeah, well my vision isn’t what it used to be. I didn’t wanna miss anything. Here, have a look,” she offered to me.

With the waft of my hand, I turned away. “I can see it just fine without those monstrosities, Mr. Magoo.”

“I want to look through them!” Sylvie took the binoculars and focused in on the tall, majestic creature. “Whoa! You really *can* see all the hairs on it! These things are sweet!”

“Me! Me! My turn!” Doris bounced up and down until Sylvie passed her the binoculars.

The engine chugged quietly while we sat for several long minutes watching the giraffe stretching its long neck while it grabbed leaves from the tall tree.

“Oh! A baby! It has a baby!” Doris nearly popped my eardrums with the pitch of her squeal.

“Shhh!” Marge scolded. “You’ll scare them!”

Even though I was excited to see the giraffes, and the frolicking baby that emerged from the foliage was quite cute, I kept scanning the plains for the creatures I was most excited to see ... the ones that I’d come here for.

The big cats. My brethren.

But once again, my scan came up empty. We’d seen baboons, gazelle, kudu, and a handful of other exotic African creatures in the hour we’d been out on our day safari, but no big cats had crossed our path. I tried not to be frustrated by the lack of showing, but Ndungu assured me we would run into plenty the closer we got to Victoria Falls.

“If you ladies are ready, we are about ten minutes from the falls. We’ll be having a picnic lunch there.”

“That sounds perfect,” Sylvie answered for us all. “Lead the way, Ndungu.”

Giving a little wave and bidding farewell to our giraffe friends, we drove off toward the famous falls I was quite excited to see. Along the way we saw a herd of elephants, and we stopped to take pictures and ooh and ahh over the behemoth creatures, then finally, we arrived at Victoria Falls.

When we hopped out of the vehicle, the water from the nearby falls crashed so loudly that Ndungu had to speak louder as we approached. “You know them as Victoria Falls, but the locals here call them Mosi-Oa-Tunya, which means ‘The Smoke that Thunders.’ No matter how many times I see them, they always take my breath away, as I’m sure they will yours.”

With that, he waved his hand, and we turned the corner to see the massive falls we’d been hearing so much about. I wasn’t one to be overwhelmed with emotions often, but the sight of the five-thousand-foot-wide falls cascading down, and the mist, which looked like smoke forming rainbows in the bright sunlight, took my breath away.

“My God,” Sylvie whispered, stumbling to a stop as she clutched her chest.

We all followed suit, open jaws mirroring one another as we stood in awe of the natural wonder.

“The Smoke that Thunders,” Marge said quietly. “It’s incredible.”

We stood silently for a few long moments, Ndungu following suit and giving us time to take in the spectacular sight. Finally, he broke our stunned silence by clearing his throat.

“You ladies can walk around and explore. I’ll get lunch set up at the overlook. Come find me over there when you’re ready to eat.” He pointed to a clearing overlooking the falls just a short walk away. “But be careful. Don’t fall in.”

“Yeah, that would be our luck,” Marge said. “And I think we’ve had enough near drownings in our lives, so stay away from the edge, ladies.”

We all took a healthy step back though we were nowhere near close enough to fall.

“See you soon,” Ndungu said with a wink, then he hurried off to make our lunch, leaving the Widows and I to soak in the awe-inspiring sight. Long

before we had our fill, Doris's grumbling stomach gave us our cue to head over for lunch.

"Whoa!" Marge turned and looked at Doris's stomach. "Sounds like a lion crawled up in there!"

"Sorry, I don't mean to ruin the moment, but I skipped breakfast." She clutched her gurgling gut. "I'm starving."

"I'm starving too," Sylvie said. "Don't worry. We will have a great view of the falls *and* food over there. Nothing to be sorry for. Let's go"

We walked single file along the trail that led to the lunch clearing Ndungu had laid out for us. After finding a spot on our picnic blanket, we enjoyed a delicious lunch and a glass of wine.

"I gotta say, Alice," Sylvie said after finishing her last sip of wine. "This wish is incredible. I am having the most amazing time."

"Agreed." Doris sat back on her hands with a sigh. "From the resort to the food to the views ... this is one heck of a wish you made!"

"I third that sentiment. Well done, Alice." Marge lifted her glass in a cheers, and I clinked it then took my last sip of wine.

"And are you having fun?" Sylvie asked, tipping her head. "You've been quiet today."

"I'm just really hoping to see the big cats, honestly. Most of the reason I wanted to go on a safari was to see the big cats out in the world, roaming the wild."

"Ah, the cougar wants to see her family, huh?" Marge grinned, and I cringed at the hole in her mouth I knew I'd never grow accustomed to.

"You're not a wild cat anymore though," Doris said with a matching, though fully toothed, smile. "Now you're a domestic house cat!"

The moment she said those words, the cringe from seeing Marge's missing tooth deepened. A house cat? Me. The audacity.

"I'm *not* a house cat," I shot back, lifting my chin proudly. "I'm a big cat—a lean, mean, powerful hunting machine. Just because I'm married now doesn't mean I'm not a big cat anymore. Once a big cat, always a big cat."

"Well, a domesticated big cat," Sylvie joked. "Like one of those cougars someone keeps in the city and walks around on a diamond-studded leash."

Marge rolled back with laughter. "Yes! Exactly that! Alejandro taking his big cougar out for a walk in Central Park. I can actually see it."

The good-natured teasing made my hackles stand up. "I'm *not* a domesticated cat! I'm a proud cougar. A *lethal* cougar." I gave them all a

look that snapped their laughing jaws shut. “No one is, or will ever, have this big cat on a leash. I’m with Alejandro because I choose to be, not because I’m his *pet*.”

Sylvie’s voice softened. “We were only kidding, Alice. We know you aren’t some house pet of Alejandro’s.”

“If anything, it’s the other way around.” Marge snorted. “Although he’s more like those cat toys that kitties love to bat around. Glitter balls! He’s your glitter ball!”

That restlessness floating right beneath my surface bubbled up again, a constant reminder that maybe I *was*, in some ways, a domesticated cat. Like a caged cougar, the bars seemed to close in around me the more I thought about never getting to run free again.

“He’s not a toy, and I’m not his kept pet. He’s my husband, and I’m his wife. And that’s that.”

“Geez. Looks like we hit a soft spot on the big kitty,” Marge teased.

Not wanting to discuss things any further, I stood up. “Don’t we have a rule that we aren’t supposed to be focusing on spouses on this trip?”

Sylvie nodded. “We did say that. You’re right. We are supposed to be focusing on the here and now with each other.

“Exactly. So that’s enough of that talk. Now, since we’re done with lunch, I think it’s time to get back on the safari.”

They each shared a look, and I suddenly felt silly for how sensitive I’d been about the good-natured jabs. Normally, I could dish them out as much as I could take them, but for some reason, I was extra sensitive about the confusing feelings they seemed to have homed in on.

Pulling up a forced smile to diffuse the stilted mood, I waved a hand toward the direction of our safari cruiser. “Well, ladies? Are you going to sit there all day, or are we going to go hunt down one of my family members? A lion? A leopard? A cheetah? A jaguar? Which one of my brethren awaits out there?”

They shared a quick look, then all pulled up matching smiles as well and stood.

“Let’s go hunting,” Marge said.

“Look out, big cats,” Sylvie said. “The biggest cat of them all is coming for you.”

Doris furrowed her brow. “Wait. We’re not *really* hunting big cats, right? Just metaphorically. I don’t want to hurt the cute kitties.”

“Metaphorically, Doris.” Sylvie tossed an arm around her shoulder. “No one is hunting anything on this trip other than good times and good memories.”

She blew out a puff of air. “Oh good. Well, in that case, let’s go hunting!”

We helped Ndungu clean up our picnic area, then the five of us headed back to the vehicle. After taking us a short drive along the Zambezi River, Ndungu gently eased the cruiser to a stop.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Look,” he whispered, his finger pointing across the plains. “Lions.”

“What?” I sat up straight, my eyes searching the landscape for the powerful creatures. “Where?”

“Oh! There!” Marge said, and I turned to see her pressing her binoculars to her face.

I squinted my eyes, but all I could make out were small figures in the distance. “Give me those things!” I reached over and grabbed them from her, excitement bubbling up inside of me as I looked into them. After a few moments of adjusting my eyes to the new depth, I gasped. “There! I see them! Lions!”

The lioness strode across the clearing, her strides powerful yet lazy, as if she hadn’t a care in the world. I looked at the long, lean lines of her muscular body, and somewhere deep inside, I felt connected to her. For years, I *was* her. The queen of the jungle. The top of the food chain. An apex predator who knew no rivals. I took what I wanted, who I wanted, where I wanted and when I wanted. Even though I loved my life with Alejandro, an ache inside of me grew as I watched her living wild and free, unencumbered by anything. Free to do as she wanted. Go where she wanted. Hunt what she wanted.

I envied her.

“I’ll get us closer,” Ndungu said.

“Wait! Is that safe?” Doris asked. “There aren’t any sides on this thing! They could jump right in!”

“They won’t,” he said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“But what if they do?”

He gestured to the shotgun strapped to the dash of the cruiser. “I won’t let them get to you.”

I sat up straight. “No one is shooting any lions. If it comes to it, just shove Marge out there. She can slow them down while we getaway.”

“Hey!” Marge punched me in the shoulder.

“They won’t hurt you. Smile when they come toward you. One look at your messed up face and they’ll take off in terror.”

She smacked me again.

“Please don’t hurt them, Ndungu,” I said. “She’s beautiful.”

The pride of lions sprawled in the sun, and none of them moved as we grew closer. When we got close enough our aging eyes could see them very clearly without squinting or Marge’s honkin’ binoculars, Ndungu put the cruiser in park.

I watched the majestic creatures in quiet awe, and I was glad my Widows seemed to know to stay silent too. Whether they were just scared of drawing the attention of the powerful beasts or giving me a moment to let the experience sink in, I didn’t know. But regardless, I was grateful for the silence.

Movement to the left captured my attention, and my breath hitched in my chest when the male lion sauntered in. His lush mane blew in the wind, and the way his powerful, muscular body moved was as stunning as the dancers I’d spent so many years with. Effortless. Fluid. Beautiful.

“The king of the jungle,” Doris whispered. “Wow.”

“He’s incredible,” Sylvie said.

Marge let out a slow breath. “Now *that’s* a man.”

As I watched the mighty lion waltzing through his pride of females, I remembered how I’d felt when I’d met Alejandro. He’d been a lion amongst cubs, and suddenly, I missed him so much I ached in a part of my soul I didn’t even know existed. His kiss. His touch. The way he could make me feel with just one look. But at the same time, I watched the lioness prowling in the wild, and I ached for her freedom. The powerful, conflicting emotions twisted and twirled inside of me like a tornado.

The male lion looked over toward us, and his head lowered when he locked onto our vehicle.

“He’s not happy we’re here,” Ndungu said. “We should go.”

But I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay and watch them. Enjoy seeing the big cats in the wild like I’d dreamed of doing. But before I could argue to stay a little longer, the large male let out a rumble, charging forward toward us before stopping with a snarl, his huge paws kicking up dust into a cloud surrounding him.

“Whoa! Cripes! Go! Go!” Marge dropped her binoculars in her lap and hit Ndungu on the shoulder.

“Eek! Drive! Drive!” Doris squealed.

He didn’t hesitate, and when the big cat charged his warning again, Ndungu hit the gas and we hurried away.

“Whoa! That was crazy.” Sylvie held onto her safari hat as the winds blew through the vehicle while we put some distance between ourselves and the pissed off lion.

“They are territorial,” Ndungu said as he slowed. “Sometimes they let us get close like that and watch, and sometimes they want nothing to do with us.”

I stared out the back of the vehicle, my heart getting heavier the farther we got from the majestic animals that had enamored me so much.

“Don’t worry, Alice. We’ll see more,” Sylvie said, noting my sad expression as I stared off into the distance.

“You wouldn’t know it now, but there is a land bridge made of rocks and dirt right there that we use to cross the river.” Ndungu pointed to a place at the river marked by tall stones. “If the water were lower, I could take you across to a spot where I know a pride of lions live. But, after the rains the past few weeks, it’s too deep to cross without a risk of getting stuck. However, there is a great watering hole about a mile up. You’ll see lots of animals, and there are often lions there as well.”

I lit up knowing I may see some more. “Good. I liked the lions.”

We made it to the watering hole, and parked a distance away so we wouldn’t disturb the huge herd of water buffalo lining up to take their drinks. Cautiously, they took turns going to the bank, their watchful eyes surveying every inch of the water.

“Oh! A different looking one! Let me look it up in my book.” Doris pointed out the deer looking creature, then flipped open her tour book identifying all the African wildlife.

“Put the book away, Doris. We’ve got our own personal animal identifier right here. Ndungu knows what all the animals are. Don’t ya, buddy?”

He grinned widely. “I sure do. I can tell you anything you want to know about them. And that one you’re looking at is a gemsbok.”

“They all look so scared trying to drink,” Sylvie said. “Are there crocs in the water or something?”

“Oh, yes. Crocs hide in the water, and in a split second, they can jump out and grab ahold of them,” Ndungu said. “The smart ones are very cautious drinking, always ready to leap to safety at the slightest ripple in the water.”



“Can you imagine having to fear for your life just to get a drink of water?” Doris asked. “Thank God we were born as humans.”

“That would suck,” Marge said, her binoculars affixed to her eyes again.

“How many water buffalo do you think there are?” Sylvie asked.

“This is a huge herd,” Ndungu answered. “I’d guess five hundred or so.”

“Wow. That’s incredible.”

“And look at the zebras coming in! I love zebras!” Doris clapped her hands. “I can’t wait to show Axel these pictures. I told him I was going to bring one home to be my new mount on the ranch.”

I sighed. “We already brought home a Spanish fighting bull, Doris. We’re not bringing home a zebra.”

She stuck out her lower lip in a pout. “But I love zebras.”

I watched the black and white creatures intermingling with the water buffalo, and while they were entertaining to watch, my mind was still back with the beautiful lions we’d left behind.

“Look! A lion!” Marge pointed.

“Where? Where?” I sat up straight, head on a swivel as I searched for it.

“Way over there.” She pointed, but I couldn’t see anything where she looked.

“I don’t see anything.”

“It’s pretty far out. I don’t think you can see it without the binoculars. Oh! Wait! Two ... no three lions! Cool!”

“Give me those!” I opened my hands, and with a groan, she placed the binoculars in them.

It only took a moment for me to find them in the distance, three lionesses trotting toward the herd of animals all taking turns at the watering hole.

“Oh! I can see them now!” Sylvie said. “Looks like they are going to the watering hole too!”

“Oh, boy,” Ndungu said with concern in his voice.

“Oh, boy? Is that bad? Why is that bad?” Doris asked.

“Because lions eat the animals there. If you ladies don’t want to get a real front row seat to how nature can be cruel, it’s probably best we head out.”

“I want to see the lions, though,” I argued, though admittedly, I had no interest in watching them tear apart the other sweet, innocent creatures I’d been watching the past twenty minutes.

Doris closed her eyes. “Oh, I don’t want to see this part.”

“Same.” Sylvie looked away as the lions closed in on their prey.

“I don’t like it, either,” Marge said, “but lions deserve to survive too. They’re carnivores. They kill or they starve. It’s not pretty, but it’s life out here in the wild.”

“I suppose,” Doris sighed. “I just don’t want to see it.”

“I’m going to turn us around and get us headed back toward camp. We’ll keep following the river here, and we’ll be back well before dark. You definitely don’t want to be out here in the dark.”

“Great plan, Ndungu. This has been amazing.”

“We’ll come back out again tomorrow.” He put the vehicle in reverse and began turning around. “Unless you’d like to try the rafting expedition instead. It’s supposed to be great fun.”

“No!” the four of us shouted in unison.

Ndungu jumped in his seat then looked at all of us.

“Sorry. Bad rafting experience last year.” Sylvie sucked the air through her teeth. “No rafting for us.”

“I’m going to need to hear this story on the way home I think.” He smiled and started driving away from the herd of animals behind us.

But before we could even start our story of being stranded in a Mexican jungle, a loud, thundering noise behind us captured our attention.

“What in the hell?” Marge spun in her seat. Her eyes went big. “Oh, cripes.”

I spun to see what had caused her face to freeze up like stone. When I saw the stampeding herd of animals barreling straight toward us, my eyes flashed as wide as hers. “Holy shit! Stampede!”

Ndungu glanced over his shoulder then spit out several words I didn’t understand, but I assumed were swear words in his native language. “The lions are attacking and it’s causing a stampede. We can’t get caught up in this. That many animals can destroy the vehicle with no effort. We can go faster than them, but this rough terrain isn’t made for speed. It’s going to be a bumpy ride, so hold on tight, ladies!”

We grabbed ahold of anything within our reach as Ndungu stepped on the gas. Doris started spitting out prayers while I flung out a string of swearwords that likely canceled out her good ones.

“They are gaining on us, Ndungu!” Sylvie screeched as she looked out behind us.

I spun back in my seat to see the wall of huge bodies surrounded by red dust closing in by the second.

We picked up speed as we lurched and bumped along the rocky, uneven ground. Each time we hit a bump, we shrieked as we caught air and came crashing back down. We hit a huge rut, and it sent the cruiser airborne for a moment, our screams melding with the roaring engine, and then we came down hard. A loud *bang* punctured the air, and the cruiser veered left and right. We screamed again as Ndungu struggled to get control of the vehicle.

Ndungu spit out another word I didn't understand, then started looking left and right frantically as we slowed down. "We blew a tire. We can't outrun them now. And they are in such a panic they will flip this vehicle if I don't get out of the path. I'm going to try for that river crossing I told you about and hope the water has receded enough we can make it across. They should keep going straight when we turn. Hold on tight because it will get bumpy when we hit the water at high speed."

"Holy cripes! This is worse than running with the bulls!" Marge shouted, tugging on her seatbelt to make sure it was tight.

We all did the same, then I turned back to see just how close the buffalo were. At this distance, I could see the whites of their eyes. "They are right on our tail! Drive, Ndungu, drive!"

"Hold on, ladies! I'll get you out of this!" He grabbed the wheel, veering left into the river between the stone markers indicating the crossing spot. Our screams collided into one loud, ear-shattering cry that I assumed every animal and human in Africa had heard. When we hit the water at high speed, it felt like slamming into a wall. I grunted as I flung forward into my seatbelt.

"Hold on! I've got to try to get us across!" Ndungu pressed the gas, gunning the vehicle into the deepening river. We were only fifty feet from the other side, but it felt like a mile as the vehicle started to chug when the water came up over the hood.

Behind us, the stampede of panicked animals blew by, tearing apart the ground we'd just been driving on. For a moment, I took a sigh of relief we were no longer in their path, but when we were a little over halfway across, the vehicle tires started spinning, then the engine sputtered and stalled out. My panic leaped up my throat again.

"Damn," Ndungu breathed. "It's too deep. The tires are sinking, and the water has flooded the engine. We can't drive across."

"Now what happens?" Doris cried out. "Are we going to drown?"

"No. We're gonna sit here and wait while I call back to the resort, and they'll send someone for help. There is nothing to worry about. We are

prepared for any and all emergencies.”

I looked down at the water flooding in by our feet. “Are we sinking? We’re sinking, aren’t we?”

Ndungu kept his calm and shook his head. “We’re not sinking. We’re safe on the bridge which is wide enough we aren’t going to slide off. We’re just stuck. The water won’t get any deeper. It’s deep on either side of us, but here we’re only in a few feet. Nothing dangerous, but too deep to drive through. We could walk back, but with the lions on the hunt, we’re safest in here. As long as we stay in the vehicle, we’re fine. All we have to do is sit here and wait for help.” He smiled and lifted up his phone, showing he was going to make the call.

*Bam.*

The vehicle shook with a powerful blow, and our screams returned into one horrifying melody as we gripped our seats while the vehicle rocked from the hit.

“What the hell was that?” Marge shouted, and we all looked around.

*Bam.*

Another hit, this time hard enough we felt the vehicle start tipping to the left.

Our screams rose again like we were competing in an audition for the part of “screaming girl” in a B-rated horror movie.

“What is happening?” Sylvie asked, panicked, as the vehicle slammed back down into the water.

“I don’t kn—” Ndungu started, but his sentence was stopped by another hit.

This time, a huge hippo’s head appeared at the side of the vehicle right beside me.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” we screamed so loudly that I worried we’d rupture our own ear drums.

“Holy cripes! We’re under attack!” Marge shouted.

An enormous mouth opened as it lunged at us, its massive body pushing the vehicle while it hit. Time slowed as I stared into the gaping mouth, and I remembered how we’d been told that the most dangerous, territorial animal in Africa was, in fact, a hippo. As it reared against the cruiser, my mind drifted to the headlines that would come from this horrifying encounter.

*Famous Dancer Killed in Rogue Hippo Attack. World Grieves.*

But then I gasped when I imagined another scenario for a headline ... the worst case scenario.

*Famous Dancer Maimed and Severely Disfigured by Rogue Hippo Attack. Miraculously Survives.*

We had no time to react when the hippo body-slammed into us again. Our vehicle lifted and slid, moving across the bridge and toward the deep water on the sides.

“Can you all swim?” Ndungu asked as we started to go over.

“Yes!” I shouted back, then my words turned back into screams as I stared straight into the hippo’s mouth, the frame around the open air vehicle the only thing keeping me out of it.

“If we go over, paddle to that shore! It’s closer!”

He pointed across the river to the other side, and I barely had time to process his words before the hippo slammed into us again. This time, when the cruiser took the hit, it slipped off the bridge and we tipped sideways into the water. Our screams quieted only when we went under.

Fear like I’d never known rushed into me as the water flooded around us. After we went over, the cruiser bobbed back to upright, and we emerged together coughing and hacking, gasping for breath.

“We need to get out of this deathmobile! Now!” Marge shouted, always the one to jump into command at the first sign of trouble.

“She’s right. We’re off the bridge, and we’re gonna go under quick,” Ndungu said. “That hippo is going to keep coming, and we’re sinking. Everyone needs to swim to shore! He’s attacking the vehicle, so if we’re lucky, he will keep focused on the vehicle and not on us while we get away!”

*If we’re lucky.*

We weren’t. I knew that well enough from how often our adventures went sideways.

Like now.

But with no other options other than the certainty we’d drown or get eaten by the hippo if we stayed, I scrambled to undo my seatbelt, my shaking fingers struggling with the simple task. As the water started to rise toward my head, I cried out, “Help! My seatbelt! I’m stuck!”

“I got you, sweet cheeks!” Marge launched over, grabbing my seat belt tight and pressing down on the reluctant button. It let loose, and she grabbed my hand, pulling me after her.

“Follow me!” Ndungu shouted as the water swallowed the vehicle, leaving only the frame above us sticking out.

“Swim, ladies! Swim!” Marge commanded. “Swim like your life depends on it!”

We all scrambled to the side of the vehicle opposite the attacking hippo, then after a quick look to make sure I wasn't leaping right into its terrifying mouth, I followed Marge's lead and we all jumped in one after another. The cold water enveloped me as I went under, and I closed my eyes against it. But the panic I felt in being blind and not knowing what threats surrounded me forced me to open them back up before I popped back to the surface.

Snakes. Piranhas. Crocodiles. Any number of lethal predators could be swarming me as I struggled to the top. The only one I knew about with certainty was the giant hippo that could swallow me whole, and that was bad enough. With the fear of the unknown swallowing me like the cold waters around me, I swam for the surface.

My eyes burned from the water, and when I came up spitting and spewing, I used my free hand to wipe my eyes. When my vision refocused, I saw the other Widows ahead of us paddling hard with Ndungu leading the way.

“Keep swimming, soldiers! Don't stop for anything! Paddle! Paddle!” Marge shouted, tugging my hand to pull me with her.

Finally, I got my petrified muscles to start working, so I dropped her hand and started swimming with her. A quick look over my shoulder showed the hippo biting and pushing against the vehicle drifting away, and I let out a sigh of relief it wasn't following us. Then I thought about the animals at the waterhole who had to drink so cautiously because of the hidden threats hidden beneath the surface, and I panicked that I was swimming straight into the mouth of a hungry croc.

“Almost there! Paddle! Paddle!” Marge shouted.

I pushed the visions of being clamped beneath the powerful jaws of a croc and dragged under to my demise out of my mind and focused on the shore just out of my reach. Using every bit of strength in my body, I pushed myself harder until I felt the ground come up beneath me. The Widows and I spilled out onto the shore, each coughing and gasping as we climbed up toward safety.

While we lay there panting and staring up at the sky, Marge rolled her head over to look at me. “I just want it to be known that it wasn't my wish

that almost got us killed this time. It was yours.”

“Can it, Marge,” I managed out between heavy breaths, then I went completely limp before the world around me went black.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Wake up! Wake! Up!” Marge’s voice rang in my ears, then I felt a sharp slap across my face.

“Hey!” I cried out, clutching my cheek as I sat upright, blinking fast against the bright light. “You hit me!”

“Oh, thank God,” Sylvie said.

“She’s alive!” Doris cried between sobs. “She’s alive!”

I looked around at the concerned faces surrounding me. “What ... what happened?”

Marge sat back on her heels. “The adrenalin rush caused you to lose consciousness for a minute.”

“I lost consciousness?”

“Yeah. You passed out, you big ninny. I had to smack some sense back into you. You okay? No head injuries I’m not seeing?”

I touched my head and felt no bumps, and I didn’t remember hitting it. “No. I think I’m fine.”

Marge jutted a thumb at the water. “Good. Then we need to get the hell off this shore. That thing could come for us any minute if it loses interest in the cruiser it’s still batting around like cat toy.”

Ndungu’s watchful eyes scanned the rushing water behind us. “Marge is right. It isn’t safe here. Is everyone alright to move?”

“I think so,” Marge answered. “Role call! Everyone accounted for and unharmed?”

“I’m okay,” Sylvie breathed out.

Doris just flopped into a boneless heap and sobbed.

“Doris, are you hurt?” Marge kneeled beside her.

“No,” she finally squeaked out from the arms she cried into. “I was so scared.”

“But you’re alright now.” Marge touched her back. “And now isn’t the time to fall apart. We need to get away from the river and somewhere safe while we call for help. Right Ndungu?”

“Exactly,” he answered. “That hippo can come on land, and they are very territorial. They also can outrun humans by about 10 MPH. We don’t want to take our chances. Let’s start walking a little further inland while I call back to the resort.”



He looked at his hand, then his eyes went big as he started patting his pockets.

I let out a sigh. “Don’t tell me you lost your phone.”

Ndungu looked up, his mouth pulling back into a cringe while he looked at me. “It was in my hand when we went in. I must have dropped it. Does anyone else have a working phone on them?”

We all shook our heads.

I pinched my temples. “For crying out loud, from this day forward, we vow to keep a Sat phone strapped to one of us at all times when we’re on our Wilder widow adventures. We seriously have no way to call for help?”

Sylvie pulled her phone out and looked at it. “No luck. I’ve been using mine for photos, but no reception out here. Zero bars.”

“None of our phones from the States are gonna have reception out here,” Marge answered.

“So, we can’t call for help?” Doris whimpered.

Before we could panic anymore, Ndungu lifted his hands. “It’s okay. There is a tribe not far from here. We can walk there and wait for help to come. There are protocols in place for this. When we don’t arrive back to camp, and they don’t hear from us, they will send out search parties. Protocol states we take shelter at one of the tribe camps, so they will search there first. We will likely spend the night out here, but they’ll find us come morning.”

Doris’s eyes widened. “We’re spending the night out here? Didn’t you tell us *not* to be out here at night?”

“We’ll be safe at a camp. It’s only a two hour walk that way.” Ndungu pointed to the east. “If we hurry, we’ll make it there before dark.”

“Holy cripes. We’re gonna stay out in the bush! Yes!” Marge cheered.

I turned to her. “If you keep celebrating the fact we’re stranded in the African wilderness, I’m going to give you another black eye.”

She smirked. “I think it’s gonna be cool. We’ll be roughing it like we’re on a real safari and not the fancy resort kind you picked. It’ll be fun, ladies.”

Doris picked herself up out of the dirt. “It will be safe there?”

“Yes. Very,” Ndungu assured us. “We have longstanding relationships with these tribes. They will take us in and give us food and shelter while we wait. You have nothing to worry about.”

Marge leveled him with a stern stare. “They aren’t cannibals, are they? I’ve seen enough movies to know where this could end up. And tasty as I bet they’d be, I don’t want to be serving up my limbs for supper.”

He chuckled. "There are no cannibal tribes in this area. You're safe."

Marge gave him another look. "As long as you're sure."

"I'm sure. And anywhere out there is a hell of a lot safer than we are near that hippo. I can assure you of that. So, we need to move. Now."

The water behind us splashed, and the big hippo emerged, its eyes fixated on us.

"You know what, as long as it's far away from that hippo, I'm in." Sylvie jumped up and hurried over to Ndungu. "Lead the way."

With a heavy sigh, I wrung out my shirt then stumbled over to Ndungu. "Alright. Let's go."

We followed behind him, dragging our water-logged bodies away from the dangers of the river behind us. One foot in front of the other, we started our trek across the African plains toward the camp Ndungu continued telling us about. We had made it almost an hour into our exhausting journey when we saw a herd of elephants and rhinos up ahead.

"Can we stop for a second and rest our feet and watch the elephants?" Doris placed her hand on her knees, bending over while she caught her breath. "I'm exhausted."

"We can break for ten," Ndungu said. "We don't want to get caught out here after sunset, and we have about an hour left." He pointed to the sky. "Sunset is in an hour and a half. So, take a quick break, but then we move."

"My whole body hurts," Sylvie said as she walked us toward a soft grassy spot. "I would kill for a hot bath and a soft bed."

"Same," I agreed. "I'm getting us all massages when we get back."

"Ah, quit your griping," Marge gruffed. "Just try to enjoy this incredible experience. We're on a safari in Africa, ladies!"

"We're stranded in the wilderness, Marge. Don't try to sugarcoat it," I fired back.

"Fine. You pansies can grump all you want, but I think this is awesome. And I want to reiterate one more time that this isn't *my* wish causing us to come face to face with death ... it's yours, Alice. So don't be bitching to me about the situation we're in." She grinned her messed-up smile, and I flipped her the bird.

"I'm pooped!" Doris hurried over to the grass, then plopped down on a soft spot. "Ah, this is so nice."

"Wait! Don't sit there!" Ndungu started towards us with his hands waving, but it was too late.

Doris's eyes flashed wide. "Ow! Ow! Ouch! Oh! Ow!" She leaped up with speed that shocked me and started swatting at her behind.

"What's going on?" Sylvie hurried to her.

"Something is biting me! Ow! Ow! My hiney!"

She spun around, and dozens of ants crawled all over her.

"That was an Army Ant hill!" Ndungu said. "Get them off her!"

"Oh, shit!" Marge hurried over. "Hold on, Doris! We're coming!"

"Help! Ow! Help!" Doris took off running.

"Stop, drop, and roll! Stop, drop, and roll!" Marge shouted as Doris zigged and zagged while swatting at her behind.

Her blind panic sent her running in circles, and we all called to her to stop running so we could help.

"It burns! It burns!" she screeched, her arms flailing wildly behind her like defective windshield wipers.

"Stop running, Doris!" I shouted as she raced past me.

"Oh, for the love of God," Marge grumbled, then crouched like a panther as Doris came barreling back past us again. With a grunt, she leaped onto Doris, tackling her to the ground. "Stop, drop and roll!" she shouted as she rolled Doris around underneath her, swatting at the remaining ants climbing on her lower back.

"Ahhhhh!" Doris screamed as she struggled to get free.

"Hold still, Doris! Quit fighting me!"

"It burns!"

Sylvie dropped to her knees and joined Marge in swatting off the last of the ants, then when they were all finished, Doris rolled over onto her back and collapsed in a boneless heap.

"Are they gone? Did you get them?"

"We got them," Sylvie answered. "You're safe."

Doris's relieved face only lasted a moment, then she winced. "Ow! My back and my hiney hurt!"

"Let me take a look," Marge said matter-of-factly.

Doris flashed opened her eyes. "At my hiney?"

"I'm a nurse. I've seen worse. Just roll over and let me make sure they are only bites and not stings that need tending."

Doris frowned deeply, then cringed with what I assumed was more pain from the bites.

“You’ll be fine, Doris. It’s just an ass. We’ve all got one. Hell, Marge is one. Please let her look,” I said.

Marge glared at me then stuck out her tongue.

“Let her look, sweetie,” Sylvie soothed. “Then we can make sure you’re okay.”

“Okay. Fine. Turn around,” Doris responded, waving her hand at all of us. “Everyone but Marge needs to turn around.”

With a loud sigh, I spun around. Sylvie and Ndungu followed. We stood with our backs turned while Marge examined Doris’s ass, then finally Marge announced, “She’s fine. Only bites and no swelling. Don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“It still hurts,” Doris said, and we all turned around to see her buttoning her khaki pants.

“You’ll be fine.” Sylvie tossed an arm over her shoulder. “Just another story to tell the grandkids.”

“We should really get going.” Ndungu pointed at the darkening sky.

“But we didn’t get much of a rest,” Doris argued.

“We’ll rest when we get there, Doris.” Sylvie squeezed her shoulder. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not be caught out in the dark. So, let’s suck it up and limp on. We’ll rest tonight.”

“Okay, fine,” Doris agreed.

With no more arguments, we started our journey again. As we passed closer to the elephants we’d been watching from a distance, we paused to stare at them.

“They look even bigger when we’re standing on the ground. Yikes,” Sylvie said as we all slowed our steps.

“The bulls can get territorial, so since we’re on foot, we’re going to give them a wide berth.” Ndungu changed our trajectory, and we started making a wide arc around the huge animals. As we got closer, an elephant raised its trunk, sounding a warning before charging toward us several steps. His enormous feet stomped the ground as he flapped his ears, trumpeting at us once again ... a warning to stay back.

I gave Marge a look. “These aren’t kangaroos, Marge. Don’t go getting delusional that you’re a Disney princess again. You’ll get a hell of a lot worse than a black eye if you go marching up to pet a pissed off elephant.”

Marge shook her head. “No need to tell me twice. Damn. He’s big. I’m glad we took the long way around. If we were closer, we’d be elephant toe

jam.”

She made a squishing noise that caused me to cringe.

“Gross. Could you keep the visions of being maimed and murdered by wild animals to a minimum, Marge? It’s bad enough being out here with no phone and no weapon.”

“I’ve got a knife,” Ndungu said. “But the gun is long gone with the cruiser.”

“I got my Swiss Army knife too,” Marge said, tapping her hip. “I can do some damage with this baby.”

“I don’t think that will work on an elephant,” Sylvie said. “Probably only piss it off more.”

“Why is it yelling at us?” Doris whimpered, staring at the bull elephant still trumpeting his displeasure as we moved past at a good distance. “We’re not going to hurt it. Can’t someone tell it that we aren’t a threat?”

“Alice maybe can speak big cat since she is one, but I don’t think any of us speak elephant, Doris.” Sylvie reached out and touched her shoulder. “But we’ll be fine if we just keep out of its territory and give it space.”

“Exactly,” Ndungu agreed. “Most of the animals aren’t out to actively hunt us. They just don’t want us on their turf. That hippo wasn’t interested in eating us, for instance. He was pissed we were in his area. That’s why he attacked. So, all we need to do is keep our distance from any animals we cross paths with, and we’ll be okay.”

As we kept moving, I started to question my envy of the wild lioness. Here I was, out in the wilds of Africa just like her, and all I wanted was to rush back to the safety and security of civilization ... to my Alejandro. Maybe the girls were right. Maybe I had turned into a domesticated big cat after all.

“Everyone. Stop. Moving.” Ndungu slowed to a stop, and the calm but firm tone of his voice made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“What’s going on?” Doris asked, but instead of answering, he shot her a look that we knew meant to be quiet as he slowly slid his knife out of its sheath.

Marge looked down at his movement, and she reached into her pocket, pulling out her Swiss Army knife as well. She gave us a look that told us she was ready for whatever was coming our way.

My heart pounded against my ribcage as I searched for the threat, my eyes scanning our surroundings. Finally, I saw the danger lurking in the tall grass up ahead on our right.

*A jaguar.*

Excitement and fear crashed inside of me as I locked eyes with her fierce yellow ones. She lay prone in the grass, her lowered head and tense muscles signaling she was ready to pounce.

Beautiful. She was absolutely beautiful. For a moment, I forgot the danger we were in, and I just appreciated seeing the gorgeous cat out in the wild. But as I was admiring her stunning coat, she let out a snarl, and suddenly, I snapped back to reality that she was a danger to us and not some beautiful friend of mine.

“If she comes for us, we have to look big and scary,” Ndungu whispered while he slowly readied his knife. “Yell. Scream. Jump up and down. Anything to deter her. Whatever you do, don’t run. Prey runs. But for now, we wait and hope she moves on.”

The big jaguar stalked out of the bush, her slow, deliberate movements bringing her even closer to us before she flattened down again, eyes locked on us like lasers.

“Alice, if you can speak ‘big cat,’ now is the time to tell your sister we aren’t freaking dinner,” Marge whispered out of the corner of her mouth while she quietly opened her little Swiss Army knife.

Even though I didn’t actually speak big cat, I continued staring into her eyes, telling her in my mind that we were friends. How much I envied her. How beautiful she was. Strong. Proud. Fearless. Lethal. That I used to be her, and now ... now I was a house cat. A trained, domesticated house cat. That yes, she could slaughter us in mere moments, but if she would just let us pass, we would be very grateful.

For a moment, I thought it was working. Maybe I really *could* speak big cat. The more I sent out the thoughts to her, the more her muscles seemed to soften along with the look in her eye.

But then ...

Then she launched forward with a loud snarl followed by a scream so sharp and eerie that it rumbled through my skin.

“She’s charging!” Ndungu shouted as he jumped forward, raising his arms above his head as he shouted. “Get big! Make noise! Now!”

Even though the charging jaguar scared me frozen into my tracks, I finally managed to move when Marge started roaring and leaping beside me.

“Rrrrrr!” she growled loudly.

“Haaaaaa!” Sylvie screamed as she started flailing around like she’d stuck her finger in an electrical socket.

“Ya ya ya!” Doris yelled as she started doing jumping jacks.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” I belted out before my body took over in a strange, spastic blend of dancer’s leaps and kicks like I was doing my routine in fast forward. I hadn’t planned on using dance moves to scare it off, but they were so ingrained in my muscles, it was apparently all my body could offer while I was frozen in such fear. I fell into the finale routine of my *Gammy* show, and as the jaguar rushed towards us, I danced even faster.

The jaguar paused her charge while the Widows and I screamed and yowled, kicked and leaped, staying close together as Ndungu commanded so we looked like one large, horrifying animal.

“It’s working!” Sylvie shouted. “Keep going!”

“Grrrrr! Rarr! ROAR!” we kept on as the stunned predator flattened against the ground again, staring at the strange creatures in her path.

Finally, after we turned up the volume and increased our antics, she turned and scurried away. We kept going for almost a minute after she disappeared, and it seemed like we were all too scared to quit. But finally, Ndungu stopped moving.

“You can stop now. She’s gone,” he said.

I did one last hitch kick, landing with jazz hands high above my head. “Holy shit,” I panted, placing my hands on my thighs as I puffed out the breaths I’d apparently been holding.

“Did that just happen?” Sylvie asked breathlessly.

Marge pumped a fist in the air. “Did we seriously scare off a jaguar with our badass selves? Hell yeah, we did! Wow! Freaking awesome!”

“I thought we were goners for sure!” Doris whimpered. “I’m so scared! I don’t like it out here at all.”

“Me neither,” I agreed as I rose to standing. “I freaking hate it here!”

“Hey! This is your wish!” Marge said. “You wanted an African safari. We are *on* an African safari!”

“No! I wanted to stay at a luxury resort in Africa and, from the safety of a vehicle, see some wild big cats! At no point did my wish involve hiking across the African plains fighting off predators with our bare hands!”

“Well, we haven’t had to fight them off with bare hands per se. So far, it’s only been a lot of swimming, running, and apparently in your case, Alice, dance battles. You did have some killer dance moves there,” Sylvie teased. “I

mean, you basically just had a dance off with a jaguar. That's pretty cool, right?"

"Like West Side Story." Marge snorted. "We were all screaming and yelling like banshees, and Alice is in a freaking dance battle."

"Shut up," I said, but then laughter started to follow the simple words as I pictured how I must have looked.

Marge started mimicking me, adding in fight sounds with the dance moves.

"Shut up!" I said louder, but I couldn't help but burst into laughter at the sight of Marge's moves and the vision I had in my head about how I'd gone full dancer at that jaguar.

"Alice's wish ... have dance off with jaguar. Check!" Sylvie laughed.

The more they started laughing, the more I couldn't hold mine back. Yes, this was not my wish. Yes, I was horrified to be stranded out here in Africa. But damned if those little Widows of mine weren't helping me see the bright side of this shit situation.

We still had each other.

After they finished teasing me for my dancer's reaction by high kicking it all around me and shoving jazz hands in my face, our laughter petered off on a sigh.

"Well, we had better get going if we're going to make it before dark," Ndungu said. "You ladies ready?"

"We're ready," I answered for us. "Just get us to safety. Please."

"We're almost there," he said. "Follow me."

We walked the last fifteen minutes until we saw smoke billowing up ahead. As we got closer, my steps slowed. A small camp with huts made of natural sticks and materials came into sight, and the closer we got, the more stunned I became.

A group of people from the tribe came walking out in a line.

"You certain these aren't cannibals?" Marge whispered to Ndungu. "Do I need to get my Swiss Army knife ready?"

"They are friends," he said, then he called something to them in their native language. The stoic looks on their faces broke as they greeted us with big smiles. "See. Friends. Not cannibals."

"Wow," Marge whispered. "They look exactly like the tribes I've seen in the documentaries."



“Incredible,” Sylvie agreed as we moved closer to the people in traditional tribal clothing, with paint streaked across their skin, and bone jewelry piercing parts of their body.

“They are welcoming us in,” Ndungu said. “Just follow me, and we’ll be safe for the night.”

“How do we greet them?” Doris asked. “I don’t want to offend anyone.”

“A smile,” Ndungu said with a grin. “It’s the universal language of friendship.”

We all stretched our faces into smiles as we entered the village, the people all grinning back at us while we filed by. Ndungu spoke in their native language, and I assumed he was explaining our plight. Soon after he finished talking with several men from the tribe, a group of small children came running up, their laughter and cheers contagious as they took us by the hands, pulling us excitedly behind them.

I glanced at Ndungu, who smiled. “Follow them! They’ll take you to your room for the night!”

A whirlwind of excitement and nerves swirled inside me as we followed the children to where we would stay for the night.

“Tell me this isn’t cool,” Marge whispered.

I didn’t want to admit it, but finally, I whispered back, “Okay. It’s kinda cool.”

With a big grin she slung her arm around my shoulder, and the four of us followed the children to our own little hut we’d call home for the night.

## CHAPTER TEN

“I’m not coming out in this!” Doris called from behind the door of our hut.

Marge planted her hands on her hips. “Come on, Doris! They gave us these outfits so we could join the wedding celebration. You would be insulting them by refusing to come out. What did Ndungu tell us when we arrived?”

Her voice was quiet as she said, “To accept everything they give us with a smile and gratitude. Saying no is a deep insult.”

Sylvie nodded even though Doris couldn’t see her. “Exactly. Now don’t insult them. The women helped us get dressed, and they are all waiting for you to come out. Now, get out here!”

“I do appreciate the mud salve they gave me for my ant bites. That was a nice gift, and it really helped stop the itching. But this I can’t accept! It barely covers my bosom! It’s not modest at all!”

“It’s their traditional dress for celebrating weddings,” Sylvie answered. “It’s beautiful, and we should feel so honored they are inviting us to this special celebration. Now, quit being a prude, and get your cute butt out here!”

After a long silence, the door to the hut creaked open. Doris peeked out, the paint on her face making her look quite exotic, and when she finally fully emerged, I couldn’t stop grinning.

“Now *that* is a gorgeous look on you, Doris! Axel would be falling over himself if he saw you right now!”

She shrunk back. “But it isn’t appropriate for the other men to be looking at me in this.” She gestured to the colorful materials draping over her breasts and wrapped around her waist in a sarong type skirt.

“You look gorgeous.” Sylvie stepped forward and grabbed her hand, tugging her out the door. “I can’t believe we get to wear this stuff. How awesome is this?”

I looked at the three Widows all sporting the same tribal outfit as me. There weren’t any mirrors here for me to examine my own appearance, but I glanced down and could only imagine how incredible I looked in it. Alejandro would definitely be having a heart attack to rip this baby right off me.

*Note to self, when I get home, hire a designer to make this costume for me for role play night.*

“You ladies look wonderful,” Ndungu said when he stepped around the side of the hut wearing the male version of the colorful outfit. “How lucky we arrived on a night with such a special celebration happening. You’re in for a real treat. This is rare to see them in this special attire doing the ceremony you’re about to witness. It’s incredible. Come. They are starting now, and we don’t want to be late.”

As much as I’d grumbled about our luxury stay getting transformed into this rough and rugged fight for survival, since we’d arrived a couple hours ago, we’d been treated so kindly that I’d started to enjoy our time here. Then when the women had come in with the ceremonial clothing so beautiful they put my Vegas showgirl outfits to shame, I’d lit up like a lightbulb that we were going to get to wear them. I never passed up an opportunity to get dressed up. Ndungu had explained to us that there was a wedding celebration happening tonight, and it would consist of a great feast, dancing, and other ceremonial displays.

“This is so freaking awesome,” Marge whispered as we followed behind Ndungu toward the sounds of drums beating. “I feel like we’re on National Geographic.”

“I’m really excited too.” Sylvie beamed.

Before I had a chance to answer, we stepped into the center of the small village, and my breath hitched in my chest at the beautiful people all circling around the huge fire.

“Wow,” Doris whispered.

“Wow is right,” I said quietly, and followed Ndungu over to a bench where some villagers indicated we should sit.

“We can’t participate in the ritual,” Ndungu said, “but they are giving us a great honor in allowing us to eat with them and watch the beautiful ceremony.”

“An honor indeed,” Marge said, giving a smile and a small bow to the woman gesturing to the benches for us to sit on.

We all took a seat beside one another, then several small children came running over with bowls for us.

“Thank you,” I said to the small girl grinning wide as she placed the bowl in my hands.

“Thank you,” the other Widows and Ndungu said as they got their bowls as well.

With giggles, the girls ran off and disappeared, leaving us to examine our meals.

“Is it ... bugs?” Doris asked. “I saw a special once that some tribes often eat bugs for protein.”

“It’s not bugs,” Ndungu said. “This is a traditional corn dish specially made for wedding ceremonies. No bugs.”

She stared into the bowl like it had three heads.

“Doris, quit offending them!” Marge bumped her with an elbow. “Just smile and do this.” With one hand, Marge scooped into her dish then paused before she put her fingers in her mouth. “Wait. I gotta ask one more time, Ndungu. You’re certain they aren’t cannibals? I’m all about trying new things, even bugs, but I draw the line at eating some guy named Ted.”

He chuckled. “You’re safe. Not cannibals.”

“Okay. I trust you, pal.” She put her fingers in her mouth and ate the paste off them.

We watched her with wide, expectant eyes.

“Well?” Sylvie asked.

Marge shrugged. “Not bad! Get in there, girls!”

With Ndungu’s words echoing in my head about not refusing any hospitality, I tried to keep the cringe off my face while I mimicked Marge’s moves. The paste felt warm on my fingers as I slid them through it, and I held my breath for a moment before I shoved them in my mouth and swallowed fast.

“Not bad at all!” Sylvie said after taking her bite.

“You’re sure it’s not bugs?” Doris asked, her fingers covered in food she still hadn’t consumed.

“Not bugs, Doris. And not Ted. Eat the damn food. It’s a gift from our hosts.” Marge shoved her with an elbow.

Sylvie gestured for her to eat. “Come on, Doris. Even Alice ate it.”

“Yeah, but that’s not a good endorsement. Alice has had a lot worse things in her mouth I bet,” Marge whispered under her breath with a chuckle.

I glared at her but didn’t argue since Ndungu was sitting right beside us.

“It’s fine, Doris. Just eat it,” I said.

With a little whimper, Doris shoved it in her mouth. We all watched as she chewed, then with one big swallow, she looked at us. “Hey! I liked it!”

“See! Told you!” Marge smiled and took another scoop of her food.

After finishing our bowls, the little girls ran more food over. We ate three more courses together, each tentative about the new foods, but getting braver with each course. Some meats, fruits and vegetables were the main course, and I had to admit, they'd done an excellent job preparing them.

Ndungu pointed to the group gathering by the fire. "Now that dinner is over, there will be the ceremony then the ritual dancing. You'll love this part."

We watched in awe as they paraded the bride out in the most elaborate costume of all. Her waiting partner greeted her with a special dance, then she was placed on a throne while he performed for her and her alone. His moves were incredible, and the dancer in me wanted nothing more than to get up and join him, but I sat quietly until his ritual dance ended. When that portion finished, a final ceremony was performed to bind them together, followed by loud cheers and cries from the tribe at the end. They exploded into dancing and cheering, each moving their bodies wildly and freely as they leaped and danced around the fire.

"That was amazing. So romantic." Doris dabbed her eyes.

"It was truly beautiful. The start of a wonderful life together I hope," Sylvie said.

I looked at the young couple locked in an embrace, and I felt happy for her ... and sad at the same time. "That was it. Her last first kiss. The last time a man will ever dance to woo her. Tonight will be her last first time for many things. I hope she remembers it," I said on a sigh. "Because it's going to have to keep her sustained for the rest of her life."

Marge furrowed her brow. "Okay. What in the hell is going on with you, Debbie Downer? And enough of the cryptic crap. Are you and Alejandro okay? You keep saying stuff that makes me think you're not okay. What gives?"

"Yes. We're great," I said with enough lack of enthusiasm it kept them all staring at me. "We're not supposed to talk about our spouses. Remember? We're in the here and now. So, just ignore me."

Sylvie stared straight into my eyes, and I swear I felt her probing inside my mind. "Alice, I'm officially lifting the 'Don't talk about spouses too much' rule. We're doing a temporary switch from Wilder Widows over to Wilder Wives. Something is going on with you. I can tell, and it's getting worse every day we're away. What's happening? Marge was hesitant to talk to us about Roxie, but she did, and she feels so much better. Right, Marge?"

Marge blew out a puff of air. “*Much* better. I know now that nothing is wrong with Roxie and me. We’re only in a rut ... and I’m going home with a shovel and some tow chains to drag us right back out of it! Are you two in a rut or something?”

I shook my head. “No. We aren’t. Things are still hot and heavy. He’s perfect.”

“Then what the hell is it? Spill, Alice.”

With a sigh, I finally admitted my truth to them and myself. “I’m pissed off at him.”

Marge furrowed her brow. “Why? What did he do? Did you have a fight on the phone.”

“No. No fight. I’m just pissed because he ... he ruined me.”

Her brow furrowed deeper. “I’m not following. Do you mean your chastity? Like you’re a ruined woman? I think that was ruined long before Alejandro came along.” With a snort, she chuckled.

I glared at Marge. “Not my chastity. Me! *I’m* ruined. I’m ... needy. Dependent. I’m ... a domesticated house cat. A caged cougar. I’m a shell of the fierce woman I once was!”

Sylvie tipped her head. “You are many things, Alice, but a domesticated house cat is not one of them. We were only kidding about that.”

With a huff, I tossed up my arms. “But it’s true. I’m no longer a wild cat out tearing apart her prey. I’m a boring, tamed house cat who is spending this whole trip staring out the window pathetically missing her owner. It’s disgusting. I’m disgusting.”

Doris tittered. “Oh, Alice. You’re in *love*, silly! That’s all. There’s no shame in missing your husband. It would be a shame if you didn’t.”

“Well, I’m pissed at him. I used to be so damn independent. I didn’t need a thing from anyone, ever. I needed only myself. Now, my God, I need him. I can’t *breathe* without him. And do you know what the worst part about it is?”

“What?”

“Not only did he break me and make me need him, but because I need him and love him, I’ll never get any more firsts again. This time apart made me realize that too! All these young, hot men running around and there’s not a damn thing I can do with them. Instead, I just sit here feeling pathetic and missing my husband. It’s infuriating. Man, am I pissed at Alejandro right now!”

The Widows stared at me with sympathetic looks.

“I’m sorry you’re feeling like this, Alice.” Doris frowned.

“Me too,” I answered. “I shouldn’t be. I should be happy to be married to a man I love, but all I can think about is that I’m here on this trip in a romantic place where normally I would be having some passionate love affair with a local. Eyeing one up, stalking my prey and then taking him down for the kill. And then I’d get that explosive first kiss. First touches. First, well everything. And I yearn for that feeling again. It’s a feeling I’m never going to experience ever again. Ever! It just didn’t really hit me until this trip that it’s over for me. Seeing all these men and realizing I’ll never have that again. No more firsts. I think I’m in a bit of mourning over them.”

“Well, none of us are getting that, sweetie,” Doris said. “But that’s marriage. We all agreed to stop kissing other boys when we said, ‘I do.’”

“I know that. And honestly, I don’t even really *want* to kiss other boys. It’s just that I wasn’t missing this part of who I was until I didn’t have him every night. When I’m with him, I don’t even *think* about anyone else. But now that I’m out here alone, I feel like a tamed cougar locked up in a cage and I’m miserable missing my owner. And no one else is even allowed to open it up and let me run free to stretch my legs. I just feel ... trapped. This time apart from him has made me feel trapped, pathetic, and weak.”

Sylvie’s eyes filled with concern. “You’re really feeling trapped in your marriage?”

“No,” I said, thinking about how much I loved him. Then I thought about how much I had loved all my random flings. “It’s just ... it’s just I didn’t realize how much I would miss all the firsts after I got married again. When I was single, there was a reason I was always hunting for someone new. And it’s not because I’m a nympho.” I paused and looked at Marge, holding up my hand to stop her from saying whatever snarky comment I knew tickled her tongue. “Don’t say it.”

“What? I didn’t say anything,” she responded, then whispered under her breath, “yet.”

I arched an eyebrow and kept on. “It wasn’t the sex that pulled me from man to man. If it was only sex I wanted, it would have been much easier to just pick one partner and have it readily available. In fact, I didn’t always sleep with my flings. Sometimes we made out like high schoolers all night long.” I closed my eyes and relished the feelings they’d evoked in me in the hours and hours of kissing we’d do. “It was the kisses that pulled me from new partner to new partner. First kisses to be specific. There is nothing better

than a first kiss. I lived for that moment right before our lips touched. The promise of passion dancing just within my reach. The newness. The excitement. A first kiss is ...” I sighed and smiled. “A first kiss is everything.”

Sylvie sighed with me. “The best. First kisses are the best.”

“And now I’ll never have one again. I’ll never have any of those firsts I used to get all the time. I gave up that freedom of firsts when I chose Alejandro. And I yearn for it. Like a caged cougar yearns to run free again ... I yearn for that freedom as well. But at the same time, I wouldn’t change what I have with Alejandro for the world. I love him. I miss him. I only want to be with him ... but it’s so confusing because I still miss the thrill of the hunt. The stalk. The chase. Sinking my teeth into some young, muscular flesh. How badly I want to give in to that unyielding urge to shove my tongue in some random guys mouth just to feel that adrenaline rush of newness again.”

Doris crinkled her face then whispered, “Oh no. You’re not talking about that swinging business, are you? Where you change partners?”

“No!” I said too loudly, and that rage over someone else touching Alejandro bubbled up inside of me like a volcano exploding magma over everything surrounding it ... the way I would explode my rage on any woman who dared to touch my man. “No. I won’t share him, and I honestly have no desire to be with someone else. It’s just that I want to keep having my firsts ... with him ... over and over again. But that’s not possible. You only get one first kiss with someone. That’s just a cold, hard fact. It’s just been extra difficult being away from him and not being able to act on all my old urges. This time apart has really made me realize that’s it. All my firsts are over.”

“I get that.” Sylvie turned to me. “What I wouldn’t give to go back to the first kiss with Tom and do it over and over again. There’s nothing quite like it.”

“Agreed.” Marge closed her eyes. “Earth shattering.”

“I remember my first kiss with Axel.” Doris drew her arms around herself and gave a little squeeze.

“See? Then you understand? And it’s harder for me because I was having so many first kisses while I was single. I loved prowling about like a hungry lioness, hunting for someone new to devour. And now ... never again.”

“But all those first kisses weren’t anything like the first one with Alejandro? Right?”



My heart swelled with the memory of our first kiss on the cruise and the way my heart had cracked open for him. “Oh no. Nothing like that. I knew the moment our lips touched that my life was changed forever. No one would ever be able to take his place. He was mine, and I was his. For always. But that incredible memory fades a little more every day. The more time that passes, the harder it is for me to step back and live inside that memory when I need to remember how that first felt. It’s what keeps me going every time I start to crave a new first with someone. But now ... it’s leaving me, and I’m terrified I’ll never get to feel that way again.”

“I get it, Alice. I really do,” Sylvie said. “But just because you aren’t ever going to have a first *kiss* again, doesn’t mean you aren’t going to have a lot of different firsts.”

“Yeah,” Marge agreed. “Like this. This is our first time at an African tribal ceremony. Our first time in African tribal clothes. Our first time eating ...” she paused and looked at the stuff in our empty bowls. “Well, whatever the hell that was.”

“Bugs. I know it was bugs and you’re all lying to me,” Doris pulled a face. “I ate bugs, didn’t I?”

“It’s not bugs!” we echoed.

Marge kept on. “Well, I’m just saying, yeah ... none of us are gonna have first kisses again. But we’ve got a lot of firsts awaiting us.”

“It’s not the same, though.” I sighed. “This is fun and all, but I want the firsts filled with passion and romance. I lived for those moments, and I don’t know how to satiate that need with Alejandro. It’s tearing me apart.”

Sylvie looked over at the new couple dancing together by the flames. “Would you really want to give up everything you have with Alejandro for a lifetime of firsts? What you have together is what most women would kill for.”

Visions of a life without Alejandro spent in endless tryst after tryst invaded my head, and my heart clenched with agony thinking about it. “No. I would never. I love him.”

“Good. Then that’s one hurdle we’re over. You don’t want to end things with Alejandro. So, now we need to figure out some new firsts for you two.”

“All the good firsts are gone,” I sighed.

Sylvie arched an eyebrow. “Oh, come on. I know you’re kinky, but there must be plenty of other firsts you and Alejandro haven’t done.”

I scoffed. “We’ve done a *lot* of firsts.”

“Well, maybe you’ve done a lot of physical firsts, but what about emotional firsts? This is the first time in your life you’ve ever really been intimate with someone ... truly *loved* someone. Right there means there are a lot of firsts I *know* you haven’t experienced.”

I tipped my head. “That’s true, actually. He and I have had quite a few firsts with intimacy and romance. I guess I just thought those were all gone too.”

“Gone? Those are just beginning, hon! Those are what keep your relationship strong for years. You have no idea how many firsts are still coming your way.”

My heart lifted a little. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” all three Widows echoed.

“You may love the thrill of the hunt, Alice, and we know you love your firsts ... and being first.” Marge lifted an eyebrow and I chuckled.

“I do love being first.”

She continued. “Well, then you can be proud that all that hunting, all that stalking you did, brought home the biggest prize of all. You took first place. You killed the biggest prey in the world. He’s yours now, so the hunt is over. And that’s a *good* thing, not something to be mourned.”

I envisioned the big lion we’d seen earlier in the day, and then Alejandro’s beautiful face entered into my mind. “That’s true. Alejandro is my lion. The strongest, most powerful man I’ve ever met.” Pride that he was mine straightened my spine. “And he’s all mine.”

“See? You need to stop fixating on who you were and start focusing on who you are now. And that is a woman happily married to the love of her life. A man she *chose*. No one tricked you or trapped you. In fact, if you wanted, you could leave him at any time. You’re not stuck. But you don’t leave him because you love him, and you’re not the same person you were before you met him. You’re not domesticated and stuck, Alice. You’ve ... grown.”

The words hit like a battering ram to the heart.

*You’ve grown.*

“You’re so right. I’ve outgrown the woman I was before. She was something to behold, but she has nothing on the woman I’ve become since I met him. He’s my king, and I’m his queen. He’s not a cage. He’s the key that unlocked my cage, letting me free of a life constantly worrying about what

everyone thinks of me. He accepts and loves me as I am. My God. How did I not see this before?”

I thought about the lioness and the way she snuggled her lion. She didn't need him to protect her or feed her. She didn't need him to care for her. Without him, she would survive just fine on her own. She was completely free, and yet she chose him ... just like I had chosen my lion. Suddenly, I felt as free as her. The restraints I'd thought were holding me down disappeared as I imagined a long life with my Alejandro by my side. A man to run free with forever.

“I've been so silly,” I said as the deep realization sank into me. “I was holding on so tightly to a woman who wasn't really happy. I was lonely and sad, and I needed those men to validate me. You're completely right. I'm not that woman anymore, and I don't want to be. By marrying Alejandro, I haven't given up anything. I've earned a lifetime of love with a man worthy of me. I haven't lost anything. I've gained everything.”

Tears burned behind my eyes as I looked at the Widows choking up beside me.

“Alice, that's so beautiful,” Sylvie sniffled. “And so right.”

“I'm so happy you aren't going to let those old notions ruin what's right in front of your face anymore,” Doris said, dabbing her eyes. “You have a wonderful man who loves you.”

“I do,” I said softly.

“And he's lucky to have you,” Marge said.

I smiled at them. “And I'm lucky to have all of you. Thank you for making me talk this through. I should have opened up about my feelings sooner. You're the best friends a girl could ever have.”

“Aw,” Sylvie crooned, wrapping her arms around my neck. “We love you too.”

After the other Widows joined in our embrace for a few moments, we broke apart our hug.

Sylvie looked at me and said, “Now, instead of mourning the firsts you'll no longer have, let's take a moment and celebrate the other firsts you're now starting to experience in life. The freedom to let yourself be vulnerable with a man. The freedom to be soft and open to love. The freedom to kiss the old you goodbye and open your arms to the new you. Those are the greatest firsts of all, Alice.”

“I love that,” I answered, my heart swelling as I realized just how right she was. We folded back into another hug, and the four of us sat embracing while the dancing and drums filled the world surrounding us.

“Now, stop spending this trip pissed at Alejandro for ruining you. You’re not ruined. You’re perfect,” Doris said as we started breaking apart our hug. “And I’m so happy you found your true love.”

“Me too,” I sighed as I sat up. “Thank you for helping me remember that. Being away from him this long was harder than I realized. I appreciate you ladies helping me get my head back in the right space.”

“Anytime,” Sylvie said. “Please talk to us when you’re spinning out. We’ll help get you right again.”

“Thank you, ladies.”

We all smiled at each other, and I said a little silent thank you to the three women who would have my back no matter what.

“They are waving us over,” Ndungu said as he strolled toward us. “Now that the ceremony is over, we’re invited to dance with them.”

“Dancing?” I sat up, my muscles already twitching at the ready to do the thing I loved most. “We can dance?”

“Oh, hell yeah! Let’s go, ladies!” Marge jumped up, the feathers attached to her colorful bra fluttering with the movement. “Ouch.” She paused and clutched her chest. “This thing has zero support. My tatas are like yoyo’s every time I move. Maybe I should sit this out or I may knock myself, or one of you, out with the swinging.”

“No pain, no gain,” I said as I rose to standing. “Ladies, the dance calls to us, and it’s our duty to answer ... sore boobs or not.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t have any,” Marge shot back.

I shrugged. “A dancer’s gift. Now, Ndungu, lead the way.”

He grinned and led us into the fray, the flames of the huge fire flickering and lighting up the dancers around it. The drumbeat sank into my soul, and I started tapping my foot to it as I tried to decide what dance moves would work best with the beat.

“I don’t know the moves,” Doris said.

“None of us do,” Marge answered. “I think we just get out there and start dancing. Let the music move you.”

“Dance like no one is watching,” Sylvie said, then she started wiggling her hips, the beads on her sarong clinking together with the movement.

Just when I had decided on the routine I would wow them with as if they were an audience at one of my shows, I watched the wild and free dancers moving like there wasn't an audience in sight. Instead of starting my old routine, I decided to take Sylvie's advice and dance like no one was watching ... let my body free to flow however the music moved me.

I started shaking my hips with my Widows, our smiles widening as we slipped into rhythm. The four of us started shimmying our way into the group, our beads clanking and clinking with the movement. My soul soared as we whooped and leaped around the fire, letting go of all the restraints that had once held me back in my life. How much I'd worried about what people thought of me. My beauty. My constant battle against aging. That need to hold onto the old me ... the one I barely recognized anymore. Out here, none of it mattered. Out here in the bush, the only thing that mattered was how much you gave yourself to the music.

Out here, we were free, just like I was with my Alejandro. I just hadn't realized it until now.

"Whoo-hoo!" Doris hooted as the music sped up.

We shimmied fast on our feet, hands in the air as we mimicked the dancers around us. We let ourselves go together as we leaped around the fire, opening ourselves to the experience that I knew would change us all forever.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I pressed my hands together and bowed to our hosts as we passed through them to the waiting cruiser.

As Ndungu had predicted, the resort had sent out search parties at first light, and by afternoon, they’d already located us. We said our goodbyes to everyone as we climbed inside the cruiser, then gave one last wave to our new friends—the ones we’d never forget.

“Wow. That was the most incredible experience.” Sylvie collapsed into the seat beside me. “We danced for *hours!* My body is so pissed about it today, but that was totally worth it. I felt so free. Didn’t you?”

“Yes,” we all echoed.

“It was transformative,” Marge said, and I agreed.

“It really was. I’ve always danced to impress people, but last night I just danced for me. And boy, what a freeing feeling to just move how you want and not care what anyone thinks.”

A smirk tightened Marge’s lips. “Too bad we’re driving back instead of hiking. You learned some killer new moves to get into another dance battle with a jaguar.”

“Shut up, Marge!” I laughed as I slapped her shoulder.

The rest of the Widows burst into laughter too, with Ndungu chuckling beside us. The drive back to our resort felt different. This time I wasn’t scanning the horizon for the big cats I so desperately envied. This time I appreciated all the beautiful animals along the way. The peaceful elephants, the busy baboons, the exotic zebras. I loved watching all the unique animals enjoying their lives in their natural habitat. The way I vowed to be true to myself from now on. No longer would I waste another minute focusing on the old me, and trying to relive a life that I had no desire to return to. Instead, I would awaken each day grateful to have the love of a man who completed me in ways I’d never stop being grateful for. And I would be forever thankful to Africa and my Widows for helping me see the light and appreciate the gift I’d been given.

“Are we there yet?” Doris asked after we’d been driving for a while.

“Do you have to piss? Again?” I arched an eyebrow.

She grimaced and squeezed her legs tighter.

Marge shook her head. “I swear you have a bladder the size of the ants who bit your ass.”

“I can’t help it!” She shimmied in her seat. “I have an overactive bladder, and I really have to tinkle!”

“About five more minutes, Doris,” Ndungu answered. “We’re almost there.”

She blew out a breath and bounced her leg as we turned into some trees that looked familiar. Shortly after, we rolled up to our resort. Doris hopped out first and waddled toward her room, and the rest of us gave Ndungu a hug and thanked him for keeping us safe and giving us an experience we would never forget.

He gave us a big smile. “We still have two more days to explore Africa, and I can’t wait to show you more of her beauty.”

“We can’t wait either, but for now, let’s go get a hot shower and call our spouses,” I answered, my desperation to hear Alejandro’s voice causing me to hurry away from the group.

When I got to my room, I used the hotel’s Wi-Fi to call him, and nearly cried when I heard his voice.

“Hello, Cariño,” he said in that sexy tone that made my skin vibrate with excitement.

“Hello, my love,” I answered, closing my eyes as I felt our connection return.

I heard his sigh. “I miss you terribly.”

“I miss you more. So much more,” I breathed out, and I meant it.

I could almost hear his smile. “Good. Then it will be all the better when you are back in my arms again.”

“I can’t wait, baby. I truly can’t.”

“Well, since that can’t happen right now, tell me everything you’ve been doing. I want to feel like I’m there with you.”

I started pouring out the details of our wild adventure, but then I stopped mid-story when I got to the part about seeing the lions in the wild.

“You know what,” I said after my long pause. “I’ll tell you everything that happened, but first I want to tell you something else.”

“What is it, Cariño?”

“That I choose you. Every day. Every second. I choose you. There is nothing and no one I want more than you. Ever. Even though you were unexpected, I can’t imagine my life without you.”

“Nor I without you, my love.”

“I just want you to know what you mean to me. I want you to truly understand the depth of my love for you ... love I never knew could exist before your lips pressed into mine. That first kiss that changed everything. My last first kiss.”

“It was my last first kiss as well,” he said. “The most important kiss of my life. And I do know that you love me, even if you fought it so hard at first.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. I did. But not because my feelings for you weren’t there. They were. Oh, God, they were. I was just scared. Scared of losing myself, I guess. Of being tamed and caged. But I’m not scared of that now. If being in love with you is a cage, then someone throw away the key.”

“Our love is not a cage, my love. Our love let us out of a cage ... a cage where we spent our lives alone. The minute you let down your walls, the door unlocked, and now we are free. Together. Knowing how much you fought, how hard it was for you to let down your guard, it only makes me love you more. You are a strong, beautiful woman who knows her mind and who needs only herself. So, the fact that you allowed me into your heart is the greatest honor of my lifetime. I will never try to tame you or cage you, my little wild cat. But I thank you for the honor of allowing me to be at your side. I will remain here always.”

A tear slipped down my cheek as I realized he knew me so well. I had picked the perfect man to tether my soul to. He accepted me, flaws and all, and loved me regardless of any of them. And he would never, ever try to cage me.

“I love you, Alejandro. I just wanted you to know that.”

“And I love you, Cariño. Now, tell me more about these lions.”

I continued telling him about our riveting adventure, then when we finished up our conversation, we ended with a few more “I love you’s” before kissing into the phone goodbye. I hung up, and that longing for him returned instantly, but this time I didn’t begrudge it. This time I embraced it and appreciated how lucky I was to have someone in my life to miss the way I missed him.

My true love.

My lion.

After a hot shower and a nap, I called the girls in their rooms and told them to put on their suits and meet me at the hot tub. We all hurried out to



enjoy another African sunset over the river while we climbed into the hot tub right beside it.

“Pass me the margarita pitcher,” Sylvie said while she soaked in the hot, bubbling water.

“Incoming,” Marge answered, passing the pitcher after she topped off her glass.

Doris folded her arms behind her head and leaned back. “This is heavenly. My body is so sore from all the hiking and dancing yesterday.”

“Same,” I agreed. “I haven’t danced that much in a very long time. And my body has never moved the way it did last night.”

“Mine either,” Sylvie agreed. “It’s incredible to just go crazy though, isn’t it? It felt therapeutic.”

“This whole trip has been therapeutic,” I said. “And I can’t thank you girls enough for helping me stop mourning a past that didn’t deserve the eternal funeral procession I was giving it.”

“We’re so glad you finally said something,” Doris answered. “It’s not good to keep that stuff bottled up to yourself.”

With a sigh, I leaned back against the hot tub. “I know. I’m getting better about opening up to you girls, but it’s still not natural for me. It was seven decades of fending for myself and not trusting anyone with my emotions. It still doesn’t come naturally for me, so sometimes I need a little probing to get the truth out.”

“It’s a damn good thing we’re nosy and relentless then.” Sylvie grinned.

“That you are.” I laughed. “And I’m grateful for it. I think I’m going to have an even better life with Alejandro now that I’m not living with one foot in the past anymore. Now my feet are fixated firmly on the future. A future with Alejandro. A future with you all.”

They grinned as they stared back at me.

“You’re stuck with us always, Alice.” Marge pointed a finger at me. “In this life, and in the next, because whichever one of us dies first is going to haunt the other. So, I’m glad to hear you really enjoy our company, because you’re gonna be in it for a loooooong time.”

I lifted my margarita glass up. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. I look forward to the late-night hauntings.”

They grinned and lifted their glasses with us. I tried not to cringe at the sight of Marge’s mouth. At least her black eye was getting better, though now it was a strange blend of yellows and purples.

Sylvie lifted her glass higher. "Here's to us having each other for support no matter what life throws at us. Marriage troubles, hungry hippos, jaguar dance-offs ... the list could go on for miles. I'm just so glad I have you ladies to lean on, both physically, like yesterday when I stubbed my toe dancing, and emotionally. I love you, ladies."

"And we love you," Doris answered for all of us.

We took sips of our margaritas, then turned our attention to the colorful sky starting over the African plains. The reds and oranges of the sunset reflected in the river flowing right beside us.

"Look! A croc!" Doris pointed.

"So, don't go for a swim in there is what you're saying?" Marge leaned over the edge to get a better look at the croc below.

"Go pet it, Marge. Give it the ol' Disney princess treatment. See how that goes for you." I smirked.

She turned back to me, flashing that smile wide just to make me cringe.

"Stop! Put that thing away!" I waved my hand at her, but she kept grinning anyway. "I can't believe I'm stuck on this entire trip with that visage in my face."

She wagged her eyebrows. "You better get used to it, because we've still got two wishes left."

"Speaking of," Sylvie said, her voice lifting. "I brought the wishing basket down because I thought tonight would be a good night to draw the next wish. Then we'll have a little time to plan while we finish our last few days in Africa."

Doris clapped and bounced up and down. "Oh, yes! Yes! I hope it's mine!"

We all nodded in agreement, and excitement fluttered inside of me wondering what adventure lay ahead of us.

Sylvie hopped out of the hot tub and grabbed the knitting basket she'd tucked under a towel under the chair. When she came back, we all gathered tight together as she lifted off the lid.

"You're up, Alice. Pick away," she said, holding it closer to me.

I made sure my fingers were dry, then I reached inside and plucked out the next wish. When I saw the name on the outside, I smiled.

*Doris.*

I lifted it up to show the others. "You got your wish. You're next, Doris."

“Whoo-hoo!” she whooped, jumping out of the water and sending sprays splashing at us. “My wish! I’m so excited!”

“What is it?” Sylvie wiped some water off her face as she and Marge leaned in.

I opened the note and tipped my head when I saw the words. “I can live with this,” I said.

“What is it? Tell us!” Marge demanded.

“Sleep in a castle,” I answered, smiling as I turned the note around to show them.

“Oh! I like that!” Sylvie grinned.

“It’s been a dream for a long time!” Doris settled back into the water. “I want to live like I’m a Renaissance lady in a castle for a few nights. Won’t it be wonderful?”

“I can get down with sleeping in a castle,” Marge answered. “I am a Disney princess after all. I belong in a castle.”

Pursing my lips, I tipped my head. “Actually, the left hook from the kangaroo has proven that you are *not*, in fact, a Disney princess. I don’t remember Cinderella or Snow White getting cold clocked by the wildlife they flounced around with.”

“We only saw the edited versions. There’s no way to know what really happened behind the scenes. Maybe Sleeping Beauty was out cold because she got throat punched by a squirrel.” Marge shrugged, and we all started laughing.

“Please don’t go trying to make the candles and teapots come to life when we get to the castle,” I teased.

“A castle! So cool! I’ll start hunting destination castles tonight,” Sylvie answered. This is going to be fun, ladies! We’re gonna live like queens!”

“And Disney princesses,” Marge corrected.

I shook my head laughing, then I let out a sigh and settled back into the hot tub water. A herd of elephants strode across the sunset just within my eyesight, and I sighed at the sight of them. That urge to feel wild and free had left me, and now all I wanted to do was enjoy this next part of my life with my best friends and the man I loved more than life itself. Now that I’d said goodbye to the old me, the wild me, I could spend some time getting to know the new me. My wish had been anything but what I’d envisioned, and yet it was exactly what I had needed.

**DORIS**

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Oh, wow!” I pressed my face to the window of our taxi and gawked at the beautiful castle towering off in the distance. The lush Scottish greenery spread everywhere around it, making it look like the scene of a movie rather than a real place we were driving through. “Look! I can see the castle over there! Is that it? Is that our castle?”

“Not that one,” Grant, the driver, answered. The burly older man with a tweed cap pointed in the opposite direction. “Your castle is only a few more miles that way.”

*Your castle.*

Just hearing those words made me titter with anticipation. We were going to sleep in a castle tonight.

“Are you excited?” Sylvie asked from her spot beside me in the back seat.

I practically squealed out my answer. “Yes! Oh, yes! I can’t believe you found us a castle in Scotland to stay in! It’s just too much!”

“Good. I’m so glad you’re happy. I did a bunch of research, and this place sounds amazing. We got so lucky they had openings for us this week.”

My heart fluttered away inside my chest as I thought about stepping inside a *real* castle. Sleeping in it. Eating in it. Living like they had centuries ago. I’d fantasized about it since I was a little girl. As a child, I’d read fairytales a hundred times over, each time dreaming about what it would be like to live in a castle like the heroine or the beautiful princess. And now, thanks to my most cherished friends, I would get to do it.

Alice narrowed her eyes at Sylvie. “I can’t believe you picked one without indoor plumbing. I’m filing an official Wilder Widows grievance about this wish. All wishes should include basic indoor plumbing. That should be a rule. I mean, offering indoor plumbing is just basic manners. I vote that we find a different castle to stay in. One with updated plumbing.”

Marge scoffed. “Such a wuss. Worried about crapping in an outhouse? Don’t be. There aren’t any big predators in Scotland. Nothing is gonna jump up and bite your ass in the night.”

“It’s not the predators I’m worried about, Marge. It’s the fact that I don’t do outhouses. You know my feelings about the quality of restrooms I expect.”

“What, that bucket in the Mexican detention center wasn’t up to your standards? We can put one in your room if you’d prefer it to the outhouse,” Sylvie teased.

“We don’t talk about that.” Alice stiffened. “And no. It was not, and neither is some rickety old outhouse people have been pissing in for hundreds of years. I’m not doing it. I’m not going in that thing. I insist we pick a different place with toilets.”

My face started to fall at her lack of enthusiasm over my wish. “Even though I would have preferred running water and toilets, I kind of like the idea of living exactly like they did back in the day.”

“I protest.” Alice crossed her arms.

“Ah, you’ll be fine, you big ninny.” Marge wafted a hand at her.

Grant cast a glance back at us. “I think you ladies are mistaken. There’s running water and plumbing at McCallum Castle where you’re staying.”

“What?” Marge, Alice and I echoed.

“Are you certain?” Alice sat up straight. “They have toilets? Running water?”

Grant nodded. “Yes, I’m certain. They’ve had indoor plumbing for at least fifty years since the big renovation there. They’ve even got Wi-Fi.”

“Damn it,” Sylvie said on a chuckle. “I was hoping to keep you all panicking a little longer.”

“You *knew*?” Alice spun toward her. “You knew this whole time there was plumbing, and you just let me freak out over here?”

Sylvie winked. “It was fun. When you asked me if there was plumbing, I was only going to scare you for a moment and say they had none, but the way you reacted was too funny not to draw it out a bit. I wasn’t planning on keeping the ruse going so long, but your expression every time we discussed it made it far too funny to tell you.”

Alice gave her a swat on the arm. “Sylvie! This level of treachery I would expect from Marge, but not you! How could you let me panic like this?”

Marge chuckled beside her then slid a fist toward Sylvie. “Well, played. The student has become the teacher.”

Sylvie bumped her fist. “Thank you very much. I’ve been watching and learning. You’re onto something here. Hassling Alice really is fun.”

“There will be *payback*.” Alice lifted her chin. “*Big payback*.”

“Bring it, sweetcheeks.” Marge crossed her arms. “I’ve got Sylvie’s back. She’s got a bodyguard for life in me after making you squirm so badly for so

long.”

I let out a big breath. “I must say, I am relieved to hear it. I do want to experience life like they lived it back in the day, but every time I go on a cattle drive with Axel, I miss the luxuries of the restrooms so much. I’m glad you found one with a bathroom.”

“I’m not into using an outhouse either.” Sylvie puckered her nose. “Don’t worry, girls. This place is very authentic but with a few modern upgrades for basic comfort. In fact, I didn’t tell you yet, but it’s so authentic that they have historical outfits we get to wear.”

My heart leaped inside my chest. “What? We get to dress up like historical ladies?”

Sylvie beamed at me. “Yep. I thought you would like this part. They dress us and feed us like we’re in the seventeenth century when the castle was built.”

I squealed and shimmied in my seat. It was even more of a dream than I’d imagined. I got to dress and act like a historical lady.

“Costumes?” Alice arched an eyebrow. “We’re wearing costumes?”

Marge let out a sigh. “Don’t act all fussy about the costumes. You danced on stage in costumes every night. Be a good sport.”

“Oh, I’m not upset about me,” Alice answered. “You’re right. I love a good costume. It’s just realizing that you will also be in costume that has me smiling. A dress, Marge. They’re going to strap you into a dress. With a corset. Imagine ... undergarments like prison cells for your bits.”

Marge’s face fell, and when it did, Alice’s lifted.

“No,” Marge breathed.

Alice tapped Marge’s thigh and gave her a sinister smile. “Be a good sport, Marge.”

Before Marge could argue anything back, Grant turned the car around a corner, then slammed on the brakes. We Widows all jolted forward, our seatbelts yanking us back against the seats.

“Sorry,” Grant said as he shifted the car into park. “Sheep.”

“Sheep?” I asked, righting myself. “I love sheep! Where?”

“Ugh. Everywhere,” Alice answered on a groan.

I looked up and saw a sea of white crossing the road, growing thicker by the second, and in moments, it surrounded the car completely.

“Sheep!” I clapped and squealed as I looked at all the cute, white balls of fluff surrounding us as they parted around the car while they crossed. “This is

so neat!”

“Wow! That’s a lot of freaking sheep!” Marge pressed her face to the window.

“Does this happen often?” Sylvie asked, and Grant shrugged.

“Often enough. You learn to get comfortable, and they pass when they pass.” He pulled out a book and cracked it open. “I keep a book handy for just this reason.”

“So, we’re just stuck here waiting for sheep?” Alice swiveled her head around as she took them all in.

“Yep,” Grant answered then flipped a page of his book.

Alice slumped back against the seat. “Ugh. They need traffic lights here.”

“It’s cool,” Sylvie defended. “Very authentic Scotland. Let’s kick back, relax, and enjoy the sheep show.”

Enjoy it I did. We sat for almost fifteen minutes before the sheep and the lone herder with his two dogs made their way across the road. After it was clear, I waved goodbye to them and watched them scurry up the green hill toward the farm above.

“All clear.” Grant put his book away then shifted into drive.

“Finally,” Alice groaned.

Marge shrugged. “I liked it. Thought it was cool.”

“Well, I had to pee,” Alice said. “And now I *really* have to pee.”

“Now who’s asking, ‘Are we there yet?’” Sylvie teased, passing a glance toward me since it was normally me asking that question.

Alice rolled her eyes. “Just get me to a properly functioning restroom please.”

“Be there in five,” Grant answered as we drove away.

He was right on the nose about the time, because five minutes later, we pulled onto a long, beautifully manicured driveway and he said, “We’re here.”

We all stopped fussing and peered out the windows, jaws dropping one by one as we approached the incredible castle towering over the expansive property. Even though it was winter, no snow surrounded the beautiful stone structure so large I worried I would get lost inside it. Green grass stretched as far as the eye could see, with gardens and hills breaking up the seemingly endless acreage. White clouds scattered throughout the dark, gray sky made the perfect backdrop to the fairytale-looking castle waiting for me.



“It’s magical,” I breathed out as we pulled to a stop. “I can’t believe we’re at a real-life castle.”

“I hope you love it.” Sylvie grinned back and squeezed my hand.

As tears started in my eyes from the overwhelming excitement bubbling over inside of me, I saw a man and a woman emerge from the castle wearing historical Scottish attire. The woman wore a beautiful dress, corseted up the front, with lovely blue and green tartan accents that matched the man’s kilt.

“Wow! They looked like they stepped straight out of history!” Sylvie said. “So cool!”

“Do we get to travel back in time?” Alice asked. “I wouldn’t mind finding those damn stones and stumbling into Jamie from *Outlander* for a night or two if you know what I mean.”

She winked, and I furrowed my brow. “What’s *Outlander*?”

“You know, Doris. *Outlander*,” she said, noting my confusion. “The books and show about the woman who travels back in time and meets that sexy Scottish beast, Jamie?”

I shook my head.

“I’ve seen it.” Sylvie fanned her face. “So hot. So, so hot.”

“If it’s hot, Doris hasn’t seen it,” Marge answered. “But I haven’t either. Heard of it though. Sounds like it’s pretty sexy stuff.”

Alice’s crooked smile lifted a little. “Very sexy stuff. Hey, since this place has Wi-Fi, maybe we’ll stream it while we’re here. I’ve got my tablet. We can have TV parties at night in one of our rooms.”

“Oh! A slumber party!” I clapped my hands then my face fell. “Wait. Is it really dirty stuff or are you all pulling my leg?”

“It’s the most romantic show ever,” Sylvie said on a sigh. “And beautifully shot in Scotland. We have to watch it together while we’re here.”

“Well, I do really like romance. Okay, I suppose I’ll watch it. Just warn me when the dirty scenes come, and I’ll look away.”

“I’m gluing your eyes open,” Alice teased. “You don’t want to miss Jamie and Claire getting it on.”

“So hot,” Sylvie whispered with a swoon.

Before I could argue back that I didn’t want to watch naughty TV shows, the door to the taxi opened. Grant bowed as he stepped aside, and one by one, the Widows and I filed out.

“Welcome!” the woman said, her thick Scottish accent rolling over the word. “I’m Fiona, and this is my husband, Finley. We’re the owners of

McCallum Castle. It's our joy to welcome you to our home and invite you to step back in time with us during your stay here. We'll take your bags, and escort you to your rooms where you'll find closets of traditional clothing awaiting you. Just look through the closets in your room, choose your favorite outfit, then when you're ready, you'll come back down and join us in the Great Hall for a meet and greet with the other guests currently staying here."

"This is so exciting!" I bounced up and down. "Thank you for having us!"

"Our pleasure," Fiona answered. "Now, follow us."

After exchanging excited looks, the Widows and I followed them into the castle. Every step of the tour on the way to our rooms, I oohed and aahed over all the beautiful décor filling every stone room. Rich tapestries. Beautiful candles. Gorgeous paintings. It looked like we had tumbled back in time, and I felt like a real princess being escorted to my room.

"These four rooms are yours," Finley said as he pointed to the four doors along the corridor. "This one overlooks the gardens, though they aren't filled with all the colorful flowers you would see in summer, but it's still beautiful greenery even this time of the year. It's been a very mild winter well above freezing most days, so we even have the fountain still running. The three rooms across the hall overlook the meadows. You can each choose your room, and then once you're settled, come on down."

"And the bathrooms?" Alice asked. "There are bathrooms, right?"

"Yes," Fiona answered. "We tried to keep everything as authentic as possible, but there have been some updates for comfort. The bathroom for this floor is right down there. You'll find a shower, a bathtub, and toilets."

"Oh, thank God," Alice breathed.

"Now, get settled, and we'll see you in forty-five minutes for the welcome party. Let us know if you need anything." Finley gave us a bow, then took Fiona's arm and they left us standing in the hall.

"Since it's Doris's wish, I say she gets to pick her bedroom," Sylvie said, gesturing to the four doors surrounding us.

"Oh, my." I cupped my face, heart fluttering in my chest as I stepped toward the first door. When I opened it, I gasped at the beauty greeting my eyes, and those tears I'd been holding back started to flow.

"Are you okay, Doris?" Alice asked. "What's wrong?"

“It’s just more beautiful than I ever dreamed of. You have no idea how much I always wanted to stay in a castle, and it feels too amazing that it’s really coming true. It’s so much better than I imagined.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy.” Sylvie slipped an arm around my shoulder and squeezed. “I think this is going to be a very fun wish. Now, let’s look at all the rooms and pick your favorite.”

“Okay.” I wiped my tears then took a breath and stepped inside the room. Everything looked exactly as it would have if I’d been born in the seventeenth century and called this place home. The candles, the fabrics, the four-poster carved bed. Everything. I walked over to the window and stepped onto the small stone balcony, the tears starting up again when I looked down into the expansive garden below. Tall hedges formed a maze around it, and a beautiful fountain in the center spewed droplets of water into the air.

“It’s magical,” I sighed as I leaned on the stone balcony. I envisioned it in the summer with explosions of colorful flowers twisted into all the greenery and hedges still thriving in the winter months.

“Okay, this is pretty freaking cool,” Marge said when she joined me. “I can’t imagine how much time goes into those gardens.”

“Wow,” Sylvie echoed our thoughts.

“Okay, I need a new gardener.” Alice slid up beside us. “My gardens don’t look anything like this. I wonder if I can swipe their gardener.”

“Alice!” I playfully swatted her. “Don’t steal away the person who makes this garden possible. We need to leave them here so they can continue the work that will make so many people who visit happy. People like us, happy.”

She sighed. “Fine, fine. But I’m taking pictures. I want my gardener to recreate this in my yard.”

“You’re on a one-acre lot,” Sylvie pointed out. “I think just that one small corner of the gardens takes up five acres. This will never fit on your property.”

She shrugged. “Well then, a miniature version of it.”

Alice pulled out her phone and snapped some shots.

“Let’s see the other rooms so Doris can pick her favorite,” Sylvie said, ending our gawking at the beautiful gardens and endless green lands surrounding them.

With one quick glance around the stunning room, I planted my hands on my hips. “I don’t need to see the other rooms. This one is mine. It’s perfect.”

“You sure?” Marge asked. “You get first dibs. May be a cooler room waiting.”

“I’m sure. I’ll come with you girls to see your rooms, but this one is definitely mine.” I looked back at the bed with the beautiful floral blankets on it and imagined snuggling beneath them, feeling so small in the middle of the giant bed.

“Okay, let’s go!” Marge led us on a tour of the other three bedrooms, each stunning and historically correct. When everyone got done choosing their rooms, we each went to the closets, swooning over the historical clothing hanging inside of them.

“I love this so hard!” Sylvie grabbed a dress and pressed it against her. “What about this one?”

“It’s perfect!” I answered, then I pulled out a dress that looked to be my size. “How about this one for me?”

“I love it!” Sylvie answered back, and we spun around together holding our dresses to our bodies.

“I was picturing more lace and glamour.” Alice flipped through the wool dresses. “These aren’t at all what I envisioned.”

“Scottish ladies didn’t wear the fashions of France and most of Europe,” Sylvie answered. “Think of *Outlander*. Claire wasn’t wearing huge frilly dresses.”

“What about the red one with the plunging neckline? I want the red one,” Alice sighed.

“That was in France,” Sylvie answered. “These are traditional dresses. They are beautiful!”

“I suppose,” Alice said with a pout. “But I was picturing like big Renaissance dresses when you said we got to dress up.”

“Go check the other closets.” I pointed toward the door. “Maybe they have some fancier styles for you.”

“Good idea.” Alice hurried off.

Marge stood frowning at the closet. “I don’t do corsets and dresses.”

Sylvie patted her back. “It’s for fun, Marge. Go to your closet in your room and pick something out. We’ll all meet back out here in twenty for the meet and greet.”

With a grumble, Marge slumped her shoulders. “Fine.”

We smiled as we watched her go, then Sylvie and I squealed one last time at our dresses, and I hurried off to my room to change. After struggling to

figure out how to put on the layers of the dress and secure it with the ties twisting up my stomach, I finally managed to finish. I looked in the antique mirror and swooned at the woman staring back at me. I could have stepped right out of the fairytale books I'd read every night as a child.

A knock on my door pulled my attention. "Ready?" Sylvie called in.

"Ready! Though I could use a little help finishing my lacing," I called back, giving myself one last smile in the mirror. I gathered up my skirts and hurried to the door, swinging it open with excitement to see the other Widows. I gasped at the beauties staring back at me. "Wow! You all look incredible!"

"And look at you!" Sylvie cupped her mouth. "Gorgeous, Doris! Here, I'll finish lacing you up. We just got done doing each other.

Her fingers went to work on the lacings I'd struggled with as the other Widows waited.

"I admit, I thought the dark materials were dowdy, but once I got it on, I think I look incredible." Alice waved a hand over her gorgeous figure.

"This is so fun!" Sylvie shimmied her shoulders, and her beautiful gown swayed with the movement. She secured the last of my lacings. "There. All done, Doris."

"This *is* so fun!" I squealed as I did a little spin, then turned to Marge whose downturned mouth matched her downturned shoulders.

She frowned deeper. "I look like an idiot."

I looked at her dress, too long for her short height, and smiled. "I think you look lovely."

She frowned deeper. "I say again, I look like an idiot."

"Well, I look like I would have definitely been Queen back in the day." Alice did a little swirl with her hips. "Any King would have decapitated his Queen for the chance to put me on the throne beside him."

Sylvie pulled a face. "Now there's a horrifying image in my head."

Alice shrugged. "I'm just saying, if I wasn't born royalty, I would have found my way to the throne anyway. Heads would have rolled, and I would have reigned."

"You're too skinny to be desirable back then," Marge pointed out.

Alice scoffed. "Nonsense. I would be the belle of any ball."

Sylvie shook her head. "Actually, Marge is right. Back then, thin meant sickly. Having some meat on your bones meant you were healthy for

breeding and from a family with enough money to eat well. It was more desirable to have curves.”

Marge grabbed her hips and squeezed. “Good birthin’ hips. That’s what they wanted. Back then, Doris or I would have been royalty. You would have been cleaning our shitpots with your scrawny little sickly hands.” Marge lifted her hands and started wiggling them in Alice’s face.

Alice gasped and pushed Marge’s hand away. “Stop. That’s the worst image I’ve ever pictured.”

I giggled. “You really think I could have been royalty?”

“Most definitely,” Sylvie answered. “You would have ruled over us all.”

My whole body flushed with the thought. Me. A queen.

“Actually,” Sylvie went on. “I’m changing my time travel wish. You know how I said if time travel was invented and everyone was racing back to take out the world’s baddies, I would go back to stop the trend of hairless women and shaving? I change that. I’m going back to changing when fuller figured women were considered hot and being a stick figure was out of style. I’m changing *that*. I’d rather shave my legs than have to count every calorie to stay in shape. Could you imagine? Just eating all the food we can thinking, ‘Gotta put on a few pounds so I look healthy and plump to entice my spouse.’” Her eyes twinkled with the thought.

“Now we’re talking! I’ll travel back with you!” Marge agreed. “The bigger the better. That’s the message we’re gonna spread, and then when we get back to present day, it’s nothing but ice cream sundaes and pizza all day every day.”

They gave each other a high five.

“Maybe I’ll stumble into the stones while we’re here,” Sylvie said. “And if I disappear back to the past with Claire and Jamie, you can be certain I’m promoting plump ladies. That’s a promise.”

I smiled. “Oh, good. Then I can eat even more baked goods!”

“Exactly!” She grinned back.

“Speaking of food,” Marge said. “I’m starving. Let’s go down to the meet and greet so we can eat, and then I can get the hell out of this horrifying dress. And Doris, if you ever question that I love you, just remember, I wore a dress for you once. That’s love.”

I smiled sweetly at her. “Thank you for playing along. It means a lot to me.”

“Wearing this costume for an hour or two isn’t going to kill me. You’re worth it.” Marge winked.

“Actually,” Sylvie lifted her finger. “We stay in costume anytime we’re in the castle. It’s part of the rules to help all the guests who stay feel like they are back in historical times. All the food, drinks, and clothing at the castle are authentic. So, anytime we leave our rooms to go on the grounds, we are in historical dresses.”

I nearly popped my own eardrums with my squeal. “You mean this isn’t only for one night? We get to look like this every day?”

“Yep.” Sylvie grinned. “I thought you would like this part.”

“I love it!” I jumped forward and hugged her. “It’s even better than I imagined.”

“I can deal with looking like this for a few days.” Alice brushed a hand across her dress. “I need to send some photos to Alejandro. I’m thinking role play. I’m Claire and he’s Jamie.”

Marge lifted a hand. “Are you trying to tell me I have to wear a damn dress every time I’m here in the castle?”

“Yep.” Sylvie grinned. “Castle rules. We can change into normal clothes when we go out on Scottish outings, but the moment we get back, we change into these.”

Marge tossed her hands up. “Aw, man!”

“Be a good sport, Marge,” Alice taunted with a sinister smile.

Marge flipped her the bird.

“Okay, let’s go!” Sylvie gave them gentle shoves down the hall.

With excitement fluttering inside me, we headed off toward our first big dinner in a castle.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marge grumbled about her dress every step of the way as we made our way through the massive castle. After taking several wrong turns, we finally arrived at the Great Hall. A sharp gasp escaped my lungs when I looked down from the top of the stairs. A long table dotted with tall candles sat in the center filled with all sorts of authentic looking food. A small three-piece musical group dressed in historical attire played traditional Scottish songs, and the other dozen or so guests were all dressed up as well, making it feel like we'd stepped back in time.

"Wow!" I hurried down the stairs, holding my skirt so I wouldn't trip. "It looks exactly like it would have back then!"

"Okay, this is cooler than it looked on the website!" Sylvie hurried after me, with Alice and Marge following.

"Welcome!" Finley opened his arms to invite us toward him. "Please feel free to eat and drink as much as you'd like. We've got authentic food and drinks, and the music is perfect for dancing. Follow me, and I'll introduce you to the other guests staying this week."

I could barely contain my excitement as we followed him. After making pleasantries with some travelers also wearing historical clothing, he led us to the group Fiona was talking to.

"Oh, you made it down!" she said. "Here. Have some wine, or we also have brandy or whiskey if you'd prefer?"

We all looked at each other and giggled. "No whiskey right now, as it tends to get us in trouble, but maybe later," I answered. "A glass of wine would be lovely. Thank you, Fiona."

Sylvie, Marge, and Alice all ordered the same, and Fiona ran off to grab them, telling us to get to know each other while she was gone.

"This is Chris and Mary," Finley said as he introduced us to a young couple in their thirties. "And this is David and Sarah." He pointed to the other young couple beside them. "They are all from America as well."

"Nice to meet you! I'm Doris." I stepped forward to shake their hands. "This is Alice, Marge, and Sylvie."

The Widows greeted them as well, and soon we were chatting up the two couples who it turned out had met a couple weeks ago on a trip in Ireland. Since meeting, they'd joined their itineraries together, and that had brought



them here to the castle with us for their last week of a month-long backpacking trip.

Mary ran a hand through her red, wavy hair and gestured to Sarah, who had similar red hair. “And then Chris walked right up behind her and put his arm around her shoulder, thinking it was me! Poor Sarah was shocked that a stranger was accosting her on the train, and she smacked him in the head with her purse. It was then he realized he put his arm around the wrong woman!” Mary and Sarah burst into laughter.

“They looked really similar from the back.” Chris sucked the air through his teeth.

“It could have happened to me too.” David laughed.

Sarah joined them, chuckling. “It’s true. You don’t see a lot of redheads usually, and our hair color and length is almost identical. Once I realized he was making a mistake and not assaulting me, we had a good laugh. Mary came over and we told her what happened, then I introduced them to my husband, David, and the four of us have been traveling partners ever since!”

“Well, that’s one heck of a way to make new friends!” Marge chuckled. “But it all turned out good. She didn’t knock you out, and you didn’t end up with a black eye like me at least.”

Sarah pulled a face. “I didn’t want to ask, but what happened?”

Marge pointed at her eye and then her missing tooth. “Kangaroo. Surfboard.”

The four sets of eyes of the couples went big.

“Well, someone is gonna need to tell us this story!” Chris laughed.

Just as Marge was about to tell the story of her Australian incidents, Fiona returned with the wine. We thanked her and took our glasses, then Marge went into detail about how she’d ended up with a black eye and a missing tooth. The couples listened intently, laughing hysterically at our tales of this trip, and our past ones. By the time we finished our dinner, we had made four new friends.

“We hope you all enjoy your first evening in the castle tonight,” Fiona said as we all started back toward our rooms. “Breakfast is served at eight o’clock right back here, and you’ll be delighted to see the traditional fare we have to offer. If you need anything, Finley and I are only a phone call away night or day. Thank you for joining us!”

We all thanked her, then the Widows and I all started our walk back to bed.

“I’m so full.” Marge rubbed her belly. “I definitely ate enough to add to my full figure and be more desirable in the old days. But damn, these lacings are the pits! I want my elastic waistband pants back.”

“No one should ever wear elastic waistband pants.” Alice rolled her eyes. Marge shrugged. “I like ‘em.”

“I’m pretty uncomfortable too,” Sylvie agreed. “These dresses definitely don’t allow for post-dinner stomach stretching. I’m ready for my PJs and sleep.”

“I can’t believe we’ll be sleeping in a castle tonight.” I bubbled with excitement again, thinking about fulfilling my Wilder Widows wish. I was going to sleep in a castle in a bed fit for a queen.

“Good night, ladies!” Sarah called as she and David walked off toward a different wing with Chris and Mary.

“Good night!” we called back, giving them a wave before they disappeared around the corner together.

“What do you know. I told you I suspected they were swingers at dinner, and look at them now,” Alice whispered. “Heading to bed together.”

“Alice! Stop!” I waved a hand at her. “They aren’t swingers. Just two nice couples traveling together.”

“Mmmhmm,” she responded, her eyebrows inching up with the sound.

“They aren’t,” I pushed back. “They aren’t swingers.”

“I call ‘em like I see ‘em,” she said with a shrug. “I’m telling you ladies. Those are some serious swingers.”

“Yer bum’s oot the windae!” Marge spit out in a strange Scottish accent, and we all turned to look at her.

“Huh?” Sylvie asked.

“Scottish phrase,” Marge answered confidently. “Means you’re talking crazy, Alice.”

Alice tossed her hands in the air. “Oh great. Now she’s gonna start trying to talk Scottish and get us in trouble once again by botching it all up.”

“I learned a few phrases from Finley tonight.”

Sylvie arched an eyebrow. “Just don’t go insulting someone saying the wrong thing.”

“I won’t.”

We all looked at her, tipping our heads.

“I won’t!” She raised her hands. “I’ll behave.”

“Good,” Sylvie said. “We don’t need a repeat of Mexico.”

“My Spanish wasn’t that bad,” Marge defended, and our looks returned to her, causing her to shrink. “Fine. I’ll keep it in check.”

“Good.” Alice started up the steps to our hall. “You’re American. Speak like it.”

Marge grumbled something under her breath, then we continued to our rooms, parting with tight hugs before bidding each other goodnight.

“See you ladies in the morning,” Sylvie said.

“Night!” I called back to them, then I closed my door and paused for a moment to soak in the sights of my beautiful room. Someone had lit a candle by the bed, and another illuminated the dressing area. After changing, I blew out the candle by the dressing area and climbed into bed.

“I feel like a queen,” I whispered to myself as I pulled the luxurious linens up to my chin and smiled, then cracked open my book to read before bed. After I’d read for an hour, my eyes got heavy with sleep. With a quick puff of breath, I blew out the candle and settled into a quiet rest.

It wasn’t long after I’d started to drift off that I heard soft voices outside my window. I froze in bed, listening quietly in the dark to the sound of a man and a woman. Curious to figure out who was outside in the gardens at this hour, I reached over and grabbed the matches, lighting my candle then carrying it to the window. When I peered out and looked down the three stories to the grounds, I saw nothing but the beautiful gardens illuminated in the moonlight. Thinking I had just made the sounds up in my head, I started to turn away, but then movement caught my eye. I turned my gaze toward it but saw nothing other than the tall flowers blowing in the soft breeze.

“Hmm. Guess I’m hearing things,” I said to myself before walking back to bed.

After I got snuggled up once again, I blew out my candle and closed my eyes. As I started to drift off ... I heard it again.

Voices.

My eyes popped open, and I listened closely, but once again only silence met my ears. What in the world? My imagination started running wild with all the possible answers for the hushed voices I kept hearing outside. As I lay alone in the dark, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I burrowed tighter into my covers, feeling very vulnerable sleeping by myself.

*I miss Axel*, I thought just before I tried to drift off again. But once again, right before my mind quieted for the night ... voices.

Now fear had my heart palpating inside my chest as I imagined some hooligans outside trying to break into the castle, so instead of sleeping like a queen in a castle like I'd dreamed about, I lay awake until the wee hours of the morning.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“This is delicious!” I closed my eyes and savored the tastes of the authentic Scottish breakfast we were eating.

“They used real butter for sure.” Sylvie took another bite. “There’s nothing like real butter.”

“Actually, it’s probably lard.” Marge popped a bite in her mouth, and Alice and Sylvie pulled a face.

“Eww.” Alice sat back in her chair. “I didn’t want to know that.”

“Lard is wonderful for baking,” I answered, not slowing down as I went for my next bite. “It gives food such a rich flavor.”

Alice pushed her plate toward me. “Well, I was already struggling over this meal before I realized it’s infused with actual fat. Pass. It’s all yours.”

“Oh! I’ll take ‘em! This kilt is way more forgiving than the dress.” Marge gestured to the kilt she’d traded in her dress for. Instead of stepping out of her room in a dress like the rest of us, this morning, Marge had emerged smiling, wearing a kilt and cream laced-neck shirt like the men wore.

“You’re bending the rules with that, Marge,” I said, gesturing to her outfit.

“Nope. They said to wear traditional clothes anytime we were moseying around the castle. This here is traditional clothes. I wore the uncomfortable dress once, and I’m not doing it again. I’m happy to march around in my birthday suit before I wear that contraption again. There isn’t much more traditional than a birthday suit.”

“At least the dress covered your hairy legs.” Alice pulled a face.

Marge grabbed the bottom of her kilt and started inching it up her thigh. “You like?”

“Ugh! Cover those things back up! Yuck!” Alice smacked her hand and Marge laughed as she tugged her kilt back down.

“It’s fine, Marge,” Sylvie said. “As long as you’re in something traditional, we’ll call it good.”

“I like the kilt. This is working for me. Now, who wants Alice’s other biscuit? I can only fit one in here. The kilt is more forgiving, but it ain’t elastic.”

“I’ll take the extra!” I grinned as I scooped the biscuit off her plate and put it on mine.

“Good morning!” Sarah said as she, David, Chris, and Mary came up behind us.

“Good morning!” we answered back.

“Wasn’t that amazing?” Mary said. “We slept like babies in that bed, didn’t we, Chris?”

“Best sleep of my life,” he said with a lazy stretch. “Didn’t want to get up.”

“Same,” David agreed. “Sarah and I were thinking about skipping breakfast to stay in bed longer, but we didn’t want to miss this.”

“Oh, it’s a good thing you didn’t,” I said. “It’s delicious!”

“Yeah, that looks amazing.” Mary looked at my plate. “Okay, I’m glad we didn’t sleep in now seeing that. Let’s go get some breakfast.”

They started off toward the display of food, giving us a little wave as they left.

“I slept like the dead last night too,” Sylvie said.

“Same.” Marge ripped off a piece of biscuit and popped it in her mouth.

Alice agreed. “I’ll admit, the beds were extremely comfortable. I was worried they wouldn’t be up to my standards, but they had high quality sheets, and the firmness was just right.”

“What about you, Doris?” Sylvie asked, her eyes lighting up. “How was it? Your first night sleeping in a castle. Did you sleep like a queen?”

I wanted to lie and tell them I also had the best sleep of my life, but the truth was, I’d stayed up half the night terrified about the voices I’d heard. Knowing it was wrong to lie, I admitted the truth. “Actually, I barely slept.”

“What?” they echoed.

“Was there something wrong with your room?” Sylvie asked. “We can switch rooms if you’d like. Mine was wonderful.”

“No, no.” I waved a hand. “It wasn’t the room. The room was perfect.”

“Then what was it?” Marge asked.

I looked at them, then glanced around to make sure no other guests were close enough to hear. “I heard voices.”

Three sets of eyes bulged at me.

“In your head? You’re hearing voices?” Alice asked, shooting a look to Marge.

“No, not in my head. Outside. I heard voices outside in the gardens, and it scared me.”

Sylvie sat forward. “Did you go look? Maybe it was just some guests out for a night walk.”

I nodded. “I did. I looked. Five times! Every time I heard them, I would get up and run to the window then look at the garden where it sounded like they were coming from, but nothing! No one was there. It was eerie.”

“Ghosts!” Marge lifted a fist. “It’s a haunted castle! Staying at a haunted house was going to be one of my wishes, so this is awesome! I get my wish without wasting one. Hell yeah!”

“Stop!” I whispered, pulling her hand down. “Don’t say that! It’s not haunted ... is it? Is it haunted?” My lip quivered as fear crept up my spine.

“Don’t scare Doris,” Sylvie scolded. “The castle isn’t haunted. Even though we joke about haunting each other all the time, there’s no such thing as ghosts, you guys.”

Marge snorted. “Speak for yourself. I believe in ghosts! And I’m definitely going to become a haunting one... to Alice, of course. I can’t wait.”

Alice gave her an eye roll.

Sylvie joined in the eye rolling gesture and turned back to me. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. I’m sure it was nothing, Doris. Only the wind.”

I shook my head hard. “No. It wasn’t the wind. It was a man and a woman. I’m certain of it.”

Alice gasped. “Wait! Jamie and Claire! Maybe it’s Jamie and Claire! Oh, I want to see them. Do you think having sex with a ghost is cheating? I mean, if I see Jamie’s ghost, it’s not cheating if I can seduce him, right?”

We all looked at her quizzically.

“What? It’s a valid question. Like the celebrity hall pass list people make. Freebies. It’s not cheating if it’s a ghost, right? A little supernatural fling wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“You’re messed up in the melon,” Marge said with a shake of her head. “Real messed up. In fact, yer bum’s oot the windae again!”

“Whatever,” Alice countered. “It was just a question in case it’s Jamie’s ghost doing the haunting.”

Sylvie tipped her head. “Well, would you be pissed if Alejandro had a tryst with Claire’s ghost?”

Alice’s jaw tightened as her eyes narrowed. “I’d call the ghostbusters on her so fast she’d get sucked into that thingy majingy before she could ever lay one ethereal finger on *my* man.”

“The double standard is real with you, Alice.” Sylvie crossed her arms. “Even though I don’t believe in them, ghost cheating is still cheating. If you wouldn’t want Alejandro doing it, then you probably shouldn’t either.”

Alice grumbled. “Ugh. Fine. No ghost affairs with whatever is haunting Doris.”

My breath hitched at her words ... *whatever is haunting Doris*.

“No one is being haunted,” Sylvie said. “I’m sure there is a logical explanation, and it’s not ghosts. Don’t worry, Doris. You’re perfectly safe here.”

I let her comforting words calm my racing mind. “Thank you, Sylvie. I was pretty scared all alone in that bed last night. I think you’re right. My mind must have been playing tricks on me.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I’m sure it was nothing.”

“Right. Nothing,” I agreed, but deep down, I was certain I had heard them.

“So, what is on the agenda for today?” Sylvie asked, changing the subject.

“I heard there is a little town only a twenty-minute drive from here,” Marge said. “I’d love to go see it. Visit a pub, stroll around, and see Scotland.”

“That sounds lovely,” Sylvie agreed.

Alice smiled. “A pub is always fine with me.”

“Doris? It’s your wish, so what do you think? Should we go see a Scottish town today?”

“That sounds perfect.” I grinned, excited to explore Scotland.

We all stood up, then Sylvie said, “Great. Then let’s all go change into regular clothes, and I’ll ask Finley about getting us an Uber. Meet back here in thirty?”

“Regular clothes! Yes!” Marge punched a fist in the air and leaped up with excitement, her kilt lifting with the quick movement.

Our eyes went wide when the kilt lifted just high enough we saw she wore no underwear beneath it.

“Marge! You’re commando!” Alice screeched, her hand flying across her eyes as she gasped in horror.

Marge gestured at her kilt. “You wanted me in traditional attire. It’s tradition you don’t wear anything under a kilt. Everyone knows that Scottish



men are walking around with those babies swinging around like church bells on a Sunday morning.”

I whimpered. “Oh no! Now I’m never going to be able to hear the beautiful church bells again without thinking about ... you know! How am I ever going to sit in my pew without imagining those things swinging around over my head?”

“Don’t ruin church for Doris!” Sylvie scolded. “It’s where she goes to pray for the rest of us so we don’t all end up in hell.”

“Just telling you the truth.” Marge shrugged.

Alice waved her finger toward Marge, though she missed and pointed it at me since she still had her hand over her eyes. “You may not be wearing underwear, but it looks like you’re wearing an entire garden under there! For God’s sake, Marge! A razor! Use a freaking razor, and for the love ... put on some damn underwear!”

“Can’t do it. Gotta keep it authentic. No underroos for this gal.”

“Oh, Marge.” Sylvie puckered her face. “I think we can make an exception for underwear. We didn’t need to see that. Yowza.”

Still shocked, I could only nod and simply answer, “I agree.”

Alice stuck out her hands and started reaching out into the air, her eyes wide open. “Help! I’m blind! I’m blind!”

Marge gave her a shove. “Quit yer griping. I’m doing what you asked. Traditional clothes. I’m in them. You’re just gonna have to deal with it.”

Alice stopped her faux display of blindness and spun to face Marge, planting her hands on her hips. “If that kilt so much as lifts one inch higher than your hairy knees, I’m going to go find one of those big old metal chastity belts and strap you in that thing so we never, *ever* have to see what’s happening under that kilt *ever* again.”

Marge crooked a grin. “All natural, baby. Just as God made me.”

Alice stared back. “God also made the people who invented razors, Marge. And underwear. Use them.”

I looked at Alice and nodded. “I agree with the others, Marge. I think you should wear underwear while we’re here. But if you don’t, then please make sure your kilt stays down. That was ... shocking.”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. I’ll be more careful. Didn’t realize I was with a bunch of prudes.”

“We’re not prudes,” Alice answered. “We just have eyes we’d like to keep instead of having them burned out of our heads trying to erase that

imagine from our minds.”

Sylvie chuckled and slung an arm around Marge’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go get in some regular clothes, *with* underwear, and go see Scotland.

“Deal,” Marge answered.

We gave a wave to the other couples and the few other guests we’d met who were still eating breakfast, then left to go change.

A half hour later, I met the Widows in the hallway, feeling a bit sad to see everyone back in modern clothes.

“It’s pretty cold out today.” Sylvie closed her room door. “You may want to grab a scarf.”

“Good idea.” I spun around and hurried into my room, coming back out with a scarf to combat the chill in the wintery air.

“Uber meeting us out front?” Alice asked as we started through the castle. Sylvie’s eyes lit up when she looked over her shoulder. “Better.”

“Better?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” she responded, her steps quickening with her excitement.

We all shared a look then followed her out of the castle to the driveway out front. Finley gave us a wave from where he stood beside an old, tiny red car.

“She’s gassed up and ready for you!” He smiled while waving us over.

“Oh! It’s so cute!” I hurried toward it. “Are we driving this?”

“Finley said borrowing the cars is part of our stay. These are vintage Scottish cars! Cool, huh?” Sylvie grinned widely.

“Its ... it’s a clown car.” Alice stood unmoving. “It’s literally a clown car. I’m waiting for them to start pouring out.”

“I think it’s so cool!” Sylvie ignored her lack of enthusiasm. “Feels really authentic for the Scottish experience, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s neat!” I stopped beside it, noting that I was taller than the small, oddly shaped vehicle.

“Is it fast?” Marge asked Finley as she stepped around it, eyeing its lines.

He clucked the side of his cheek. “Not really. But it will get you where you need to go. It’s been in the family since the sixties. Old reliable.”

“You got the old part right,” Alice mumbled out the corner of her mouth.

“Quit yer griping and get in,” Marge said as she approached the driver’s side. “I’m driving.”

“Can I drive?” I asked, and the simple question caused the three other Widows to whip their heads to look at me, eyes wide.

“Uh, maybe that’s not the best idea,” Sylvie said. “With your driving history, I think it’s best we let someone else drive. How about me?”

“But it’s my wish.” I stuck out my lower lip. “And I really want to drive the car. It’s so cute. I’ll go slow.”

They looked between each other, worried eyes coming back to meet mine.

“Uh, I think I should drive,” Marge said as she opened the driver’s door. “I’m the best driver.”

Stomping my foot, I crossed my arms. “It’s my wish! I want to drive the funny car! I’m a good driver.”

“Do you happen to have helmets in there anywhere?” Alice asked Finley while she jutted a thumb toward the castle.

“Yeah, like those big metal knights’ helmets?” Marge asked. “Or shields? We could use those to brace for impact.”

He chuckled. “I do, actually, but it’s a short drive with no traffic along the way. I’m sure your friend will be fine driving.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Right? You do know how to drive?”

“Of course I know how to drive! I’m a great driver. Can I drive? Please?” I asked the Widows.

Sylvie answered first. “I guess. Yes. Of course. You can drive.”

“It’s been nice knowing you,” Marge whispered to Alice.

“We’ll be the ones haunting the castle tonight,” Alice whispered back.

I gave them a stern glare then hopped into the driver’s seat, my smile stretching wide as I settled in. “Get in, girls!”

After a few moments, they all climbed inside with Marge joining me in the front.

“Thank you, Finley! We’ll see you in a few hours!” I called as I waved out the window.

He waved goodbye then walked back into the castle.

“You know how to drive stick shift?” Marge gestured to the stick beside me.

“Uh ... maybe? It’s been a while.”

“Cripes.” Marge breathed, then gave me a quick rundown.

After a few minutes of listening, I felt ready to go. “Here we go, ladies!” I shouted as I shifted from neutral to first. I took my foot off the clutch, and we surged forward then stalled out. “Oops.”

“Cripes! Feather the clutch. Feather, Doris! Feather!”

I sucked the air through my teeth as I fired up the engine again. “Okay. Feather the clutch. Got it. Okay ... we’re off!” I grinned as I tried again.

With a surge we shot forward then stalled to a stop.

“I think I have whiplash,” Alice moaned from the back. “Is there a chiropractor at the end of this drive? I’m going to need one at this rate.”

“You can do this, Doris. Take your time,” Sylvie encouraged me.

Now the jitters took hold of my stomach, and I worried I had been wrong in thinking I could drive the old car. “Maybe I should let Marge drive.”

“Thank God,” Marge answered and started to open her door, but Sylvie reached forward and grabbed her shoulder.

“No. Doris wants to drive. Let’s give her another chance. Come on, Doris. You can do this.”

I took a deep breath then went over Marge’s instructions in my head. After firing up the engine, I put my feet on the pedals and started shifting the weight from one to the other like she’d said. I stepped harder on the gas this time than the last to be sure I didn’t stall, and instead of lurching forward and stalling out, we took off with a squeal of the tires.

“I’m doing it! I’m doing it!” I cried out as we flew out of the circular driveway and onto the long one taking us back to the road.

“You’re doing it!” Sylvie cheered me on.

“Whiplash. I literally have whiplash,” Alice breathed out. “Now that we’re going, don’t crash the damn thing.”

“Cripes. I’m not normally one to say ‘slow down’ but slow down Doris! We aren’t in the Indy 500!”

“Sorry. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t stall out again,” I said as I lightened up on the gas.

Proud that I’d gotten going, and scared to stop and start again, when we reached the road and I could see clearly that no traffic was coming from either direction, I slowed down and kept going as I made the left-hand turn. Grinning widely when we hit the open road, I steered the car along the winding road twisting into the Scottish countryside.

“Wrong side of the road!” Marge shouted.

“Oh, shoot!” I swerved to the opposite lane. With a sheepish smile, I looked over and said, “Oops.”

“We’re gonna die,” she mumbled.

Ignoring her naysaying comments, I put my focus back on the road and enjoyed the scenery around us as I drove along. Though it was winter in

Scotland, it was still green with no snow, and much milder than I had been accustomed to growing up in Minnesota. Winter to me meant temperatures in the negatives with storms covering everything in deep snow regularly. We rarely saw a blade of grass until April. This didn't feel like winter, but more like spring to me.

"About ten miles farther down this road, and then we'll reach the town," Sylvie said after we'd driven a short while.

I glanced in my mirror to see her checking her phone. "So, I go straight?"

"Yes. Go straight."

Marge looked over at me. "And by straight, she means follow the road, Doris. If the road turns, you turn. Don't just drive straight off into that field ahead."

"I know what she means." I shot Marge a look. "I'm not stupid."

"Just being clear," Marge retorted. "Like this turn. Follow it."

I looked away from her toward the sharp turn veering right. As I took it, I started back into the opposite lane that felt normal for me to drive in.

"Wrong lane!" the girls shouted in unison.

"Oops!" I jerked the wheel, and we swerved back into the correct lane. When I made it around the corner, my eyes went big when a wall of white sheep appeared in front of me.

"Sheep!" Marge shouted. "Look out!"

I screamed as I reached for the shifter to slow down, but I panicked as we barreled straight at them.

"Brake, Doris! Brake!" Sylvie shouted behind me.

My heart jumped into my throat as I glanced down at the shifter. "I forgot how to downshift!"

"Brake!" All three Widows screamed in unison.

Instead of downshifting like Marge had taught me, I slammed on the brakes. We all surged forward with a grunt as the tires squealed and the engine stalled, stopping right before we bowled into the flock of terrified looking sheep. They scurried across faster while we sat panting in the car.

"What in the holy hell, Doris?" Marge scolded. "You almost killed those poor helpless sheep and turned them into mutton!"

"I thought I had to downshift like you told me, and I panicked!"

"Out." Marge opened her door.

"What?" I asked, turning to look at her.

“Out!” she shouted as she jumped out, her voice trailing off as she ran around the car and opened my door. “Out.”

I looked at the sweet sheep I’d almost turned into roadkill, and I didn’t argue. Trying to remember what to do, I shifted the car into neutral, unbuckled my seat belt and jumped out. When my feet hit the ground, I looked at Marge and said, “Sorry. I really just wanted to drive.”

She placed a hand on my shoulder. “I know, Doris. But we want to live, so we’re done letting you drive. Ever.”

With an exaggerated frown, I nodded. “Okay. Probably a good idea.”

“Hey! We’re rolling!” Sylvie screamed.

I spun around to see the little red car starting backward down the slight incline we were on.

“Oh, shit!” Marge shouted, pushing me out of the way as she launched toward the car. “Didn’t you put on the parking brake? Hold on, girls! I’m coming! I’ve got you!”

She missed the door by inches, and the car picked up momentum as it rolled away.

“Ahhhh! Help! Help!” Alice and Sylvie screamed from the back seat.

Marge ran forward after them with surprising speed and dove into the open door. Her little Velcro shoes kicked in the air before she disappeared inside. The car bumped off the paved road and went backward down a small ditch into a green field to the chorus of screaming Widows before Marge got it to stop.

I stood on the road with a sea of sheep behind me and whispered, “Oops.”

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“You’re buying,” Marge said as we finally stepped into the little pub. “The punishment for almost killing us is you pay for drinks to celebrate that we didn’t actually die.”

“Of course, of course. I really am sorry. I’m so sorry,” I apologized for the one hundredth time since the nice sheep herder had come along and helped us push the car out of the ditch and get back on the road. I’d said sorry so many times that I thought I may lose my voice.

“You can stop apologizing, Doris. No one was hurt,” Sylvie said sweetly. “We’re all okay.”

“We almost died,” Alice said as we made our way to the bar. “I literally saw my life flashing before my eyes. My beautiful, wonderous life. The one you almost snatched from me because you didn’t put the damn parking brake on.”

“You’re just lucky I’m a lot spryer than I look.” Marge pulled up a stool. “Not many people could have jumped into a moving car like that. Cripes. I’m like a superhero. Someone get me a cape.”

“You’re our hero always.” Sylvie gave Marge a squeeze on the shoulder and a kiss on the head before sitting down next to her.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeated, slinking into the last stool.

“No more apologizing,” Sylvie said.

“Maybe once more since you almost *killed us*.” Alice gave me a side-eye. My neck sucked down into my shoulders. “Sorry.”

“And what’s up with the damn sheep?” Alice asked. “Twice? We got stuck waiting for them *twice*? It’s like they wait for us to come by and then someone shoves them out in the road. They can’t always be crossing the road, can they? Is there some sheep attracting beacon we’re wearing? It’s ridiculous is what it is.”

“Why did the sheep cross the road?” Marge asked, smiling.

We didn’t answer.

“To piss off Alice!” She tossed her head back in a hearty laugh, and we all groaned at the stupid joke.

“Hello, ladies! What can I get you?” the red-headed bartender asked as he tossed napkins in front of us.

Marge stopped her laughing and propped an elbow on the bar. “What do the locals drink?”

“Scotch,” he answered quickly.

“Four Scotches it is!” Marge ordered for us.

Even though I didn’t think I’d want a Scotch, I didn’t dare argue. I just wanted to slink into a hole and stay there after what I’d done.

“Coming right up!” With a toothy grin, he spun around to grab the glasses. He slid them in front of us then poured the golden liquor into them. “There ya go.”

“Start us a tab?” Sylvie said. “And can we get some lunch menus?”

“Coming right up,” he answered. “I’m Ewan. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Ewan,” I answered.

A moment later the menus slid in front of us, and as he started away, he spun back and faced Marge. “Okay, I’ve got to ask. You get in a brawl ‘er somethin’?”

As she’d done many times since the accidents, she just smiled and pointed to her eye then her mouth. “Kangaroo. Surfboard.”

Ewan blinked back at her. “Now that I wasn’t expecting. I don’t shock easily. I’m a bartender in Scotland. Well done. That drink’s on me.”

“Hey!” She grabbed her Scotch and lifted it, giving him that smile showcasing her missing tooth. “Totally worth the pain I went through for a free drink!”

He gave her a high-five then told us he’d be back to take our order.

“I love Scotland!” Marge said after taking a sip of her Scotch. “Great wish, Doris.”

“I’m so glad you’re liking it. I am too,” I answered. “It really was fun sleeping in a castle.”

Alice lifted an eyebrow. “Well, except for the haunting part, right?”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up when I remembered how I’d felt hearing those voices.

“Stop scaring her!” Sylvie swatted her arm. “The castle isn’t haunted.”

“What castle?” Ewan asked as he came by.

“McCallum Castle,” Alice responded.

Ewan’s eyes widened. “Oh, that place is haunted all right.”

“What?” we all echoed, and my heart stalled out in my chest.

“Oh yes.” He leaned forward on the bar. “Sad story too.”

“What ... what is the story?” I asked, my voice breaking.

“Well, back in the seventeen hundreds, the family that lived there had a daughter. A real beauty named Agnes. She was the most beautiful woman in all the land, and all the wealthy lords were fighting for the right to her hand. Her father was using her as leverage to gain even more standing than they already had, and poor Agnes had no say in the life that awaited her.”

We all listened silently while he went on.

“But Agnes had fallen for the stable boy, Duncan. They were young and in love, and Agnes wanted nothing to do with all the suitors lining up for her. All she wanted was her beloved. Every night, she would climb out her window using the trellises to meet Duncan in the gardens, and the two young lovers would sneak off to the stables to be together.”

“The ... the gardens? Did you say they met in the gardens?” I gulped.



“Yes. They had the most beautiful gardens at Castle McCallum. Actually, I think they are still there.”

“They are.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat.

“So, what happened?” Sylvie asked.

“Well, her father finally chose the man to give her hand to. Some old lord who had the most money and position, but he was rumored to be brutal to his wives. Two had died in mysterious ways. Agnes was horrified and decided to run away with Duncan. That night, they were to meet in the garden, and then they’d steal two horses and leave together forever.”

“And did they? Did they make it?” Marge asked, leaning forward.

Ewan slowly shook his head. “No. That night, she climbed out her third-story window and down the trellis she’d always used. But this time, it broke. Agnes fell to her death, landing beside her beloved who’d rushed forward to catch her too late. He was so distraught that he carried her into the gardens where they’d always met and kissed, then he pulled out a knife and took his own life right there beside her. Legend says you can still see them walking through the garden on nights when the moon is full.”

My heart had stopped beating at some point in his story, and it felt like cold fingers grasped the back of my neck. “In ... the gardens? You said in the gardens?”

“Yeah. The gardens,” he repeated.

“Whoa.” Marge turned to look at me. “You said it was a man and woman’s voice in the garden, right? I bet it was them! Agnes and Duncan! Wow! You really did hear ghosts.”

My face went cold as I stared at them, blinking.

“Whoa. Talk about ghosts. You look like you’ve seen one,” Ewan said as he stared at me.

“She heard one,” Marge whispered. “She didn’t see one, but she heard one.”

“I ... it was the wind,” I said quietly. “It must have been the wind. The wind. Yes, the wind.”

My mind refused to process that the voices I’d heard were of two young lovers who’d died hundreds of years ago.

“You picked a haunted castle!” Marge grinned. “Nice, Doris! Two wishes in one!”

Sylvie slid a hand along my back. “It’s not haunted. It’s not, Doris. Ghosts don’t exist.”

“Oh, it’s haunted,” Ewan said with a puff of air. “I know plenty of people who have seen spooky shit happen there.”

“Are any of them the ghosts of Jamie Fraser by chance?” Alice leaned forward.

Ewan chuckled. “If it was, I think every single woman on the planet would be fighting over a stay in that castle.”

“Damn it,” she breathed.

“Okay, enough ghost talk,” Sylvie said. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. Let’s order.”

Even though I tried to rationalize the crazy notion of ghosts out of my mind, I couldn’t erase the clear voices I’d heard in the night. A man and a woman. I was certain of it.

“You got any haggis back there?” Marge asked. “Always wanted to try that.”

“You’re in Scotland.” He smiled. “Of course, we have haggis.”

“Fire it up!” She slammed her menu down.

“Gross.” Alice groaned.

“You don’t even know what it is,” Marge countered.

“The name is gross. Haggis. That’s all I need to know. I’ll take a salad.”

“Sissy,” Marge taunted, but Alice ignored her.

After we all ordered, the Widows went on talking about our trip and our plans, but I couldn’t do anything but stare out the window toward the direction of our castle ...

Our *haunted* castle.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Night, ladies.” Marge gave us a wave goodbye before disappearing into her room.

“Night,” Alice responded, then disappeared herself.

“You sure you’re okay?” Sylvie asked when she stopped at my room.

I nodded, though I wanted to shake my head instead.

“Okay. Well, if you need anything, I’m right across the hall.”

It took everything I had not to beg her to come and sleep with me, but I didn’t want them to think I was a ninny. At least that was what Marge kept calling me after I’d said maybe we should pack up and leave the castle early. I’d slept in a castle. That was the wish. Now all I wanted to do was grab my bags and run for the hills and away from the ghosts I worried floated just outside. However, the other three were having such a wonderful time, I couldn’t bring myself to ruin it because I was scared of the ghosts.

Ghosts I tried to convince myself weren’t real.

*It was the wind. It was the wind. It was the wind.*

I chanted those words over and over as I put on my plaid pajamas and climbed into bed. When I looked out the window and saw the moon almost full, I pulled the covers up tight around my chin.

*It was the wind.*

Leaving my candle burning, I tried to coax myself to sleep, hoping dreams of my strong, protective husband Axel would flood my mind and fight off the scary dreams about ghosts I imagined would come. But sleep eluded me again, and every creak and crack of the castle, and every soft brush of wind against the window made me jump out of my skin.

“You can do this, Doris,” I said to myself as I snuggled in deeper. “God will protect you. He would never let some silly ghosts harm you. Just trust in Him and go to sleep. You’re safe. Protected.”

With those comforting words soothing my scared soul, I closed my eyes.

A soft woman’s laugh from outside the window caused me to snap my eyes open. I froze in place, listening. A man’s voice, just above a whisper, then her giggle returned.

“Ghosts!” I whispered my scream, tumbling out of bed and bolting out the door.

“Sylvie! Sylvie! They’re back! Wake up!” I pounded on her door.

A moment later, she swung it open. “Doris? Are you okay?”

Tears slipped out of my eyes as I shook my head. “No! They’re back! The voices are back!”

“What? Right now?” Sylvie wrapped her robe tight around her waist.

“Yes! Right now! A woman laughing and a man’s voice. I heard them! Ghosts, Sylvie! There are ghosts!”

Marge’s door swung open. “Cripes! What’s going on out here?”

“Doris heard the voices again,” Sylvie answered as she slipped an arm over my shoulder.

Marge’s eyes bulged. “Right now? Agnes and Duncan are out there right now? I want to see!”

She nearly bowled me over as she bolted into my room. Alice opened her door, the green mask on her face causing me to gasp.

“Oh! You scared me,” I said, clutching my chest.

“It’s a moisturizing mask. You don’t think I look this good using lard on my face, do you?”

I shook my head.

“What’s going on? Why is everyone in the hall?”

“The voices are back,” Sylvie answered for me again.

Alice straightened. “Is it Jamie? Did you get a look? Is he out there?”

“No, I didn’t look! I’m terrified! I want to go home!” Tears streamed freely down my face as Sylvie pulled me in for a hug.

“It’s too late to leave tonight, but what if we all stay with you tonight? Would that be okay? Then you won’t be alone.”

“You ... you would do that? You’ll stay with me?” I swiped the back of my hand across my eyes.

“Of course, we will,” Sylvie said, then looked to Alice. “Won’t we, Alice?”

She huffed, then nodded. “Yes, yes. Fine. We’ll all stay in your room tonight and look for ghosts. But if it’s Jamie, I’m coming back to my room so I can be available and alone. Shit. I’d better wipe this mask off before he arrives.”

“I thought ghost affairs were cheating.” Sylvie lifted an eyebrow.

“I won’t *do* anything, but maybe ghost Jamie can take off his shirt and sit on the edge of my bed or something.”

“Mmmhmm,” Sylvie answered with a smirk.

“Just hold on. Let me get my robe and wash my face.” Alice started back into her room then stopped. “Oh! I’ll get my tablet too. I’ve been streaming *Outlander* at night. We can have a slumber party and watch it together.”

“Oh! Yes!” Sylvie smiled widely. “Do that!”

Alice hurried off into her room, and I followed Sylvie back into mine.

“Shh!” Marge waved a hand at us where she had parked herself squatted down next to my window, her face pressed against it. “I’m trying to get a glimpse. Don’t scare them away!”

“There are no such things as ghosts,” Sylvie said.

“That’s what the character in the movie says right before she gets offed by a ghost.” Marge turned back and gave Sylvie a playful glare. “The one who doesn’t believe in ghosts is always the first to go.”

My body went cold. “I ... I think I believe in ghosts.”

Sylvie glared back at Marge. “Marge! Stop it! There are no ghosts. Now, we’re all coming in here to have a slumber party and watch *Outlander*. You can stay over there as long as you’d like, but Doris is scared, and we need to make her feel safe.”

Marge snorted. “I’m only kidding, Doris. Agnes and Duncan aren’t gonna hurt you. They’re just focused on each other. Couple of young ghosts doing naughty ghost things in the garden. Nothing to worry about, Doris. You’re fine.”

Though silly, her words actually did make me feel better. Why would the ghosts of two young lovers want to do me harm? She was right. If there really were ghosts out there, they weren’t any kind of a threat to me.

“You know, that helps.” I followed Sylvie back to my bed. We crawled under the covers together. “I don’t know why that helps, but it does. Thank you, Marge.”

“You’re fine, Doris. If I can leap into a moving car to save Sylvie and Alice, I can certainly protect you from a harmless ghost.”

“I’m here with Jamie!” Alice sing-songed when she burst into my room, her silk robe trailing behind her as she held up her tablet triumphantly. “Thank God they have Wi-Fi here.”

“Come on!” Sylvie patted the bed, making room for Alice to climb in. “You coming, Marge?”

She shook her head. “Nah. You guys watch your lady porn. I’ll be staking out the gardens. I’ll let you know if there’s a sighting.”

“I don’t want to watch porn!” I protested.

“It’s not porn.” Sylvie laughed. “It’s the most romantic show in the world. Yes, there is some sexy time on here, but it’s romance, Doris. Nothing to be ashamed of. And if it makes you feel better, it’s married sexy time.”

I tipped my head. “Not premarital sin sex? That does make me feel a little better, but still. Warn me when the naughty scenes are coming.”

“You’re not going to want to turn away,” Alice said with a waggle of her eyebrows.

The three of us smooshed together under the covers, and Alice caught me up on the main plot points. After she started streaming the historical show on her tablet, the beautiful scenes from days long past pulled me straight into them. It was even more fun watching them in the castle in Scotland while I, too, was in a castle in Scotland. It didn’t take long at all for me to get sucked straight into the show that already had Alice and Sylvie riveted.

“It’s the wedding night, Doris. So, you can imagine what is going to happen if you want to turn away,” Sylvie warned me.

“Yes, yes. Of course,” I answered. I turned my head, yet darned if my eyes wouldn’t listen to my mind, and from the corner of my eye I peeked over to watch the passionate scene. My heart raced at the images unfolding on the screen, and I felt dirty that I was watching them. But at the same time, I was riveted by the passionate love between Jamie and Claire, and I could now see why everyone went on and on about Jamie’s ghost being welcome in their bed chamber.

“You’re peeking! You’re peeking!” Alice pointed at me.

“What? No!” I flicked my gaze to the old tapestry on the wall. “I wasn’t looking.”

“I saw you looking, you old horn dog,” she teased.

My cheeks flushed with heat as I denied the accusations, but finally, I heaved a sigh. “Fine. I peeked. But it’s okay because they’re married so it’s not a sin.”

“It’s so romantic,” Sylvie sighed, her gaze still fixated on the naughty scene flickering across the tablet. “Isn’t it so romantic? Ah. Jamie and Claire.”

“It is a rather romantic story,” I said, peeking at the scene once again then flushing through my whole body at the images.

“Not as romantic as Agnes and Duncan,” Marge said from her perch at the window. “And you noisy broads have scared them away. I got nothing out here.”

“I’m sorry we scared off your non-existent ghosts, Marge.” Sylvie stuck out her lip in a fake pout.

“They’re real. You’ll see.” Marge pressed her hands to her thighs, groaning as she pushed herself up. “Damn. I think I pulled a hammy jumping in that car today.”

“Get over here and watch this with us.” Alice scooted over, gesturing for Marge to join.

“Nah. The ghosts are gone, and I’m not into historical Scottish lady porn, so I’ll head off to my room for the night. Come get me if you pervs hear any voices out there.”

None of us pulled our eyes away from the screen as Jamie and Claire sank into the depth of their passion. I didn’t even care that I was openly staring. I couldn’t look away.

“Yes, yes, whatever.” Alice wafted a hand at her. “Just leave us to our steamy scene.”

“Dirty pervs,” Marge whispered under her breath then started for the door.

But right before she opened it, voices in the garden floated up into my room. The four of us froze, gazes darting around to each other as we then all spun toward the window.

“Get down!” Marge whispered as she dropped prone to the floor. “Turn that porn off!”

Alice flipped the screen down and pushed a button to make it stop. My heart rattled against my ribcage as Marge belly-crawled across the stone floor.

“I’m gonna catch ‘em this time,” she whispered as she slid past. “Nobody. Move!”

We squished together tighter when we heard the voices once again.

“Holy shit,” Sylvie breathed. “You weren’t joking. Voices.”

“See! I told you!”

“Shut it!” Marge barked back quietly.

The three of us pulled together into a hug while Marge quietly rose to her knees, her piercing gaze searching out the window into the gardens below.

After several long moments, I couldn’t stand the suspense anymore. “Well? Is it ghosts? Are they there?”

Marge didn’t move and remained frozen at her perch.

“Marge. What do you see?” Alice asked, stroking a hand through her hair to straighten it. “Is it Jamie? Please tell me it’s Jamie.”

Marge didn’t respond again.

Sylvie sat up straighter. “Okay, I know there are no ghosts since they don’t exist, but you’re freaking me out. What do you see, Marge?”

Finally, Marge let out a deep sigh. “Damn it. We missed them again. Nothing out there. I should have grabbed my binoculars. I can’t see a damn thing.”

I let out a sigh of relief that there wasn’t a ghost floating in my window.

“See. Nothing. No ghosts. I told you! It’s something else!” Sylvie broke apart our hug.

“If you aren’t worried about ghosts, then why did you look so scared?” Marge spun to face her, an eyebrow inching up with the question.

Sylvie shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not ghosts I’m worried about, but there were voices. Creeps me out someone is milling around down there in secret.”

“I’ve had stalkers before,” Alice said. “It’s not fun wondering if some freak is sneaking around outside your window.”

“You’ve been stalked?” I spun to face her. “Really?”

Alice’s soft chuckle preceded her answer. “Me? Of course I’ve been stalked. Comes with the territory of being beautiful and famous. Just par for the course.”

“This ain’t no stalker out there,” Marge said as she came past. “That’s ghosts. I’m certain of it. They disappear too fast for mere mortals. Move over, ladies. I’m bunking in here with you tonight.”

“Oh, is big bad Marge scared of a little fake ghost?” Sylvie challenged with a smile.

“Nah. Since this room over the garden seems to be the hot bed, I want to be right here to catch Agnes and Duncan when they sneak into the room tonight and slip into bed with you all. Their cold, dead hands pulling back your blankets while you sleep unaware.”

Alice and I quit breathing, and Sylvie stiffened.

“Then BAM! They stab you with the dagger Duncan offed himself with.”

We all jumped at her forceful word.

“Now who’s scared of the ghosts.” Marge grinned a sinister smile straight at Sylvie.

“Marge!” Sylvie grabbed a pillow and smacked her with it. “Get out!”



Marge burst into laughter and tumbled into the bed with us. “Nah. If you’re all staying to help Doris feel safe, then I’m staying with you. Move over you dirty birdies. Let’s see what all the fuss is about with this lady porn you’re watching.”

The four of us squished under the covers together, and Alice put *Outlander* back on. Even though I was riveted by the show, I couldn’t help glancing toward the window every now and again, hoping there weren’t two floating figures staring back at me. The thought sent an icy shiver down my spine, but when I’d look back at the Widows sandwiching me between them, I could breathe a sigh of relief. My friends were here to keep me safe.

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After we awoke as a pile of drooling, snoring women, the Widows left my room and went to theirs to dress for breakfast. Feeling much safer in the light of day, I got dressed alone in my room before meeting them out in the hallway.

“Lang time nae see, ya wee lasses!” Marge said when she stepped out into the hall wearing her kilt and Scottish cap.

“Seriously?” Alice propped a hand on the hip of her dress. “You watch *Outlander* once and you’re going to be talking in a Scottish accent the rest of our stay?”

“A dinnae ken.” Marge grinned back.

“Don’t poke Alice before she has her coffee.” Sylvie slung an arm around Marge’s shoulder and guided her down the hall.

We followed along, and when we reached the Great Hall, the guests were already dining.

“Guid mornin’!” Marge called to everyone.

“Guid mornin’!” they all called back.

“Great. It’s contagious,” Alice grumbled. “Someone stab my eardrums please.”

“Coffee for Alice. Stat.” Sylvie hurried over to the coffee and poured a cup, rushing back and putting it in Alice’s hands. “Here you, go. Don’t bite anyone.”

“I’m tired. We stayed up too late watching *Outlander*.” Alice sat in the chair at the empty table.

“Yeah, and hunting for ghosts,” Marge added, sitting down beside her. “I got up so many times to check last night, but nada.”

“Yes, we know you did.” Alice speared her with a hard stare. “Because every time you got up, you woke us up too.”

“Coffee. Drink.” Sylvie pushed the bottom of Alice’s cup until it touched her lips.

“I just can’t thank you all enough for staying with me last night. I would have been so scared all by myself.”

“Of course, Doris. The voices were definitely unsettling,” Sylvie said.

“You mean the ghosts were unsettling,” Marge corrected.

With a sigh, Sylvie picked up her coffee and blew across it. “No ghosts, Marge. Rational explanation.”

“And that is?” Marge leaned forward, waiting.

“One of the guests. That has to be it.”

“Fine. I’ll go interrogate them.” Marge gestured to the room of people. “Everyone staying here is in this room. I’ll find out if any of them were out in the gardens last night.”

“No way!” She shook her head. “If you start telling everyone we’re hearing ghosts, they’ll lock us up in the looney bin, and I’ll never get home so see my grandbaby! I’ll do it. Subtly.”

“Fine. But when you find out it wasn’t the guests and it was a ghost, I’ll be here waiting.” Marge crossed her arms and sat back.

Sylvie got up and started walking around to the guests asking if anyone had gone for a walk in the garden last night. When she got a whole bunch of head shakes and no’s, she came back to the table defeated.

“Well, I talked to all the guests. Everyone who is staying here is accounted for, including Fiona and Finley.”

“And?” I asked, hoping it would be one of them so I could quit being scared. When her face turned into a defeated pout, I shuddered knowing her answer.

“Okay, so no one walked in the garden last night,” she admitted.

“Aha!” Marge slapped the table so loud everyone around us jumped. “So, you’re admitting it’s a ghost.”

I whimpered.

Sylvie chuckled. “Ah, no. I’m not admitting to anything of the sort. I’m only admitting that my initial theory that it was a guest isn’t the answer. There’s still another rational explanation, I’m sure.”

“Well, there’s only one way to solve this,” Marge said.

“And what’s that?” Alice asked. “Because your arguing is giving me a headache.”

Marge leaned forward onto her elbows, her troublesome gaze passing across us. “We stake out the gardens tonight. Catch the ghosts in the act.”

“What?” I sat back. “You want to go out into the gardens? *With* the ghosts? No! No way!”

Alice scoffed. “I’m with Doris. No thank you. I’ll be upstairs watching *Outlander* while you’re all slaughtered by spirits.”

Marge kept her gaze fixated on Sylvie. “You in? Or are you yellow too?”

Sylvie quirked a smile. “Oh, I’m in. I can’t wait to prove you wrong. There is a very rational explanation for the voices in the garden.”

“Oh, that could be a good book name, couldn’t it?” Alice said. “*The Voices in the Garden*. I bet that’s what they’ll call the movie they make about the murders that are going to happen tonight. Don’t worry, having stayed in my room, I’ll still be alive to tell the gruesome tale. I’ll do you all justice.”

“No way I’m going!” I shook my head so hard I cricked my neck.

Marge’s eyes twinkled. “Oh, come on, ladies. Don’t you want to have a little adventure with us tonight? It will be fun! And then we’ll know for sure who is right. Me or Sylvie. We have to do this together.”

“Nope. I’m out.” Alice took a long sip of her coffee.

“Me too. No way,” I answered.

Marge sat back, crossing her arms across her chest. “Well, then. If we aren’t going ghost hunting tonight, then I suppose it will have to be my next wish. Yep. Stay in a truly haunted house, the scariest one in the world, and go ghost hunting at night. I can see the wish written down now.”

“Marge! No!” I pleaded. “I can’t do that!”

“You’re joking.” Alice set her coffee down. “Tell me you’re joking.”

Marge shook her head slowly. “Nope. You ladies get one chance to get out of staying at a haunted house and going ghost hunting. We do it. Tonight. One night at a haunted castle we’re already at. It will be over in an hour, and then I swear I won’t ever make staying at a haunted house my wish.”

Nerves and terror crackled inside of me. “I don’t want to, Marge. I’m too scared!”

“I’ll protect you, Doris. I always do, don’t I?”

I bit my lip. “Well, yes. You do, I suppose.”

“And I’ll protect you again. We can do this, ladies. Tonight, we stake out the garden and find out what’s out there.”

“Well, I suppose it’s better than having to go to some horrifying stinky old house.” Alice rolled her eyes. “I don’t like it, but if it means avoiding that fate, then fine. I’m in.”

“Yes!” Marge pumped a fist in the air.

“I don’t want to be alone in my room!” I blubbered, tears starting. “Please don’t leave me alone. And I don’t want to go see the ghosts.”

Sylvie reached over and placed her hand over mine. “Doris, there are no ghosts. We are only going to go for a nice moonlit walk in the garden, prove Marge wrong, and then never *ever* have to go stay in some stupid ‘haunted’ house again. We’ll all be there together, and you’ll be safe.”

I twisted my hands into my dress, then after a long moment, I said, “You promise it will be safe?”

Alice nodded. “If we see some ghosts, all we have to do is show them Marge’s messed up face and it will be them running away from us. In fact, her face will probably haunt them.”

“Can it, Alice.” Marge turned toward her and gave her a snarl, showing off the missing tooth and causing Alice to spin away.

“Put it away!”

Marge laughed then let out a sigh. “Okay. So, it’s agreed? We meet tonight and stake out the garden?”

“I’m in,” Sylvie said confidently.

“Fine. In,” Alice agreed.

I couldn’t believe I uttered the words with how scared I was at the thought, but I finally said. “I’ll do it.”

And then, I almost passed out.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marge stood in my doorway waiting for the other Widows and me to finish dressing in layers for our ghost hunt. “Man, I would kill for some thermal night vision or an EMF reader. Roxie and I were watching a show last year, and they could totally see the cold spots where the ghosts were. It was so cool.”

“I don’t want to go. Please don’t make me go,” I begged as Sylvie wrapped a scarf tight around my head.

“It’s chilly out, so we don’t want to get cold,” she said ignoring me.

“At least your dresses are long,” Marge noted, pointing at her bare legs. “This kilt doesn’t cover a damn thing. But I’m not complaining. It’s better than ghost hunting in a damn dress. I still think this is dumb. We should just wear normal clothes. It’s late. We aren’t running into anyone but ghosts.”

“The rule is when we’re out of the rooms on castle grounds, we’re in costume,” Sylvie argued back.

“I’m with Marge on this one. It’s late. No one will even be around. We should change,” Alice said.

“It won’t take long to prove Marge wrong,” Sylvie replied. “And we agreed to dress historically when we’re moving about the castle. I don’t want to bump into Finley and Fiona in a track suit.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Marge grumbled. “Guess on the off chance we run into Finley and Fiona, we don’t want to get reamed out.”

“But it’s cold.” I pouted. “Maybe this once we could wear our regular clothes around the castle. Then we can dress warmer. Or ... we could skip it and stay here!”

“We abide by the rules,” Sylvie countered, ignoring my last plea. “We wear the historical clothes. Like I said, it won’t take long to prove Marge wrong. Our dresses are wool and should be plenty warm.”

“Fine,” Marge answered, “but those dresses better really be warm because chattering teeth will give away our location. No chattering, ladies. We need to stay quiet and in cover.”

“You’ll be the one chattering away with those bare-ass legs,” Alice said, then she tipped her head. “Although, with all that hair covering them, I suppose you’ll be quite warm.”

Marge glared at her, but Alice just grinned back.

“I suppose there is also another upside to Marge wearing that kilt.” Alice jutted her chin at Marge. “If we get spotted by the ghosts, we can all duck behind your hairy legs for cover. Those babies could hide an entire village behind them.”

Marge grinned. “Nature’s camouflage.”

“I really don’t want to do this.” I stomped my foot. “Please don’t make me.”

Sylvie finished knotting the wool scarf below my chin. “No one is making you. You can stay up here.”

That thought scared me more than the ghost hunt awaiting us. “I’m not staying here alone! It’s worse to be alone at night here!”

Marge shrugged. “Well, then you’re stuck coming to the garden with us, sweet cheeks. I’m gonna see Agnes and Duncan tonight. I’m proving Sylvie wrong, and no one is stopping me.”

“And I can’t wait to find out what is *really* making that noise. I’m so excited to see the look on your face when I’m right.” Sylvie stuck her tongue out at Marge.

Marge returned the gesture.

“I’m hell bent on avoiding staying in some rotten old, haunted house if we don’t do this and Marge makes it her next wish. If that means standing in a garden for an hour tonight, then whatever. I’m bringing my vodka. I’ll be fine.”

“No booze!” Marge scolded. “They’ll smell it.”

Alice’s eyes went big, and she snorted. “No booze? Well then, count me out. If you think I’m gonna go freeze my tuchus off in some haunted old castle garden while completely sober, you’ve got another think coming.”

“You’re never completely sober,” Marge fired back.

Alice opened her mouth to argue then closed it.

“Just take some big swigs before we go,” Sylvie said, solving the problem. “You’ll catch a nice buzz and be good. In fact, I want some too. I need a buzz before we head out. It’s gonna be chilly out there!”

Alice pulled a flask from her dress pocket and passed it to Sylvie. After Sylvie took a big swig, they passed it to me.

“Here. This will take the edge off,” Alice said.

I didn’t want to drink, but I thought I was going to jump straight out of my skin without something, so I closed my eyes, pinched my nose tight, and chugged.

“Atta girl.” Alice took the flask back as I choked and spat.

“Okay. We’re ready.” Sylvie stood tall, her chin raised as she squared off with Marge. “Fifty bucks says it’s not a ghost.”

“Make it a hundred,” Marge countered.

With a grin, they extended their hands and had an exaggerated shake.

“Alright, soldiers. Quiet is the name of the game, so follow me, stay low, and don’t attract any attention. This is serious business. Once we get outside, it’s silence. Nothing but total and complete silence. Ghosts have excellent hearing, and I don’t want to spook them off before we see them. Do you understand? We need to be invisible. Ninjas.”

Alice cocked a hip. “I’m gonna ninja kick you in the head if you don’t stop talking and get this show on the road so we can get back in here and watch *Outlander*.”

Marge gave her a glare, then spun on her heel. “Roll out!”

We all followed after Marge, and my blood whooshed through my veins, surging the fear through every inch of my body. All I wanted to do was race out the front door, get in the car, and speed away home, but after how badly I’d driven yesterday, I worried I’d accidentally kill a sheep on my big escape.

With all the other guests fast asleep, we walked through the empty castle until we got to the doors leading out to the gardens. We stopped in the large foyer, and Marge spun around then lifted a finger to her lips.

“Ninjas. Understand? We’re ninja Widows the minute we step through these doors. We go. We sit. If the timetable holds, we’ll see something in less than an hour.”

“Yes, yes. Ninjas. We get it. Let’s do this,” Alice said, hurrying her along.

“May the best man win,” Sylvie whispered right before Marge opened the door.

Marge matched her cocky stare. “It’s gonna feel good taking your money. I want it in singles so I can throw it up in the air and let it rain down around me.”

Sylvie chuckled, then we all went quiet as we tiptoed outside. The full moon illuminated the gardens, and I was surprised I could see our shadows as we slinked into the rows of hedges. They created a small almost maze-like structure forming paths winding all through the gardens, though they were short enough to see over them. I was grateful for that, because if I couldn’t see anything but hedges stretching up over my head, I’d have passed out from

the claustrophobia. Each step closer we got to the fountain in the center, the vodka started to take hold, and a warm buzz tingled through my body, helping to ease my crippling fear.

Marge lifted her hand, and we all slid to a stop. After a random assortment of strange hand gestures none of us understood, she pointed to the bushes behind her.

“What? We don’t know military hand signals,” Sylvie whispered.

“Shhh!” Marge mouthed back, then repeated the gestures at us.

“What are you trying to say? We have no idea.” Alice started tossing strange gestures back at Marge.

Marge tossed her hands in the air and whispered, “Geez. Amateurs! I said, let’s all get low and crawl through the opening there, then hide behind those bushes, two on each side. They look like great coverage with a good visual of the gardens and the fountain.”

“With those strange hand signals? That’s what you said?” Alice asked.

Marge rolled her eyes. “Just get in the damn bushes.”

She turned and got low, crawling under some foliage and disappearing inside. After sharing a look, the other Widows and I followed suit, grumbling about our creaky joints as we got down on our hands and knees and went after her.

“It’s hard crawling in this dress,” Sylvie grumbled, but Marge shushed her with a stern look over her shoulder.

When we got through the bushes to the other side, Marge lifted her finger to her lips then whispered quietly, “Doris, with me here. Alice and Sylvie. Right on my other side behind that bush. Then we stay low and quiet. T minus forty-two minutes until ghost time. We want to be well established and silent before they arrive.”

“Roger that,” Sylvie said with a wink and a salute.

“Are you drunk?” Marge asked.

She lifted her fingers and gestured for “a little.”

“Me too. I think I’m a little drunk too,” I admitted.

Marge gave us a scolding stare. “Behave, you booze hounds. Don’t blow this for us. No more talking. No more moving. Nothing. Ninja Widows.”

“Ninja Widows. Got it,” I whispered, giving her a salute like Sylvie had.

We all went quiet and still, and I was surprised by how calm I felt while we sat in wait. Most certainly it was the vodka doing its job, but even still, I’d been paralyzed with fear before, and now I felt ... well, sleepy.



After we'd waited for what had to be twenty or thirty minutes, my blinking got slower, and my breathing deeper. As I lay on my stomach in the bushes, I started to drift off into a much-needed sleep. I hadn't slept much since arriving at the castle, and each blink took me closer and closer to going out completely. Just before I slipped off into a happy slumber, I felt a tapping on my shoulder.

I went to speak and ask what was going on, but Marge slid a hand across my mouth, using her other hand to press a finger to her lips. The way her eyes pleaded with mine, I knew it meant it was time.

My heart jumped into my throat as the fear I'd thought was gone came crashing back like a tidal wave.

The ghosts.

The ghosts were here.

I slowly turned my head to look through the foliage, and my eyes widened when I saw movement toward the fountain. I couldn't make out any definitive shapes as the full moon had dipped behind a cloud, leaving us in the pitch black, but I knew they were there. My fear rose to unbearable levels as we sat in the darkness, and I nearly jumped up and took off screaming. Instead, I flattened closer to the ground, frozen in place by fear of the ghosts ... and of the tongue-lashing I'd get from Marge if I spooked them off.

*Please keep me safe, Lord. Please, please, please protect me and my friends from the ghosts.*

As I remained frozen and praying for my safety and the safety of my friends, Marge slipped her hand off my mouth, giving me one last gesture to remain silent. I glanced at Sylvie and Alice, and when they looked away from the fountain toward me, I saw the whites of their wide eyes that shared my shock.

"You made it," a woman's voice said, and I recognized it instantly as the one I'd heard outside my window.

"Of course, my love. I hope you weren't waiting long," a man's voice said.

"I'd wait for you forever," she responded.

*Agnes and Duncan.*

*Marge was right!*

A cloud moved off the full moon and illuminated the gardens ... and I saw the silhouette of two historical figures embracing beside the fountain. Her in a long dress. Him in a kilt. It was exactly as the bartender had described. The

two lovers reunited once again under the full moon. I knew instantly that the rumors were true, and I was staring at the ghosts of Agnes and Duncan. As I took in the full sight of them, the fear I'd been caging broke free with a vengeance. It took hold of my body, and my need to flee the scene overwhelmed all my other senses.

I needed to get out of there.

Now.

I started to crawl backward, but Marge spun and impaled me with a warning stare, shaking her head to stop me. But I couldn't. My body wouldn't stop. I was too scared. All I wanted to do was fly out of the garden as fast as I could, jump in the little red car and speed away.

"Don't move," Marge mouthed, but I kept crawling backward.

Alice and Sylvie turned toward me, their eyes also begging me to stay still.

"I can't. I can't. I can't," I whispered as the panic gripped me with its unyielding fingers.

"Doris!" Marge mouthed. "Don't move."

"I can't," I whispered again, my rear now hitting the bushes behind me. "I can't. I can't. I can't."

When the bushes I'd bumped into started to shake, I froze and whipped my gaze back to the ghosts beside the fountain. My breath trapped in my throat when both of them spun to face me. As the clouds drifted off the moon and lit up the darkness for only a brief moment, I could just make out the faint features of their faces. Most importantly, I could make out their eyes ... the ones staring straight at me. When their penetrating gazes locked onto me like laser beams, the panic inside of me exploded straight out of my mouth.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" I screamed as I leaped up.

Sylvie and Alice jumped up and started screaming as well, and our screams mingled into one long, ear-shattering symphony of terror. Visions of angry ghosts sailing across the gardens and murdering me invaded my mind as I continued my blood-curdling scream. When I spun to run away, something gripped my arm, and I yowled and flailed while I fought it off. My elbow collided with something hard, and the grip on my arm released.

"Run!" I screamed to my Widows as my little feet took flight. "Run away! Run away!"

"Run away!" Alice screamed with me, and her lengthy strides sent her speeding past me with Sylvie hot on her tail.

Sylvie grabbed my arm and pulled me with her, and I glanced back to see Marge hoofing it just behind us.

“We’ve been made! Run, soldiers! Run!” she barked, and I pushed my legs faster trying to follow Alice out of the maze of bushes and shrubs.

“Where the hell is the exit?” she shrieked as she took another turn.

We all spun after her, and I glanced over my shoulder hoping I wouldn’t see two angry apparitions breathing down my neck.

“Keep moving!” Marge barked. “Don’t stop!”

As we finally closed in on the castle, Alice hit an intersection cutting us off from safety. She didn’t slow down and pick a direction. Instead, she launched straight over the final hedge standing between us and freedom. Grabbing the bottom of her dress, she hoisted it high, and with one big leap, her long legs sent her sailing over it like an Olympic hurdler. Thinking the straight line back to the castle was the fastest way to escape the ghosts on our tail, Sylvie and I veered after her. With one last backward glance to see Marge puffing behind us and not ghosts, we grabbed our skirts and jumped over it together. But instead of landing gracefully on the other side, it seemed without Alice’s lithe frame and athletics, the hedge was too big for us to clear. With a scream followed by a grunt, we tumbled into the rough branches.

“Ahhhhhh!” I screamed louder as I fought the foliage gripping me tight. My skirt fell over my head, causing me to go blind as I battled the fabric and the shrubbery.

“Ahhhhhh!” Sylvie screamed beside me while she tried to right herself.

“Get up and RUN!” Marge screamed, and just as I pulled my dress from my face, I looked up to see her leaping over us like a gazelle, her kilt giving her full freedom to move without restraint.. and her lack of underwear giving me a show as terrifying as the ghosts on our tail.

Shocked for a moment she’d cleared the bushes so easily, and shocked by the sight of her naked behind practically glowing in the moonlight, I snapped back to the threats likely floating toward us in an angry ghostly rage. I leaped to my feet with Sylvie. Marge, who’d waited, grabbed our hands and pulled us with her.

“We’re almost there! Get to the castle! Get to the castle!”

“Hurry up!” Alice called over her shoulder.

Huffing and puffing and too scared to look behind me again being this close to freedom, I pushed my body to the breaking point. Finally, with our

screams still echoing around us, we made it to the castle doors. Before we could get inside, the doors to the castle burst open, and the lights from inside flooded the darkness. Fiona, Finley, and a few other guests stood staring at us in the doorway, their confused faces twisting as we tore out of the gardens toward them.

“Get to the castle!” Marge commanded again, and we rushed toward the people standing in the doors.

So glad to see humans to help us, we spilled into the lighted hall like it was a magical refuge no ghost could cross.

“What’s happened?” Fiona said as she caught me. “Are you alright? What’s going on? We heard screaming coming from outside.”

“Ghosts!” I screamed, still unable to calm my body down. “Ghosts! Ghosts!”

“What?” Finley asked, closing his plaid robe around his body tighter. “What are you talking about?”

“In the garden! The ghosts of Agnes and Duncan! We saw them!” Marge panted. “We freaking saw them!”

“Holy shit.” Sylvie put her hands on her knees while she caught her breath. “It was them. It was ghosts. You were right, Marge. Holy shit. You were right.”

“Ha!” Marge pointed a finger at her and started to speak, but she couldn’t catch her breath, so she lifted a finger to take a moment.

“We’re leaving.” Alice, who was shockingly not out of breath, gave us all a firm look. “Tonight. Right now. Get your things. We’re going.”

“I second that,” I agreed. “I want to go home. I’m scared!”

“Everyone just take a deep breath and tell us what’s going on,” Finley said, sliding an arm around my shoulder. More confused guests came to join us in the foyer, everyone looking sleepy in their pajamas. No doubt, our screams had woken everyone within a mile’s range.

“We heard voices in the gardens the last two nights,” Marge started. “A man and a woman. Then we went to the pub and the bartender told us the story of Agnes and Duncan, the young couple who died here in the gardens and how this place is haunted. So, we decided to try to catch the ghosts in the act. We snuck out tonight, hid in the bushes and waited. And then, sure as can be, they showed.”

“Ghosts?” Finley said with a furrowed brow. “You saw ghosts?”

Sylvie nodded. "I didn't believe in ghosts, but they were there. We saw them. We all saw them. Kissing by the fountain."

"We came. We saw. We're leaving," Alice said. "Now."

"Just hold on. Are you sure it wasn't guests?" Fiona asked. "I've heard the story of Agnes and Duncan, but I can tell you I've been living here for twenty years, and I've never seen a thing. I bet it was guests."

"It's not," I said. "We asked at breakfast yesterday, and everyone said they hadn't been out to the gardens at night. We asked everyone. It wasn't them."

The other guests all started nodding along, agreeing they hadn't been out there. But suddenly Chris came around the corner into the group, a worried look on his face. "What's going on? I woke up to screaming and I can't find Mary anywhere. Where is she? Is everything okay?"

We started looking around for Mary and shook our heads when we didn't see her.

Sarah came down the stairs, the same worried look on her face, tears welling in her eyes. "I can't find David anywhere. I heard screaming and woke up and he's gone. What's going on?"

"I can't find Mary either," Chris said as he hurried to her side.

They both looked to us, and as I opened my mouth to tell them about the ghosts, Alice suddenly lit up.

"Wait a minute." She pressed a finger to her chin. "Your husband is missing. And your wife is missing."

They both nodded as they looked around through the small crowd.

She spun toward us, her head tipping sideways. "So, one husband and one wife are both missing?"

"Yes," they answered again.

A spark of recognition lit up in her eyes, as she said quietly, "Not swingers."

I scrunched my brow, wondering what she meant, but before she could say anything else, Mary came running into the corridor.

"Chris!" Mary hurried toward him, the skirt of her historical gown flowing behind her. She wasn't in pajamas like everyone else.

"Mary! Thank God, I was so worried!" He caught her in his arms. "I woke up to screaming and couldn't find you! Where did you go? Why are you in your dress? You were in your pajamas sleeping beside me when I saw you last."

She didn't answer, only hugging him tighter as he furrowed his brow, the confusion on his face apparent.

David strolled in from the other side, wearing his traditional kilt. As soon as Alice saw him, her face lit up like the sun. "Not swingers at all. And *not* a ghost."

I wanted to ask her what her cryptic words meant, but the reunion between Sarah and David held everyone's attention.

"David! I've been looking everywhere for you! Where were you?" Sarah ran into his arms. "I was so scared to find you missing!"

"Nope. Not ghosts. Not swingers. An affair," Alice said as she stared at the group then looked back to us with a knowing smile.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

Sylvie caught on first and clasped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God! An affair! Not ghosts!"

"What?" Marge furrowed her brow. "Ghosts. We saw ghosts. Kissing. By the fountain. You all saw them too! That hundred bucks is mine!"

Sylvie shook her head, a huge grin splitting her face. "It wasn't ghosts. It was Mary and David sneaking off to have an affair. They were just dressed in their historical garb, and we thought they were ghosts. It wasn't ghosts. It was an affair. It's why they denied being in the gardens the last two nights. They couldn't admit it in front of their spouses without busting themselves out."

"What? Yer bum's oot the windae! We saw them plain as day! Ghosts! Or ..." Marge paused, furrowing her brow, then her eyes widened. "No," she breathed.

"Yes." Sylvie grinned back. "Not ghosts. An affair. Mary and David having an affair is the answer to the riddle. I win! I win the bet! Ha! Take that, Marge!" Sylvie lifted a triumphant fist.

Her excitement in beating Marge made her forget volume control, and when she realized she'd announced the affair to everyone around us, Sylvie spun around to face the two shocked couples, and cringed. "Oh dear. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to announce that."

"You ... you're having an affair?" Chris spun to Mary.

She grabbed his shirt, pleading eyes meeting his. "No. I'm not. I swear. We were only talking by the fountain. That's all."

"You are kidding me," Sarah turned to David, her eyes burning with rage. "You snuck out to meet *her* by the fountain? Is that why you're all dressed up

like this? Because you wanted to meet Sarah. Of course. Of course!” She tossed her arms in the air.

David shook his head, but his attempt at lying was so horrible no one needed a lie detector to catch on. “Uh, no. We just bumped into each other is all.”

“Bumped into each other’s tongues is more like it,” Alice whispered under her breath.

“Bullshit!” Sarah shouted. “I knew it! I knew something was going on ever since the train! You liar! I hope you’re happy with her, because we’re over!”

When she took off running, David raced off after her.

Chris looked to Mary and shook his head. “I knew it too. I didn’t want to believe it, but I knew it. We’re done, Mary. It’s over.”

“Chris! Wait!” she cried as she hurried after him. “It’s just a fling! It’s nothing! I love you!”

“Oops,” Sylvie whispered under her breath as we watched the two devastated couples hurrying away.

Alice wafted a hand. “Don’t feel bad. They did it to themselves. It’s better the poor spouses know so they can leave those treacherous cheaters behind. They made their bed, and now they can lay in it. Probably together.”

Sylvie nodded. “I suppose. I do feel bad though. We ruined two marriages tonight.”

Alice shook her head. “No, we didn’t. *They* ruined their marriages when they decided to cheat. Weak people cheat, remember? They were weak and not worthy of their real partners. Not our fault we accidentally caught them. Probably did them all a favor. Now, quit feeling bad over there.”

“Thanks, Alice,” Sylvie said with a soft smile.

Marge twisted her lips. “So, are we sure it wasn’t ghosts we saw? Maybe we saw both. Maybe Mary and David were in a different part of the garden, and we actually saw ghosts. Maybe it was a coincidence!”

We all looked at Marge and shook our heads.

“Sorry, Marge. Not ghosts. An affair,” Alice answered. “I knew I smelled naughty sex on those couples. I misread it as swingers. Seems only half of them knew about the swinging.” She chuckled.

“Well, damn.” Marge blew out a breath. “I thought for sure I had won.”

“Sorry, Marge.” Sylvie pressed a hand to her shoulder. “I’ll take that money in singles so I can rain it all over your head.”

Marge chuckled and slumped her shoulders in defeat.

“Well, that was exciting,” Fiona said. “Why doesn’t everyone head back to bed, and we’ll talk more about this in the morning.”

The small, shocked gathering of guests all nodded and started back to their rooms, and finally it was just me and the three Widows standing alone in the foyer.

“Well, that was enough excitement for me for the evening,” Sylvie said. “I think I pulled a muscle trying to jump that hedge.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m gonna feel that in the morning,” I agreed.

“At least Doris didn’t elbow you guys in the eye.” Marge pointed to her good eye, and I gasped when I saw the start of swelling above it.

“Oh no! Did I do that?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I tried to stop you from running and you apparently took the Ninja Widow suggestion seriously. You whacked me right in the orb with that pointy elbow of yours. Man, you’ve got some strong bones still. You must eat a lot of cheese.”

“I’m so sorry! I thought a ghost was grabbing me and I just panicked! Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“May have a new shiner in the morning, but I’ll be fine.”

Alice sighed. “Great. You’re going to look even more spectacular than you already do with a missing tooth and that strange yellow and purple swirling around your left eye.”

Marge shrugged. “Now my right eye will match at least.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said again. “I really thought you were a ghost.”

Sylvie started chuckling. “Now that I know we weren’t running from ghosts, can you imagine how ridiculous we looked to Mary and David?” Sylvie asked.

As the reverse images popped into my head of what they must have seen, I started giggling. When the Widows started laughing with me, our laughter built until we were standing in the foyer of castle with tears rolling down our faces as our whole bodies shook.

“They must have been more scared than we were!” Marge howled. “Can you imagine? You’re alone in the garden sharing a quiet kiss and suddenly four old ladies pop up from the bushes screaming their fool heads off?”

We laughed harder, and I clutched my stomach as the pains worsened. “Stop! My stomach! I can’t breathe!”



“I can’t breathe either!” Alice spit out between hysterics. “I laced this damn dress too tight.”

Finally, when we’d all run out of breath from laughing, we let out a cumulative sigh.

“Oh, man.” Marge wiped her tears. “Well, I gotta say, that was one hell of a way to end the night. What do you say we hit the hay? Now that we know there aren’t any ghosts around, Doris, you should feel safe sleeping alone. Right?”

“Right,” I answered, but then my face fell.

Alice took notice and tipped her head. “Did you want me to come in your room and we can stream *Outlander* again?”

My eyes lit up as I nodded. “Oh, yes! Please! I have to know what happens!”

“I’m not missing *Outlander*,” Sylvie said. “Slumber party in Doris’s room!”

I squealed as I clapped my hands. “Oh, yay!”

Marge grumbled. “Well, I’m not one for lady porn, but I’m not missing out on another slumber party. Come on, you dirty pervs, let’s go.”

We all linked arms and started back to our rooms together, and I smiled when I thought back on the events of the evening. I smiled wider when I felt the safety of my three friends around me.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Oh, man. Everything hurts. Why did we have to try to leap those bushes?” Marge grumbled as we strolled through the breakfast hall holding our plates of food.

“Me too. I haven’t run that fast since high school,” Sylvie said. “I’m not eighteen anymore. Ouch.”

“I hate running,” Alice said as she pulled up a chair. “But I’m fit enough from dancing I feel fine.”

“Yeah, but you totally ditched us and took off, leaping over bushes like a spooked gazelle.” Sylvie gave her a playful glare. “Totally abandoned the group.”

Alice lifted her chin. “I was going for help. One of us had to survive to go back and save the others. That’s all.”

“Mmmhmm,” Marge grunted. “You sticking to that story?”

When Marge narrowed her swollen and already bruising eye at Alice, I shrunk a little in my seat. I’d apologized a hundred times since I’d seen the damage when we’d all woken up in my bed, but now that she had two black eyes, and one because of me, I felt awful.

“Yes.” Alice folded her napkin onto the lap of her dress. “That’s all that was going through my head. Getting help to come save you.”

We all looked at her then laughed, and I shook my head. “I’m just glad we made it out of there alive. I was so scared! I was sure every time I turned around a ghost was going to be right there reaching for me like ...rarr!” I clawed my hand forward. “I had nightmares about it last night!”

“That sure was something else.” Sylvie laughed. “When I booked this castle, I pictured a relaxing weekend living like queens, not living in some live action of *Ghostbusters*. Sorry, Doris. I hope your wish was still okay.”

“Oh, yes! I mean, I was scared through a lot of it, but I loved every second.”

“We were scared through more of the wish,” Marge said. “We had to survive your driving too.”

My cheeks flushed red as I dropped my gaze to the plate. “Sorry.”

“Good morning, ladies!” Fiona smiled as she reached our table.

“Good morning!” we answered.

“Well, that was exciting last night, wasn’t it?” She sucked the air through her teeth.

“We’re so sorry to have caused such commotion. It wasn’t our intent at all,” Sylvie said.

Fiona waved a hand at her. “Nonsense. It was actually quite thrilling to have some excitement here. In fact, the guests are still talking about it, and Finley and I are thinking about hosting some haunted weekends for people. Could be a lot of fun to ghost hunt around the castle.”

“Oh, man! I’m in! All in!” Marge sat up.

Fiona smiled. “Good. We’ll be happy to have you back.”

Sylvie looked around the dining hall. “Have you seen the two couples? I really didn’t mean to announce the affair to everyone like that. I feel terrible.”

“They all left early this morning. I saw Sarah when she was packing up to go. She’s horrified, but grateful that she knows now, so you don’t need to feel bad.”

“Oh, thank God,” Sylvie breathed. “I felt awful.”

“She said you did her a favor. She was thinking she was crazy in suspecting the affair, but a wife always knows, and now she has the proof. She’s divorcing him, of course, and she talked to Chris, and he’s leaving Mary too.” Fiona leaned in. “In fact, I have an inkling that Chris and Sarah are going to end up together.”

“Really?” Sylvie lit up. “Okay, that makes me feel better. I really felt bad.”

“And you know what’s funny?” Fiona went on. “You ladies went in the garden to look for the ghosts of Agnes and Duncan, and the reason you saw Mary and David there was they, too, had heard the story of Agnes and Duncan, so they went there to reenact and role play as the couple. Each night they would meet in the garden and pretend to be the young lovers, then go to the stables to ...” she drifted off. “Well, you know.”

Alice waggled her eyebrows. “Oh, we know.”

“So, anyway,” Fiona said. “That’s what happened. Sarah said David admitted the affair has been going on for a couple weeks, but that’s why they were in the garden in their historical clothes. Pretending to be Agnes and Duncan.”

“That’s shocking,” I said, clutching my chest. “I still can’t believe it.”

Fiona shrugged. “Well, thanks to you ladies, at least now Sarah and Chris know, and they can move on. And also, you’ve shown Finley and I that

clearly people want more lore when they come to visit us, so we're going to explore those ideas of haunted weekends and what not. So, no worries about waking the whole castle last night. Turns out, it was a great thing."

I smiled. "God works in mysterious ways."

"That He does." She grinned back. "Enjoy your breakfast, and tonight is your last night. If you need anything, please let me know."

With a wave, she walked away, leaving me and the Widows alone at the breakfast table.

"Wow. Who'd have thunk all that could have happened because Doris heard voices in the garden?" Marge said.

"It is amazing how this wish turned out," Sylvie said.

"It's been a great wish!" I smiled wide. "The perfect wish, in fact."

"What do you say after breakfast, we go draw the last wish out of the basket?" Sylvie said, her eyes sparkling. "My wish."

"Hell, yeah!" Marge cheered. "Round four! Bring it on!"

"I'm so excited about this wish. It's gonna be great." Sylvie shoved a bite of food in her mouth.

"Is Marge going to make it through without more injuries and looking *more* ridiculous?" Alice juttled a thumb at Marge.

Marge shrugged. "I dunno. I think the matching black eyes look kinda cool. Like I'm wearing a mask or something. Oh! Zorro! I look like Zorro now!"

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, cringing.

"Quit apologizing," Marge said. "I told you. I think it looks cool."

"There shouldn't be anything dangerous about my wish," Sylvie said. "But there shouldn't have been anything dangerous about staying in a castle, either, so I make no promises."

"Hurry up and eat so we can see what's next!" Marge said, then shoved half her Scotch egg in her mouth.

Excitement to find out what was next made me eat faster than I should have, and soon the Widows and I were hurrying off to Sylvie's room to get the basket. After grabbing it, we decided to open it by the fountain that had been the scene of last night's excitement, so we hurried through the castle and the gardens until we arrived.

"It looks much less scary in the light of day," I said as we settled onto the stone benches beside the fountain. "It looked terrifying in the moonlight."

“Yeah. I was pretty freaked out too,” Sylvie said. “I mean, even though I didn’t believe we would find ghosts, it was still creepy.”

Alice leaned back on her hands, closing her eyes to enjoy a few moments of sun. “Well, it’s beautiful today. The perfect spot to pick a wish. Go ahead, Doris. Your turn.”

Sylvie practically bubbled with excitement when I reached into the basket and pulled out her wish. Anxious to find out what was next, I pulled open the little folded note.

*See the Northern Lights.*

“Oh! Yes!” I squealed as I flipped the wish around. “This sounds wonderful!”

“What is it?” Marge asked.

She and Alice squished together and read the wish.

“I’ve never seen those!” Alice said. “Great idea!”

“Me neither!” Marge said. “Cool idea!”

Sylvie grinned back excitedly. “I did some research, and there is one place in the world we are pretty much guaranteed to see them this time of the year.”

“Where, dear? Where are we going?”

Sylvie stood up and planted her hands on her hips. “Dress warm ladies, because we’re heading to Finland!”

“Finland?” we echoed.

“Finland,” she said back. “Now, after I arranged Doris’s wish and knew I was the last one, I went ahead and booked the place we’re staying and made the travel arrangements, so tomorrow morning, we head out, ladies!”

We all squealed with excitement, and I jumped up to hug Sylvie. “I can’t wait!”

“Me too.” She hugged me back. “I have been wanting to see them my whole life.”

“Well, we’ve got one day left in Scotland. What are we going to do?” Alice asked as she rose to stand.

“Let’s go take a drive around the countryside and explore,” Marge said.

“Great idea,” Sylvie agreed. “We can try to find the standing stones and go back in time.”

She waggled her eyebrows, and the rest of us swooned when Alice whispered, “To find Jamie.”

“Let’s go, ladies!” Marge said, starting forward, then she stopped and turned to me. “And you’re *not* driving!”

I shrank down and cringed. “Sorry again.”

Sylvie slung an arm around my shoulder and squeezed. “We love you, Doris. But if you ever insist on driving again, we’re leaving you on the side of the road.”

“I second that,” Alice said. “And so do the damn sheep.”

I flushed pink as I laughed with them, then the four of us strolled out of the gardens that had scared us so badly last night and went off toward our next adventure.

Together.

**SYLVIE**

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hyvää päivää!” the man at the baggage claim holding a sign with “Wilder Widows” on it in bold, black letters said when we approached him.

“Whoa. Now that’s a lumberjack,” I whispered to Marge as we approached the giant, burly man with the strawberry blonde shaggy hair matching his beard.

“They breed ‘em big here, I guess,” Marge answered.

“Damn,” Alice whispered. “You could climb that lumberjack like a tree.”

“Hiya java!” Marge called back using words that sounded nothing like how he’d greeted us.

Alice gave her the side eye. “Can it with trying to speak Finnish, Marge. We just got you over those bizarre Scottish phrases.”

“Ah, yer bum’s oot the windae!” she taunted.

“You can’t say that anymore. We’re not in Scotland.”

Marge just responded with an arched eyebrow and a mischievous smile.

“Welcome, I’m Olavi,” the man said when we reached him. “I speak English.”

Though his accent was strong, he was very understandable.

“Oh, wonderful!” I answered. “None of us speak Finnish, so great to know we can talk to you in English.”

“Welcome to Finland. We are excited to have you here.”

“We’re excited to be here.” I reached out and shook his hand.

Marge pushed in and gave him a big shake as well. “Pleasure to meet you. Hey, Olavi. How do I say, ‘Your bum’s out the window’ in Finnish?”

After a brief curious tip of his head, he answered, “Peräsi on ulos ikkunasta.”

Marge spun to Alice, planting her hands on her hips as she butchered the words. “Peraso yulon ignasias. There. Not talking Scottish.”

Alice looked to her then Olavi. “I apologize for my friend if she says anything inappropriate to you while butchering your language. Please ignore her.”

Olavi smiled and chuckled.

“I nailed it.” Marge shrugged. “You’re just jealous I can speak all these languages so well.”

“Oh, yes. That’s exactly it.” Alice rolled her eyes.



Olavi looked at Marge again, and his brow furrowed as his gaze drifted over her face.

She noticed the confusion in his eyes. “Kangaroo. Surfboard. Doris,” she said as she pointed to all her injuries. “It’s a long story, but I’m happy to tell you if you’d like.”

“I would like.” He laughed. “I would definitely like.”

“I’ll tell you all about my battle wounds on the ride.”

“Look! It’s snowy out there!” Doris rushed to the large window at the airport and pressed her face to it. “So pretty!”

“Well, it’s winter in Finland,” Alice answered. “Sylvie is hellbent on turning us into popsicles apparently.”

“It won’t be that bad,” I answered. “You’ll see.”

“There had better be heat. And plumbing.” Alice gave me a stern stare.

“You’ll like it. I promise.”

After I’d seen the ads for this place online, I’d barely been able to keep a lid on all the excitement awaiting us. Seeing the Northern lights had always been a dream of mine, and now I would get to see them in one of the most beautiful places in the world.

Olavi gestured toward the glass doors. “I have a vehicle waiting right outside. We’ll grab your bags, and I’ll escort you to the resort. If you’re here for the Northern Lights, you’ll be happy to know reports say we’re going to have an excellent show tonight.”

I hopped up and down and clapped, and Doris joined me.

“Oh, I can’t wait!” she said. “This is so exciting!”

“Where we’re staying,” Alice started as she stepped closer to him. “They have heat and plumbing, right?”

He furrowed his bushy brow. “Of course.”

“Oh, thank God,” she breathed out. “Okay. Then we can go.”

After grabbing our bags, we followed Olavi out to the SUV and piled in. After making sure we were buckled up, he started us off toward our destination. The thirty-minute trip took us through enchanting snow-covered landscape that had us all oohing and aahing along the way. When we turned down the wooded road to our resort, the excitement inside me nearly bubbled right out the top of my head.

“We’re here! This is it!”

“Where is this—” Alice started, but then when the glass domes came into view, her voice trailed off. “Wow.”

“Are we staying in those?” Doris asked, excitedly.

“Yep! We each get our very own luxury dome. An unblocked view of the Northern lights over our heads anytime. There are gourmet restaurants, hot spas, saunas, and lots of other luxury amenities, so you better not complain, Alice.”

“No complaints at all,” she said in awe. “This is incredible.”

I smiled as we pulled through the wooded landscape past all the beautiful wooden buildings and the glass igloos dotting around them. It looked exactly like it did online. Better even.

“This looks like a hobbit fairytale!” Marge smooshed her face to the window. “We really get to sleep in those?”

“Yep.” I grinned. “And the roofs are completely glass, so it’s like sleeping in a snow globe under the Northern lights.”

“Neat,” she breathed out, drawing out the word. “So neat.”

“And they’re heated?”

“Yes, they are heated, Alice.” I chuckled. “And you have your own bathroom.”

“Then neat is right,” she said as we pulled to a stop.

A woman came out of a rustic wooden lodge, waving as she approached the vehicle.

“My wife, Johanna,” Olavi said as he gestured to the petite brunette.

“Damn. He could break her in half in bed,” Alice whispered out the side of her mouth.

I swatted her shoulder and laughed. “Shh.”

“Just saying.”

We opened our doors, and Johanna greeted us with smiles and a tray of hot cocoa. “Welcome! We are all set up for you in your private domes. Olavi will take care of your bags. If you want to follow me, I’ll get you ladies settled in.”

We trailed along behind her, snow crunching beneath our boots as we sipped our hot cocoa and oohed and aahed at all the magical sights along the way.

“Oh! Are those reindeer?” Doris squealed, pointing to the large animals munching hay behind a fence.

“Yep,” I answered. “And ... we are going on a reindeer sleigh ride tonight!”

“We are?” she practically screamed her answer. “Really?”

“Really,” I said. “They have all sorts of stuff here. Reindeer sleigh rides, sledding, skating, ice fishing, sled dog adventures.”

“Whoa!” Marge lifted a hand. “You had me at sled dogs! Hell, yeah! I want to do that!”

“We’re here for five days,” I answered. “Plenty of time to try them all. Then we head home so I can be back several weeks before I become a Nana.”

My heart warmed at the thought of welcoming my first grandchild into the world. Though I’d thoroughly enjoyed all our adventures thus far, I would be lying if I didn’t admit part of me was ready to head home early to see my daughter as much as I could before she became a mother herself. It was such a special time, and I couldn’t wait to be there helping her through the magical transition to motherhood.

“And you said a sauna, right?” Alice asked. “I’m most interested in that.”

“They have several saunas. You’ll be warm and toasty.”

“Good. I’m already frozen. I want to start at the sauna.” As she spoke, her breath fogged up around her. “Look. My breath. I can see it. I don’t like that.”

“Your accommodations are warm and toasty,” Johanna said. “If you need warmer clothes than you brought, we have plenty of extra coats, snowpants, winter boots, scarves, etc. Just let us know, and we’ll bring you whatever you need.”

“I’m not wearing snowpants.” Alice crinkled her nose.

“Then your ass is gonna be cold,” Marge said. “There’s no insulation on that thing.”

“It will be plenty warm in the sauna,” Alice countered. “Which is where I’ll be spending my time here.”

“You have to come out on *one* adventure with us,” I said as we reached the line of domes we’d be staying in. “Tonight at the very least. I booked us a reindeer sleigh ride to watch the Northern lights.”

“We leave in one hour,” Johanna said as she opened the door to one of the domes. “Don’t worry. We keep warm blankets on the sleighs. You won’t get cold, and we can take you to the best spot to see the lights. They should be incredible tonight if predictions hold.”

I buzzed with excitement as I smiled back at her. “I can’t wait.”

“Here you go, ladies.” Johanna waved an arm for us to enter. “I’ll give you the rundown on this one, and as all the domes are the same, you can then go and pick the other ones you want.”

My jaw unhinged when we stepped under the beautiful glass ceiling. I craned my neck back and looked up at the unhindered views of the dusky blue sky above. “Wow. This is incredible.”

“It really is like being in a snow globe!” Doris pressed her hands to her mouth. “Beautiful!”

“This is freaking awesome.” Marge spun around, her neck bent back as she stared up at the sky. “Just freaking awesome.”

“I’ll admit, this is pretty luxurious, Sylvie.” Alice walked farther into the dome to the king-sized bed draped in fine linens. “And the bathroom is right in here. And clean.”

I looked to where she pointed at the small, but fancy tiled bathroom off to the corner. Everything used clean, modern lines yet somehow captured the warm and rustic feel of the woods surrounding us.

“You like?” Johanna asked.

“Love,” I answered. “It’s perfect.”

She grinned widely. “Wonderful. Then you can all make yourselves at home. If you’re hungry, the dining lodge is the large building right over there.” She pointed to the building with the plumes of smoke drifting out of the two chimneys. “There are three restaurants inside. Everything is included with your stay.”

“And the bar?” Alice asked, poking her head out of the bathroom.

“Same building,” Johanna answered.

“Oh, good.” Alice came back from her inspection and joined the group.

“So, get settled. The next three domes in the row are yours. Get some rest, grab some food if you’d like, and we’ll come by in an hour for the reindeer sleigh tour to watch the Northern lights. Sunset is in an hour, and it takes about an hour to reach our destination. They should be hitting peak by the time we arrive.”

“Thank you, Johanna. We can’t wait.”

She bid us goodbye and left, then the Widows and I took a moment to appreciate the gorgeous surroundings.

“Cool wish, Sylvie. Two thumbs up,” Marge said. “Never would have dreamed such a place existed.”

“It’s like a fairytale!” Doris spun around, staring at the sky. “A real fairytale!”

“I’m taking this dome,” Alice said. “It’s too cold to go back out there and look at the others. Plus, it’s closest to the bar.”

I chuckled. "That's fine, Alice. You can have this one. We'll go get settled in ours. We'll meet back here in an hour to go on the sleigh ride." Before she could open her mouth to argue, I pointed a finger at her. "And yes, you are coming. It will be chilly, but dress warm, and you'll be fine. After we see the lights tonight and fulfill my wish, you don't have to leave your little warm bubble."

She frowned but nodded. "Fine. But I'm not wearing snowpants."

"Deal." I laughed, then the other two Widows and I left her to go find our own domes.

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After we had settled into our domes and unpacked, the Widows and I all met at Alice's dome. We were bundled up warm and toasty in our wool hats and snow jackets, but Alice stepped out in a giant fur hat and coat.

"Wow. You look like we should be calling you Natasha," Marge said as she appraised Alice's outfit.

"Well, when our pre-trip packing list said to bring an outfit for cold weather, I had to run out and get something that wouldn't make me look like a marshmallow." She looked at us, giving us a judgmental swipe of her eyes. "Like that."

"We may look like marshmallows, but you look like you slaughtered an entire family of mink for that." Marge scowled.

"Don't worry, it's not real fur." She swiped her hand down the long coat. "It's as high quality as it can get though. And warm. Since you're forcing me to embark on some nature journey into the arctic, I'm going to be as warm as I can. This muff will keep my hands warm."

We looked at the matching fur muff she stuffed her hands into.

Marge snorted. "You've got a muff."

"Can it, Marge. It's warm. And the one with a real muff is you, as we so horrifyingly learned in Scotland."

Marge grinned a sinister grin. "I'm gonna start wearing kilts every day now just to mess with you."

"Metal chastity belt. I'll do it."

They continued their silent stare-off, and I shuddered remembering the horror of seeing Marge's nether regions ... twice. "No kilts without

underwear, Marge. We're making that a Wilder Widows rule from now on. You abused the privilege."

"Oh, shoot! I don't have any mittens!" Doris interjected, looking down at her exposed hands. "I forgot to pack mittens, and I don't have time to knit any quick!"

"Johanna said they have extra stuff. When she gets here, we'll ask. In the meantime, take one of mine and we can keep one hand in our pockets."

"Thanks." She smiled as she took my extra wool mitten.

"Oh! Look!" Marge pointed, and we turned to see the reindeer parade coming toward us. "So cool!"

"Wow!" Doris clapped. "Look at them!"

Olavi sat in a sled-like contraption hooked up to a reindeer in front of him, with two more reindeer and sleds hooked to him and following behind. The majestic animal pulling the caravan stopped right beside us, and I could barely breathe being so close to it.

"Hyvää päivää!" Olavi was so bundled all we could see were his eyes and big smile. "I'm honored to take you on your first reindeer safari!"

"Can I pet it?" I asked as he got out and stepped to the head of his lead reindeer.

"This is Rakas." He stroked the face of the beautiful animal. "He loves to be petted."

We each took turns petting Rakas, then he walked us back to meet the other reindeer.

"This one is Kulta and this one is Muru. They are very excited to take you on this adventure. You'll ride two per sledge."

"Sledge?" I asked.

"The sleds are called sledges. Two per sledge, and I'll be in front pulling you all along."

"So, we don't have to steer?" Doris asked.

"No. I drive Rakas, and the others are hooked up to these lines and follow along. You just have to kick back and enjoy the ride."

"Thank God Doris isn't driving anything," Alice said.

"Sorry." Doris shrunk.

I chuckled. "Stop apologizing, Doris. We're all alive."

"Okay, so two in each sledge. The blanket goes over your legs, and if you need any warmer clothes, I have a bin in my sledge with all sorts of thermal gear."

“Mittens?” I asked. “Doris doesn’t have any.”

“Of course.” He reached into the bin and pulled out some mittens, handing them to Doris.

“Thank you!” she said, then she hurried to the first sledge. “Can I ride in this one? I like Muru the best.”

She stroked a hand down the reindeer’s neck, and he leaned into the scratches.

“I’ll ride with you, Doris,” I said, moving to her side.

“Guess it’s me and your muff.” Marge grinned at Alice.

Alice ignored her and climbed into the back sledge. “Don’t sit on me.”

“You’re two inches wide. I’ll have plenty of room.”

Marge climbed in beside Alice, then Doris and I got into our sledge. After we got the blankets pulled up tight around us, Olavi did a quick check of his reindeer before getting into his sledge.

“Okay, ladies! Here we go!”

He spoke some Finnish words to Rakas, and the beautiful deer took off trotting. Kulta and Muru followed right behind him, and soon we were sliding across the snow.

“So cool!” I said as I watched the snow-covered trees pass by when we turned down a small, wooded trail. “This is so much better than I expected!”

“Loving it!” Marge called from behind us. “Totally awesome!”

“Our reindeer better not have gas,” Alice said. “I had a very unfortunate carriage ride in New York once, and I’d rather not have a repeat.”

I laughed, then went quiet and just enjoyed the beautiful sights of Finland’s snowy landscape. We rode that way for almost an hour, the darkness settling around us as we slipped silently along. Solar lights every few dozen feet marked the trail the reindeer seemed to know well, and Olavi told us about polar nights where they had darkness here for weeks on end with no sunrise at all.

“So, you see. We have to manage well in the darkness, or we wouldn’t leave our house for weeks at a time. But then, in the summer, the sun doesn’t set for months. It’s daylight twenty-four hours a day.”

“I couldn’t handle no sunlight,” I answered. “The no night I could deal with, but not endless darkness.”

“Yes, but we have these to make the nights better,” Olavi said as we emerged from the thick woods. He pulled his reindeer to a stop at the top of the hill overlooking the icy world below us.

With a gasp, I clutched my chest when I looked up and saw the Northern Lights. The sky danced in a carousel of greens, reds, and pinks swirling above us and illuminating the white snow with the colors. The way the light moved mesmerized me, and I couldn't form a single word while I took it in.

"Wow," Doris finally said, but I couldn't answer.

It was too beautiful. Too magical. Too incredible to capture with words. Instead, we sat in silence beneath the glow of the moon and the twinkling stars while the light show danced above us.

"And that is why we don't mind the long nights," Olavi said softly.

"Yeah. I can see that," I finally managed out some words. "It's ... it's incredible."

"I can't believe this is a real thing," Marge said from behind me. "Like nature is doing this, and it's amazing."

"These are so much better than I thought they would be," Alice admitted. "It's beautiful."

"God's work," Doris whispered in awe. "And He's doing a beautiful job."

I slipped my arm around her shoulder and squeezed, so grateful to have my friends here with me to enjoy this special sight. We went quiet again for at least twenty minutes as we watched the sky transform every second with blues and pinks, greens and reds. They flickered and strobed, swirled and twisted. I'd never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

"Oh! Oh, man!" Alice choked out behind me. "It's got gas. I got the gassy one."

With the moment broken, I started to laugh, turning around to see her and Marge plugging their noses. Kulta lifted his tail, and Alice pulled a horrified face while he dropped a pile of poop behind him.

I burst into laughter as she choked and coughed, Marge plugging her nose but joining as well. Olavi turned around and sucked the air through his teeth.

"When a reindeer's got to go, they've got to go."

"I think this is our cue to head back," Alice mumbled from behind the muff covering her mouth.

"It is time to head back," he agreed. "The reindeer are getting antsy. But not to worry, you'll be able to see the lights from inside your domes."

With a cluck of his tongue and some Finnish words, he started our parade of reindeer back down the path toward the resort.

"This was beautiful, Sylvie," Doris whispered. "Thank you for sharing the magic with us."



Magic. She was right. My wish had turned out to be magic, and I made a note that someday I would bring my new grandchild here to see the wonder of this world they would be joining. My heart warmed thinking about all the different things I would get to show him or her ... all the places I'd traveled with the Widows that someday I could share again. I'd learned so much from my adventures with the Widows, and I didn't want my grandchild to go their whole lives without seeing it all like I had. No. It was my goal to embed them early with the things I'd learned from my time with the Widows.

To live life to the fullest. Chase their dreams. Explore. Push boundaries. To do what I'd been so lucky to do. And most of all, I wanted them to find friends like mine to share the adventures with.

I looked around at my most cherished friends, grateful they'd been here to share this with me, then I gave the sprawling landscape bursting with colors one last look before Olavi started us back down the trail of lights leading into the woods.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Hike!” Marge shouted as she flew past us, her sled dogs racing in front of her. Alice lay on the sledge at her feet, her screams echoing as they blew past.

“Why did I let you talk me into this!” Alice’s voice trailed off as the dogs flew over the hill.

“Whoa!” Marge hollered just before they disappeared.

“I’m glad I rode with you,” Doris said from her seat at my feet. “I don’t want to go that fast.”

“Me neither,” I agreed as our dogs ran along at a leisurely pace. “There’s a reason I chose to drive and not ride.”

“After what happened in Scotland, I’m never driving *anything* again.”

“Oh, stop worrying about that. It was an accident. Could have happened to anyone.”

Doris shook her head, the pom-pom on her little pink hat shaking with the movement. “No. It wouldn’t have. It always happens to me. It only proves I shouldn’t be allowed to drive anything. Ever.”

“Whoa!” I called to the dogs, remembering the terms they had taught us in our hour-long training before letting us loose with our own team.

When they didn’t listen to my voice—as they had warned us during the training that the excited dogs may refuse to listen—I carefully stepped off the skis and onto the brake in the center. As it pushed down into the snow, the resistance finally pulled the dogs to a stop. I grabbed the anchor and dropped it into the snow.

“Okay. That’s it. You’ve been apologizing and apologizing for it. It was an accident. And you know what, I trust you, Doris. In fact, I trust you so much that I’m going to switch spots with you.”

She spun around, looking up at me with wide eyes. “Switch spots? With me? Oh no! I couldn’t!”

I stepped off the sledge, careful not to let go of the handle as they’d warned us to always have at least one hand on it, and I used my free hand to gesture her to get up. “Yes. You can.”

She grabbed onto the wooden handles on either side of her seat pulling herself down hard. “No. I can’t. I won’t. I’ll hurt you. I can’t be trusted.”

“Doris!” I laughed, reaching down and taking her hand. “I trust you. Now I know you want to try driving the dogs. Get up and get on.”

“I did kind of want to try.”

“So, try.”

She bit her lip then finally climbed to her feet. “Are you sure?”

“You listened to the same training lecture as us. You know what to do. Go ahead.”

With worry filling her eyes, she stepped behind the sledge and gripped the handles.

“Remember. Feet on the skis unless you need to stop. Then carefully step onto the brake in the center. And don’t fall off.” I smiled at her then climbed onto the seat in front of her feet and said a silent prayer I hadn’t made a big mistake.

“I’m nervous,” she said.

“You’ve got this. Just remember, step on the brake to stop, step on the skis to go. Gee is right. Haw is left. Hike is go or go faster. Whoa is stop, though they aren’t listening to that, so you need to use the brake to slow them. You can do this. Let’s go.”

After a moment, she let out a deep breath then yelled, “Hike!” The dogs took off at a nice medium run, and she squealed with delight as we slipped along behind them. “I’m doing it! I’m doing it!”

“You’re doing it!” I called back, my grin so wide the cold air hurt my teeth.

The dogs seemed thrilled to be out burning off energy on a run, and I loved how happy they were. I’d heard rumors about sled dogs sometimes not being treated well, but that wasn’t the case with our happy pack of pulling pups. They lived like pampered kings and queens at the resort with their own rooms in the lodge, and every day they leaped and barked ready to get out for a much-needed adventure.

Doris and I glided across the open area, then she yelled, “Gee!” to turn the pack right onto the trail that looped around the property. The dogs listened to her instantly and took the turn while Doris and I leaned our weight to help steer the sledge and prevent us from tipping. With Doris and I cheering them on as they towed us into the woods, we wound down the narrow, groomed trail, our dogs barking and yipping their excitement as we flew along behind them.

“See! I told you that you could do it!” I called back to Doris.

“What?” Doris called back, and I realized the wind was muffling my words.

“Never mind!” I shouted again.

She answered once more with, “What?” and I chuckled then settled back in to enjoy the ride.

As the dogs twisted and turned down the trail they knew well, they sped up as we passed over a bridge. Just when we made it safely to the other side, I saw a sharp turn up ahead.

“Use the brake and slow us down!” I called back. “That’s a sharp turn!”

“What?” Doris called down to me.

“Use the brake!” I shouted louder.

“What?” she asked again.

As we kept going at a speed far too fast for the turn, I shouted. “BRAKE!”

“Brake! Oh! Yes! Wait ... how do I use the brake again? I forgot!”

“Step on the thing between your legs!”

“What?”

“The brake, Doris! Step on the brake!”

When the dogs didn’t slow, I looked over my shoulder to see her staring at her feet, clearly confused as to how to operate the brake. A glance back in front of us showed the turn coming up fast.

Too fast.

Knowing Doris wouldn’t be able to brake in time, I started trying to command the dogs with my voice. “Easy!” I shouted, but like before, they ignored me. “Whoa!” I tried again, but when the dogs didn’t slow their speed toward the turn looming ahead, I knew we were in trouble. Using all the air in my lungs, I screamed as loud as my voice could go. “Step on the brake, Doris! The big thing between your feet! Quick!”

“Oh! Yes! I remember now!” she shouted, but it was too late.

My eyes went big as we hit the turn with too much speed, and as one side of the sledge started to lift, I screamed.

“Lean, Doris! Lean!” Attempting to keep from flipping, I leaned all my weight to the other side. The sledge lifted up high, and I screamed as I started to think we were going over. But just as we finished the turn, we landed back down with a thud.

“Whoa! That was close!” I called back. “Now hit the brake and stop this thing!”

When there wasn’t a response, I turned back to see nothing but empty space where Doris had been.

“Doris!” I screamed as the dogs picked up speed, flying down the trail without a care in the world.

I scrambled to my knees as best I could without falling off, and when I peered over the handle to where Doris had been, I saw her pink form flailing around in the snow.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered as I dropped back down into my seat and gripped the handles. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.”

After letting myself panic for a moment as I flew along in my runaway dog sled, I took a deep breath and tried to come up with a plan.

“Whoa!” I called to the dogs, but they ignored me. I deepened my voice, trying to sound more menacing. “Whoa, doggies! Whoa! Whoa!”

My words fell on deaf ears as they dug down deeper into the snow, their happy barks the soundtrack of my nightmares while we careered down the narrow trail through the woods. I looked over my shoulder, trying to decide if I could climb over the rail and jump on the brakes, but before I could formulate a plan, we turned another corner and I saw Marge and Alice flying towards us.

“Oh, shit!” I cried out. “No brakes! We have no brakes!” I screamed, though I doubted they could hear me with the wind whipping in their ears as they barreled toward me at speed.

Only moments remained before we collided, and I saw two sets of wide eyes when they saw me flying toward them.

“Whoa!” Marge screamed.

Her pack started to slow as Marge stepped on the brake. My heart landed in my throat as I stared at my friends—the ones directly in the path of my out-of-control dogs careening toward them and certain collision.

“Look out!” I screamed, then did the only thing I knew I could do, and I dove off my sledge, landing face first in a bank of snow. As quickly as I could, I rolled to my knees, looking first to my sledge and dogs racing safely away, then whipping my head left to see Marge and Alice’s sledge tipping onto its side, the two of them tumbling out on the opposite side of the trail. Marge held onto the handle for dear life, but as her dogs turned the corner, it swung her out and with a “smack” she collided headfirst with a tree.

“Oh!” I clasped a hand over my mouth. “Marge! Marge! Are you okay!”

I jumped up and tromped as fast as I could through the snow, ignoring the pain I now felt in my ankle. When I reached Alice, I leaned over her. She lay flat on her back with a look of death in her faraway stare toward the sky.

“Why did I agree to do this?” she grumbled.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, looking quickly between her, Marge’s limp body, and the two sets of dog teams running in opposite directions with the sledges dragging behind them.

“Only my pride, Sylvie. Only my pride,” she answered.

“Good. Stay still. Don’t move. I need to check on Marge.”

I jumped up from Alice’s side and limped the extra few yards to where Marge was in a crumpled heap.

I dropped to my knees beside her. “Marge! Marge!”

When her eyes opened and she whispered, “Ouch,” I let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Oh, my God. I thought you were dead!”

With a groan, she sat up, spitting out a mouthful of snow as she wiped more from her eyes. “Not dead. Gonna have a hell of a headache though. But not dead. Whoa. I see stars.”

“Do I need to check you for injuries? Tell me what to do! You’re the nurse!”

Marge sat silently for a moment, and I knew she was taking stock of her body. Finally, she shook her head. “Nothing broken. I can wiggle all my extremities. Probably a concussion, but all in all, not bad.”

“Oh, thank God,” I said again, my body going limp as I collapsed beside her.

“What the hell happened?” she asked while she wiped more snow from her face. “All of a sudden your team appeared, and no one was driving it!”

“Yeah,” Alice said as she strolled toward us in her giant fur suit. “What the hell happened? You almost killed us!”

Before I could answer, a little pink, puffy visage appeared as Doris came huffing around the corner. “Sylvie! I fell off! I lost my balance! I fell off! I’m so sorry! We took the turn too fast, and I fell off!”

Marge narrowed her eyes. “Doris. Doris happened.”

Alice clenched a fist and snarled out, “Doris.”

When Doris saw us all heaped together in a broken bunch, she stopped and clasped her hands over her mouth. “Oh, no. Oh, no. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Is this my fault? This is my fault, isn’t it?”

Marge didn’t answer and turned her angry glare on me. “*Why* in the *hell* did you let *Doris* drive?”

I shrunk and sucked the air through my teeth. “She was feeling bad about Scotland. I just wanted to show her I trusted her.”

“And how did that work out for you?” Alice arched an eyebrow up toward the fluffy rim of her oversized fur hat. “For all of us?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, joining Doris in her chorus of apologies.

“Are you hurt, Doris?” I asked as she reached us.

She pressed her hands onto her pink snowpants and puffed to catch her breath. “I don’t think so. The snow was soft where I landed. I’m only out of breath from trying to catch up to you. I tried so hard, but you were going so fast. I’m sorry, Sylvie.”

“Sorry, *Sylvie*?” Marge grumbled as she touched the center of her head. “I’m the one who is gonna look like a freaking unicorn thanks to your ‘driving’ skills. Again.”

Doris burst into tears, then collapsed into a little pink pile, sobbing into her giant mittens. “I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt! I told you I shouldn’t drive, Sylvie!”

“Hey, hey, hey.” I rolled through the snow to reach her. When I slipped an arm around her, she cried harder and put her head on my shoulder. “It’s okay, Doris. It’s an accident. No one is seriously hurt.”

“Says you,” Marge retorted, but I shut her up with a stern stare.

“Doris is sorry. It was an accident, and she didn’t mean it. Now, since we’re all okay, we need to go find our dogs before they get stuck in the woods somewhere. Doris and I will go after our dogs this way, and you two go after your dogs that way.”

“Yeah. Probably a good idea,” Marge said as she pushed herself to standing. “Gotta put the puppies first. I’ll save killing Doris for later.”

Doris wailed, and her shoulders shook with her sobs.

“Marge!” I scolded. “She’s already feeling bad enough. Now stop teasing her and tell her you’re okay.”

Marge twisted her face then let out a long sigh. “We’re okay, Doris. I’m just kidding. Don’t feel bad.”

“But I do. I do feel bad.” She looked up with teary eyes.

“How about this,” Marge said. “You can stop feeling bad as long as you make me a promise.”

“Okay?” Doris blinked, her eyes lighting up at the suggestion.

“Never, and I mean *never* again anytime you are within my vicinity will you operate anything. No cars. No four wheelers. No dog sleds. Nothing. If

you're near me, you're a passenger, even if Sylvie tells you otherwise."

"Yes! Okay! Yes! I promise!" Doris responded with a snuffle. "Never again."

Marge stuck out her hand, and Doris gave it a good shake.

"There. It's settled," I said as I rose to standing. "Now everyone has made up, Doris promises never to drive anything again, and we are all alive. So, let's go find our poor doggies."

"I'll be here waiting. Someone send a snow chariot or something. I'm not walking all the way back in the snow." Alice leaned back on her hands.

"There are bears out here, you know," Marge said nonchalantly. "So, just keep an eye open for them. I mean, I wouldn't worry about getting eaten by one since you look like that, but I would be worried you'll be mistaken for one and some giant grizzly is gonna try to get frisky with you."

Alice twisted her face then spat. "Ugh! Fine! I'm not staying out here alone with the bears. Let's go."

Marge gave us a wink, and she and Alice headed off in one direction. I slipped an arm around Doris's shoulder and said, "Let's go."

The two of us limped off along the trail in search of our dog sled team, and I vowed to never, *ever* let Doris drive anything ever again.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

The snowflakes drifted down around Doris and me as we rode along the trail on the horses we'd rented for the morning. With Alice refusing to ever set foot in the wilderness again, and Marge off on an ice fishing excursion with Olavi while he collected firewood, it had just been us two horse lovers to wander the beautiful trails around the resort.

"Good boy, Lumi." I stroked a hand down the neck of the grey horse named appropriately because the word meant snow. He shook his head, and it sent his long, white mane flipping back and forth before settling onto his neck.

"This is so fun!" Doris said from behind me on her mare, Milla. "I'm so glad we got to do this before the storm arrived."

I looked up at the sky, noticing the darkening clouds crowding together, then looked at my watch. "We should head back. They said to be in before noon since the storm starts at one, and it's already starting to snow."

"Good idea. We don't want to get stuck out here in a storm."

I turned Lumi around, and Doris turned with me, then we started back the short ride to the resort. All day everyone had been buzzing about over the massive blizzard heading our way. Though they were prepared for such weather as it happened often, and they assured us there was a generator to keep the main lodge warm and functioning, Olavi, Johanna and the staff were taking all precautions necessary to make sure the guests and animals around the resort were comfortable no matter the weather. Olavi had been hard at work chopping wood to keep the fires burning warm, and Fiona had been busy cooking up extra meals to keep us all warm and fed. We were grateful they'd put so much time into ensuring we wouldn't get cold or hungry if things went south.

As Doris and I strolled back to the stables, we turned to see the snow tank trudging through the high drifts. When it rolled to a stop, a plume of dark smoke rolled out of the engine, and it stalled with a loud *bang!*

Our horses jumped, but a few strokes of the neck and soothing words calmed them back down.

"That didn't sound good," Doris said as she steadied her mount.

"No. It didn't."

Olavi got out, and after he kicked the treads several times and spat some words I assumed were swearing, he looked over when he noticed us.

“Sorry! Didn’t see you there! Darn thing is broken. We barely made it back.”

“Yeah, but we did!” Marge walked around the other side of it with a huge grin as she held up a big, dead fish. “And we brought dinner! While Olavi was on the shore whacking wood up, I caught it myself like Davy freaking Crockett!”

“That’s a big one!” Doris said as she hopped off.

“Your friend is a good fisherman.” Olavi gave Marge a pat on the back. “She caught three while I was gathering wood.”

“Only kept one though. The biggest one.” Marge lifted her big fish again.

“Well done, Marge!” I smiled as I jumped off my horse. “At least we’ll never go hungry with you around.”

She strolled over with an extra swagger in her step. “Never. Snakes. Gators. Fish. Varmint. I’ll find us food anywhere. And tonight, we’re smoking this beauty!”

“Sounds delicious.” Doris rubbed her belly.

“Where’s Alice?” Marge asked when she looked around and didn’t see her.

I pulled the reins over Lumi’s head and started leading him to his stall. “She was taking a nap then going to the sauna, I think.”

“Pansy.” Marge huffed.

“Yeah. You called her a pansy yesterday, which goaded her into getting on the dog sled. And we all know how that turned out. I think it’s best we leave her to soothe her bruised body in the sauna today.”

“Sorry about all that,” Doris whispered.

Marge waved a hand at her. “Ah, that’s old news, Doris. And even though it hurts like hell when I bump it, I think the big horn on my head really rounds out my new look.”

The protruding lump on her head was impossible to ignore, and I cringed when I looked at it. With the two black eyes and the missing tooth, Marge looked like she’d been in boxing match on our vacation. “What are we going to tell Roxie when we get you home in a few days? She’s gonna be horrified and never let you travel with us again.”

Marge shrugged. “What I’ve been telling everyone else. Surfboard. Kangaroo. Doris. And now, well, tree.” She finished as she pointed to the big

goose egg on her head. “I don’t want to worry her while we’re away, so I’ll just show her my new battle scars when we get back. No worries, though. She knows I’m tough, and she wouldn’t dare stand in the way of our annual Wilder Widows trips. Those are non-negotiable. Even put it in our marriage vows.”

I chuckled. “That list you have to rattle off is getting rather lengthy. Maybe we need to bubble wrap you for the rest of our stay, so we don’t add anything else to it.”

She laughed out her nose. “I’ll be fine. Hopefully Roxie just thinks I look like a tough badass.”

“We’ll cross our fingers for you,” I answered, and Doris lifted her hands and crossed her fingers tight.

Doris looked at her hands then tucked them inside her pockets. “Oh. My fingers are cold. I can’t feel them.”

I slipped off Lumi’s saddle and said, “You know, I’m frozen too.”

“Should we join Pansyass in the sauna?” Marge arched an eyebrow. “Maybe bring my fish in there and really freak her out?”

I chuckled at the thought of Marge dropping a dead fish at Alice’s feet, then when I imagined her explosive reaction, I shook my head. “She’ll kill you.”

Marge quirked a mischievous grin. “I’ll just run into the woods. She swore she’d never go in them again, so I’ll be safely out of range. I’ll meet you ladies at the sauna.”

“Marge! You’d better not!” I called after her, but she only waved over her shoulder and kept walking.

“Oh, Lord. We’d better untack and get there fast,” Doris said.

I nodded in agreement, and we hurried to finish untacking our horses and get them tucked into their warm stalls before the blizzard hit.

After a short jog to our domes to get our suits, Doris and I met outside wearing the huge, warm robes and fuzzy boots they’d supplied us with. We went to check for Alice in her dome, but when no one answered, we assumed she was still in the sauna. Bundling our robes around us tight against the cold and with the snowflakes picking up in intensity, we hustled the short distance to the sauna around the corner. I swore the temperature dropped ten degrees during the short sprint.

“Brr!” I shivered as I quickened my steps. We were just about to reach the sauna when we heard an ear-piercing shriek followed by Marge’s howling

laughter. The door to the sauna flew open and Marge launched out, her dead fish clutched tight in her hand as she sprinted off through the snow laughing.

“Totally worth it!” she called as she ran.

“Disgusting!” Alice shouted when she appeared in the doorway, only a white towel wrapped around her upper body. “I’ll filet you like that fish if you bring it anywhere near me again, you monster!”

Marge kept laughing as she ducked behind a woodpile. Her little head popped up and she peered back, grinning. “You gotta catch me first!”

Alice clenched a fist and pointed it toward Marge, but one look at the snow and trees separating them, and she took a big step back into the warmth of the sauna. “Later! I’ll kill you later!”

“Okay, okay.” I lifted my hands and looked between them. “Let’s call a truce so we can all warm up. Marge, go give that fish to Olavi to smoke, and Alice, go back inside and pretend that didn’t just happen.”

She gave Marge one last glare then spun around and stomped back into the sauna. Doris and I followed her inside, and when the warm air hit me, I stopped, opened my arms and said, “Ahhh. Heaven.”

“Oh, this feels nice!” Doris trotted over to sit beside Alice on the wooden seats stacking up the wall like stairs.

“Yes, this is what I’m talking about,” Alice said, leaning back and tightening her towel around her chest. “This is my kind of trip.”

“How long have you been in here?”

“About twenty minutes,” she answered.

Doris pointed to the sign on the wall. “Uh oh. I don’t think you’re supposed to stay in much longer. That’s what the warning sign says.”

I looked at the sign with the lengthy list of rules, stopping when I got to the fourth one. “It also says not to use under the influence of alcohol, and I bet she broke that rule too, didn’t she?”

Alice just grinned. “I’m fine. If I feel woozy and pass out, just shove me in a snowbank for a minute, then pull me back in.”

“Deal.” I rested my head back on the step behind me and inhaled the warm, humid air while Alice and Doris did the same.

Ten minutes later, the door swung open, and the whoosh of cold air was a sharp contrast on my skin, though not entirely unpleasant.

Marge hurried in, her robe and hat covered in snow she shook off on the floor. “I’m back. Damn. It’s cold out there. Snow really started coming down a few minutes ago.”

“And the fish? I assume that’s not here too?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“No fish this time. I swear.” She lifted her hands to show they were empty then hurried in to join us. “Olavi is smoking it now.”

Alice didn’t look up at her from her pose on the steps. “If you ever stick a fish in my face again, I swear to God I’ll break your neck with my bare hands.”

“But you won’t kill me, at least.” Marge smiled wide. “That’s sweet.”

“The death part was insinuation,” Alice rebuffed.

Marge shrugged. “People survive broken necks. Maybe you’d just turn me into a quadriplegic. Then I’d be alive but just unable to move. Not ideal, but I could get a helper monkey, so that’s kinda cool.”

I furrowed my brow. “A helper monkey?”

“Yeah. You know, a little monkey to take care of me and feed me, get me water, type for me, that kind of stuff. A helper monkey.”

“I don’t like monkeys.” Doris scrunched up her face.

“Well, monkeys really like you.” Marge waggled her eyebrows. “So much one humped your head. Oh! If I ever get paralyzed and need a helper monkey, go back to Mexico and find me that one! Then he can terrorize Doris in between spoon feeding me strained peas!”

Alice peeked open an eye. “Yes, and then we’ll all sit there and laugh when it flings poo in your face, and you can’t lift your arms to do anything about it.”

Marge scowled. “Nasty.”

Alice finally sat up. “Yep. While you’re sitting in your chair unable to move, I’ll be there every day training your monkey to throw shit at you. Maybe then you’ll realize what a terrible idea it was to stick that smelly fish in my face.”

“No monkeys. Please!” Doris begged.

Alice laid back down. “I don’t like monkeys either, actually. Dirty little creatures. Fine. I won’t break your neck, Marge, but payback is going to be monumental.”

Marge lay down horizontally on the stairs and propped her hands behind her head. “I look forward to your rebuttal.”

“So, anyway,” I said, changing the subject. “Doris and I had a wonderful time on our ride today. Glad we got it in before the blizzard.”

“What are we going to do for the next few days if it keeps up?” Doris asked. “I’m assuming all the activities will be closed?”

“Probably,” I said with a frown. “I was really excited to try some more of these winter activities, but with the blizzard, I assume we’ll just be snuggled up in our domes watching the Northern Lights. Although, not sure if we can see them through the snow.”

“Oh! And *Outlander!*” Doris sat up, her eyes wide and filled with excitement. “We can watch more of that, right? Even though we aren’t in Scotland anymore?”

Marge chuckled. “Look at that. You and your dirty lady porn pulled Doris to the dark side.”

I ignored her. “Of course we can. *Outlander* slumber parties under the Northern lights sound wonderful. But I’ll be sad if we won’t get to do another reindeer sleigh ride. I wanted to go one more time before we leave, but Fiona said the snow will likely be way too deep.”

“Maybe we could stay a few extra days?” Doris asked. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I have to get home to Rachel,” I answered. “As much as I would love to stay, and as much fun as I’m having, I can’t wait to get to her to spend her last few weeks getting ready before the baby comes. And I *have* to be there when my grandchild is born. I can’t risk missing it. I’m already going to miss so much living halfway across the country from them, I don’t want to miss this. I won’t. I promised her.”

“Are you staying at her house?” Marge asked.

“No. Tom and I rented a house in the neighborhood for a month. I want to be there to help her before and after the baby is born, but I also don’t want to smother her. There is nothing worse than an overbearing mother hounding you after giving birth. That bonding time is so important. And I would know.” I rolled my eyes. “Bruce’s mom showed up at our house the day we brought Rachel home, and that relentless woman *would not leave*. She just moved in and wouldn’t stop giving me ‘tips’ and telling me how I should do things. Criticizing me for every little decision I dared make on my own without consulting her. Ugh. It was awful. I’m not doing that to Rachel. I’ll be nearby if she needs me, but I’m not going to force myself into her special time with the new baby.”

“She’s so lucky to have you,” Doris said sweetly.

“And I’m lucky to have her. She’s such a wonderful person, and now that Tom is in our lives, he just wants to get to know her as much as he can. He missed so much with not knowing about her until she was an adult. He is so excited to be a grandpa and see some of those milestones he never got to experience.”

“You two are going to make wonderful grandparents.” Doris sighed. “And there is nothing better than being a grandparent. You get all the fun of spoiling them without having to deal with the aftermath. I love when mine come to visit.”

*Come to visit.* Those words reminded me how many of the milestones I was going to miss when our time with the new little one would always be spent in small bursts of us visiting them or them visiting us. But there was no way Tom and I would leave Wilder Lane for California, even though we’d initially talked about it. We’d just have to make the most of the time we had when we could. Cherish every moment.

“Oh, the first time you hold them is magic.” Doris closed her eyes tight.

“I can’t wait for that part.” My heart swelled to bursting thinking about holding my grandchild in my arms. A child who would exist only because of the love Tom and I had for each other. If I hadn’t walked into the bar that night, hadn’t fallen into his hypnotic eyes, Rachel would never exist. And without Rachel, no new baby. And if this child had children, our love would stretch for generations to come, all those new lives just because of my love for Tom, and his love for me.

My bloodline would live on in my grandchild. Our love would live on in our grandchild. Life continued. Just like it had continued after we’d lost our husbands when we’d thought it was all over for us, we’d lived on then, and because of it, now a piece of me would live on forever.

The miracle of life really summed up how I felt about the whole situation.

“I think I’m more cooked than my fish is right now.” Marge sat up. “I’m gonna head back to the domes.”

“I’ll join you. I’m getting overheated myself.”

Doris gasped and looked up at the sign. “Oh no! I went over the twenty minutes they said not to exceed!”

“I did a long time ago,” Alice said. “I haven’t melted into a puddle of goo. You’re fine, Doris.”

She stood, reaching for her robe. “Well, I don’t want to risk it. I’ll head out with you ladies.”

“You coming, Alice? Meet at my dome and we’ll have an *Outlander* binge session with a snowstorm swirling around us? Could be really cool!”

“You know I will never say no to Jamie. I’ll bring my tablet.” She sat up then pulled a face. “Ugh. I have to run outside through the snow again. Why don’t they have tunnels?”

“Buck up, Pansyass. You’ll be fine.” Marge opened the door and the whoosh of cold air caused us all to gasp. She closed it right away. “Oh, man. That’s freaking cold.”

“Ugh. This is going to suck.” I tightened my robe as much as I could then slipped on the big furry boots.

“On three, we all run together,” Marge said.

Alice groaned then stood, putting on her robe and boots and lining up with us.

“One, two, three!” Marge counted, then pushed open the door and we all took off running through the blizzard, shrieking.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Give me some more of that smoked fish.” Doris held out her plate toward Marge.

“Good, right? I catch a damn good fish!” Marge grinned and grabbed the plate then put a few more forkfuls of her catch on it. “Here you go.”

Alice wrinkled her nose as the plate passed across the bed and under her nose. “Yuck. It stinks. My dome is gonna reek like fish all night. There should be a ‘no stinky fish in bed’ rule. I’m imposing that starting now.”

“You’re the one that insisted we do *Outlander* night in here so you wouldn’t have to walk out in the snow to get back to your dome in the morning.”

“That was before I knew you’d be polluting it with that nasty smelling crap.”

“It’s really good, Alice. You should try it.” I shoved a cracker topped with smoked fish into my mouth.

“Pass.” Her chin lifted as she looked away. “Marge probably poisoned it.”

“I wouldn’t be eating it if it was poisoned, dummy.” Marge opened her mouth wide and shoved a forkful in.

“It still stinks, and I don’t want it. I’ll stick to the fruit spread.”

Alice reached to the spread of food we had sprawling on the bed in front of us. Johanna had put together a large assortment of fruits, breads, and cheeses for us to snack on when she’d heard we were having a slumber party tonight. After delivering it inside a giant cooler so it wouldn’t be wet from the blizzard swirling around us, she’d bid us goodnight and trudged back to the dining hall.

“Who is ready for *Outlander*?” Doris asked, her eyes twinkling.

“You really can’t wait to get back to your lady porn, can you, you dirty perv?” Marge teased.

“It’s romance not porn, Marge,” Doris countered, using the words we’d originally used to convince her to watch it.

“You keep telling yourself that.” Marge winked.

“I’m ready,” I said before Marge could make Doris feel too guilty to watch. “Alice, fire it up.”

Alice pulled out her tablet, and as she was loading the show, my cell phone rang.

“Oh! Hold on! It’s Tom. I couldn’t get ahold of him earlier today, so we haven’t talked. Give me fifteen?” I asked, excited to hear his voice and tell him about our horse ride today.

“Tell him hi from us,” Doris said.

I smiled and slid off the bed, clicking my phone to answer. “Hey, baby! I tried calling you earlier, but you must have been out.”

“I was. I went ice fishing today, and I just got back to a message that Rachel is in trouble.”

“What?” My blood froze inside my body as I stiffened up straight. “What do you mean Rachel is in trouble?”

The Widows all stopped eating and spun to stare at me.

“Blake just called. Rachel is having symptoms of preeclampsia, and he had to rush her to the hospital. If they can’t get things under control, they will have to do a c-section tomorrow and deliver the baby early.”

“What?” I pressed a hand to my chest. “Do you know anything else?”

“No. Blake couldn’t stay on the phone. But I’m heading to the airport right now, and I’m going to jump on the next plane to get to her. Just get home, Sylvie. She needs us.”

“Yes. Of course. Oh, my God. I’ll take the next flight out.” As I said it, I looked up at the bubble over my head ... the one showcasing the blinding blizzard we were in.

“Tom. We’re in a horrible blizzard right now, but I’m going to do everything I can to get home in time. No.” I closed my eyes, and my maternal love roared inside of me. “I *will* get home in time. Just get to our daughter, and I’ll call you when I’m on my way.”

“I will, Sylvie. Don’t worry. I’ll be with her. Please be safe. I love you.”

“I love you too. And if you get to her first, please tell her I love her.”

“I will,” he said, then he hung up.

I stood staring at my phone for a moment, and Alice’s voice shook me from my shock.

“What’s going on, Sylvie? What’s happened?” she asked.

“Rachel. She’s in some health crisis, likely preeclampsia, and they rushed her to the hospital. They may have to deliver the baby early by c-section tomorrow.”

The Widows all gasped.

“Oh, honey. That is so scary.” Doris’s eyes filled with tears. “And you’re so far away.”

“I have to get home. I have to get home. *Now*,” I said, and I meant it. Nothing was standing between me and my daughter ... and my new grandchild. Not the blizzard. Not the thousands of miles between us. Nothing.

They all nodded their response.

“Of course,” Marge said. “We are getting you home. Let’s get to the lodge and see if Olavi can give us a ride to the airport. We’ll just be waiting there and jump on the next flight out.”

“Yes. Good idea,” I said, my stunned mind still reeling from the news.

The three Widows all rose at once, and in an instant, I was wrapped up tight in their warm embrace.

“She’ll be okay, Sylvie,” Doris said first.

“We’re gonna get you home to her. I promise,” Marge said.

“I’m not there. I should be there with her right now.” Tears broke loose and started streaming down my face. “My baby needs me.”

Alice squeezed me tighter. “Take comfort in the fact that Blake is there, and Tom will be there soon. And we’re going to get you there as fast as we can.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and sank into their comforting embrace, then with a deep breath, I sniffled and cleared my throat. “Okay. Now is not the time to fall apart. We have to get to the airport and get home right away. The flight is about sixteen hours, and with travel time and waiting, it will be almost twenty-four hours before I can get to her.” My heart clenched thinking about the length of time it would take to reach her.

“Then we’d better get moving. Okay!” Marge clapped. “Hustle up, ladies! Let’s make a plan! Alice, use your tablet to find the next flight out of here.”

“On it.” She hurried over to the bed.

“Doris, call the lodge and tell them we need a ride to the airport stat. We’ll go now so we don’t get snowed in.”

“Going!” she rushed off toward the phone.

“Sylvie. Just take a breath and try to relax. I know this is scary, and I know you’re probably dying inside right now, but panicking won’t change anything. Take a deep breath and know that she’s in good hands and we’re going to get you there as soon as we can. Okay?”

I nodded, and the tears started streaming once again.

As I stood there, stunned, while my Widows rushed around me, I tried not to let my mind race off with all the worst-case scenarios that could be going on. I grabbed my phone and called Blake, hoping that he could give me more information. When he answered, panic laced his voice.

“Sylvie? Thank God,” he said.

“What is going on, Blake? Tell me everything.”

“She developed preeclampsia. They are doing everything they can to treat it and not have to deliver the baby early, but if they don’t have things under control by tomorrow night, they are going to have to do an emergency c-section.”

“Oh, my God,” I whispered into the phone. “Is she okay? Can I talk to her?”

“She’s with the doctors getting some treatments done right now to get her blood pressure down. They are worried about organ damage.”

My hand flew to my mouth. “Oh, my God. My poor baby.”

“She’s okay right now, Sylvie. She’s in good hands with great doctors. They are going to do everything they can to fix her so she can carry to term, but if things don’t turn around, then we need to deliver early.”

“I’m trying to get home as fast as I can. Please tell her that I will move mountains to get back there. If we fly out tonight, we’ll be there tomorrow night. Just tell her to stay strong. Mommy is coming.”

“Thank you, Sylvie. She’ll be so happy to know you’re coming. She loves you so much.”

The tears broke loose as I nodded, choking out, “I love her so much too. Tell her I’m coming. And Blake, please keep my baby safe.”

“I will. She’s the love of my life. I’ll make sure she and my baby are in the best of hands.”

“Thank you, Blake,” I said. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Travel safe, Sylvie.”

We hung up as Alice shouted. “The airport is still open! There is a flight leaving in four hours.”

“Book it!” Marge shouted.

“Done!” Alice spun back to the tablet.

Doris hung up the phone and turned to me, then burst into tears. “We’re snowed in!”

“What?” I said, my tears stopping instantly as doom pierced my gut, and a rage to reach my daughter caused my eyes to narrow. “We can’t be snowed

in. They just said the airport is open. I need to get to Rachel.”

Doris shook her head. “I just got off the phone with Johanna. The snow tank is the only thing that could make it out of here. And it’s broken. There’s no other way to get to the airport because the roads aren’t plowed, and we’ve gotten a foot of snow already. The airport can keep the runways plowed, but the roads to get there are unpassable. Since none of us are in a life-threatening medical emergency, the police or emergency vehicles won’t come for us with a special plow. There’s no way there until the storm stops.”

My pulse thrummed through me, pounding in my ears as my blood pressure rose. “I am leaving. Now.”

“We’re stuck!” Doris sobbed.

“No, we’re not.” Marge lifted her chin, straightening her shoulders. “I’m going to find a way out of here. Even if we have to take the freaking dogsleds, we’re going. You ladies get packing. I’m going to the lodge to figure this out. There must be some way to the airport. Just need to grease a few wheels.”

Marge grabbed her giant parka and pulled it on then headed for the door.

“Marge?” I said, and she turned to face me. “Please find me a way home.”

She gave one sharp nod then opened the door. The snow flew in with the winds, and when the door closed, I stood in silence staring at the empty space.

“Come on, sweetie. Let’s get your stuff packed.” Alice slid an arm around my shoulder and guided me over to the coats by the door. She helped me put on my coat, then she and Doris guided me back to my dome to pack.

Time seemed to crawl while I shoved all my belongings into my suitcases. Every few seconds, I flicked my gaze to the digital clock beside the bed.

Twenty minutes.

Marge had been gone for twenty minutes and it felt like hours.

With our flight leaving in three and a half hours, and a blizzard standing in our way, I started to lose hope we’d make it out tonight. And if we didn’t leave tonight, it would be another full day before I could reach Rachel.

Plenty of time for something horrible to happen without me by her side.

Alice and Doris had run off to their domes to pack as well, and the quiet surrounding me only amplified the anxiety nearly dropping me to my knees.

But I couldn't fall apart. I *wouldn't* fall apart. Rachel needed me, and the only way to get home to her was to hold it together and keep moving.

I stuck my bathroom supplies into the bag then looked around. Everything was packed. As soon as Marge secured us a ride, we could hit the road. A gust of wind blew inside my dome as the door opened. Doris and Alice stumbled inside, snow clinging to their coats and hats.

"Holy crap! It's bad out there!" Alice slammed the door shut.

"Did it get worse? Does that mean we aren't going to be able to leave?" My voice cracked.

Alice noticed my reaction and shook her head. "No. It doesn't mean that at all. Marge is out there somewhere working on things, and if we know Marge, she's going to find a way to get us to the airport tonight."

I nodded. She was right. If there was anyone on this planet who could figure out how to get us out of here, it was Marge.

"Try not to worry, dear." Doris took off her coat then sat on my bed and patted for me to sit beside her. "There's no use in worrying. All we can control is what we can control. Then we need to trust God to handle the rest. I've been praying hard ever since you got the call. It's going to be fine. You'll see."

Her comforting words soothed me, and I sat on the bed beside her and laid my head on her shoulder. "I'm just so worried. I hate that I'm not there."

"I know, dear. I would be a wreck too."

"Same," Alice said. "We're all mothers. We understand how awful this must be for you."

"It's really horrible." I sniffled back the tears. "I feel terrible I'm not there."

"Rachel is a strong woman, and she's surrounded by doctors and her husband. And Tom will be there soon. I'm sure she misses you, but she's in good hands."

I nodded. "You're right. It's not like I'm a doctor. All I could do is hold her hand and comfort her. She must be so scared."

"Blake is holding her hand, and soon you will be too. Just try to relax, hon." Alice tossed an arm around my shoulder, and she and Doris squeezed me between them.

Another gust of wind whipped through the dome, and I jumped up to rush to the door. "Marge? Is that you?"

“It’s me!” she shouted while she stomped the snow off her boots. “I’m back!”

“Well?” I raced to her, my heart pounding while I waited for what she had to say. “Can we get out?”

She looked between us and gave a slight nod. “Yes. We can get out.”

“Oh, thank you!” I launched forward and wrapped her up in my arms. “I knew you could do it! How did you manage to get us a ride?”

She stepped back and gave us all a look. “There are no cars. Helicopters can’t fly through this. I tried. The snow tank is dead.”

I furrowed my brow. “So, how are we getting to the airport?”

“Snowmobiles,” she answered.

“What?” Alice gasped.

“Snowmobiles?” My eyes went big.

“Snowmobiles.” She nodded. “They are the only things that can get through this snow. Olavi agreed to give us two snowmobiles, and he showed me the snowmobile trail that cuts off a ton of time from taking the roads, and it will take us right near the airport. It’s only a half hour ride since we’re cutting straight through, but he said to plan on an hour with the low visibility.”

“Can we really do this? Can snowmobiles get us there?”

Marge shrugged. “Don’t see why not. It’s gonna be cold, and we have to leave our luggage behind, but they’ve got snowmobile suits and helmets for us, and they said they’d ship back our bags. So, what do you say ladies? Who’s up for a snowmobile ride?”

“Me,” I answered quickly. “Anything to get me to Rachel.”

Marge gave me a sharp nod. “Doris. Alice. If you two don’t want to do this, you can stay here and take another flight home. I’ll go with Sylvie.”

“Oh, no,” Doris said. “We’re not leaving your side through this. We’re flying home with you, and we’ll go to the hospital to be with you and Rachel. We can do this.”

I looked to Alice. “I won’t be upset if you want to pass. I know how you feel about the cold and the wilderness. Seriously. You can stay here and catch another flight.”

Alice twisted her lips and closed her eyes, then she shook her head. “No. All for one and one for all. Where you go, we go. And to hell if I’m leaving your side while you’re going through this. I survived dog sledding with Marge. I can survive an hour on a snowmobile. I’m coming.”

My tears of anxiety and grief turned to tears of pure joy at the love my Widows showed for me. How they stepped up in my time of need. How I knew that no matter what life threw at us, I would always be okay because I had them by my side.

“Thank you,” I said through the tears. “Thank you all so much for doing this for me.”

“No need to thank us,” Marge said. “We’ve got your back. Always. Now, let’s get to the lodge so we can get in our snowmobile suits and hit the trails. We’ve got three hours until that plane takes off, and nothing is going to stop us from being on it.”

With a nod of my head, I put on my coat and the four of us stepped out into the blizzard together.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I feel like I’m wearing a full body diaper,” Alice complained as she shimmied around in her giant black snowsuit.

Marge gave her a tap on the shoulder, and the material crinkled beneath her touch. “Well, I plan on driving like the wind, so you may get scared and piss yourself. Consider them doing double duty.”

“Great,” Alice mumbled.

“You really don’t have to do this,” I said as I zipped up my suit over my purse filled with credit cards and travel documents strapped to my chest, just like the other Widows had done. “I will completely understand if anyone wants to stay back.”

Alice sighed then shook her head. “No. I’m doing this. Where you go, I go. Let’s hurry up and get this over with so I can get out of this stupid suit.”

“I just called and checked. The airport is still open,” Johanna said as she walked into the candlelit room. The power had gone out fifteen minutes earlier. “They are clearing the runways fast enough that they should be able to get you out tonight. Of course, there is a chance you’ll get grounded.”

“It’s a chance we have to take,” I answered quickly. “I’d rather be at the airport and ready to go then here and miss a flight.”

“The trail is impossible to miss,” Olavi said as he handed Marge her helmet. “I wish I could go with you, but I need to stay here and get the generators going. Johanna doesn’t know how to operate them, and if they go out while I’m gone, we’re in a lot of trouble. The pipes can freeze fast in this weather.”

“We’ll be fine,” Marge said. “Just stay on the trail, and we’ll pop out right to the edge of the city. Right?”

He nodded. “Exactly. Just leave the snowmobiles and helmets there at the edge of the woods, and we’ll come pick them up after the storm. You’ll need to keep your snowsuits on to protect you from the weather while you hike the last quarter mile or so to the town. Hide the snowmobile keys nearby and take a photo so I know where they are. Once you’ve finished the hike to the city, you can call for a cab to get you the last few miles to the airport.”

“Will cabs even be running in this?” Alice asked.

Olavi nodded. “It’s these back roads that don’t get touched until after the storms, but the plows constantly loop around the city so people can get

around the big towns. Just get to the city, and the roads should be clear enough to get you to the airport.”

“Roger that,” Marge said.

“And you’re sure we won’t get lost?” Doris asked, concern threaded in her voice. “I don’t want to get stuck out in this blizzard.”

Olavi shook his head. “The snowmobile trail has been cut through the woods. It’s impossible to miss. Just don’t drive off into the trees, and you can’t get lost.” He paused. “Maybe I should go with you.”

“Olavi,” Johanna said softly. “You can’t go until you at least get the main generators going. I have no idea how to work them.”

“We don’t have time to wait,” I said. “I appreciate the offer, but if you’re sure the trail is unmissable, then we’ll leave now so we don’t miss that flight. The next one isn’t until tomorrow night. That’s too long.”

“You can’t miss the trails,” he confirmed. “And I’m going to give you a two-way radio in case you get into trouble. If you get stuck or lost, stay where you are and contact me. I can come and get you as soon as I get the generators going and everything secured. But if all goes well, you shouldn’t have any trouble. Just make sure you radio when you get to the town, so I know that you’re safe and the location of the snowmobiles after you leave them. If I don’t hear from you within ninety minutes, I’ll take a snowmobile and come search for you.”

“Thank you, Olavi. Johanna. Thank you so much. I can’t tell you how much it means to me you helping us like this. You have our credit card numbers, so please charge us for our snowmobile suits we won’t be able to return and anything we don’t get back and the cost of shipping our stuff. Or a sizeable fee for being such a huge pain in your butts.” I leaned forward and pulled them both into a hug, my huge snowsuit making it difficult to raise my arms around Olavi’s massive frame.

They squeezed me back, then Johanna said, “Just get home to your girl. We’ll make sure to send all your stuff out as soon as the storm clears. It will get back to you safe and sound.”

With one last goodbye, the Widows and I left the lodge and stepped out into the blizzard. The wind whipped against our snowsuits but the chill didn’t penetrate.

“These suits are awesome! I’m toasty as hell in here!” Marge said as she walked up to the first snowmobile.

“I look ridiculous, but I am warm,” Alice said.

“Okay, how are we doing this?” I asked.

“Two per snowmobile. I’ll drive with Alice, you drive with Doris.” Marge paused and gave me a look. “And Doris *doesn’t drive*. Comprene?”

“Comprene,” I answered, and I meant it. This wasn’t the time for taking risks with Doris’s ability to control anything requiring steering.

“Then let’s roll out, soldiers!” Marge waved her hand in the air, then jumped onto her snowmobile.

Alice climbed on behind her, and after I got on our snowmobile, Doris climbed on behind me.

“We need to stop at my dome before we leave!” Alice said before she slipped on her helmet.

“For what?”

“I forgot something. Pull up quick, and I’ll be in and out in a second.”

“Roger that,” Marge said, then clamped the visor of her helmet down. Her voice was muffled when she yelled, “Let’s ride!”

We both fired up our snowmobiles, and I was grateful for the short tutorial Olavi had given us. After hooking the auto-shutoff cord to my snowsuit, I pressed the lever on the handle and rode off after Marge. By the time we reached Alice’s dome, I had a pretty good feel of the steering and pressure I needed for speed.

“I’ll be a second!” she called, then hopped off, her snowsuit crinkling with her quick steps. A few moments later, she emerged with a Louie Vuitton garment bag.

“What the hell is that?” Marge asked.

Alice climbed back on and put the suitcase between them. “My best couture dresses are in here. Since we clearly have room between us, I’m not leaving them behind. I won’t. If they get lost in the mail, I’ll just die. They won’t be in the way, so just go. I’m ready.”

If it anyone but Alice had pulled a stunt like that, I’d have been shocked, but instead, I chuckled as I watched her press the bag carefully between them before wrapping her arms around Marge’s waist.

“Roll out!” Marge shouted, and when she sped off, I flew along behind her.

Even with the blinding snow, Olavi hadn’t been lying when he’d said the trail was impossible to miss, even in the dark. Our headlights illuminated the perfect clearing between the trees stretched out before us, and the snowmobiles flew across the deepening snow with ease. Normally, I would

have scolded Marge for going so fast, and I'd have picked a much more leisurely pace, but my desperation to get home to Rachel caused me to lean forward and gun my snowmobile even faster.

Our little caravan wound down the trail, up and down the hills as we raced toward the airport. Doris gripped me tightly from behind, and I hoped like hell she wouldn't fly off with the speeds we were taking the turns. We emerged into a stretch of open snow-covered land, and for a moment I worried we would lose the trail, but Marge veered left, and I saw the large opening back into the woods and the easy-to-spot trail.

I twisted the handle to follow behind her, but just as we slipped back into the woods, we hit some deep snow, and my turn veered wide. My eyes flashed open at the large tree directly in front of us, and I screamed as I cranked the handles the opposite way to avoid it. The sharp trajectory sent Doris and I sailing into the woods, and we plowed into a snowdrift with a *thump*. The fast stop sent me shooting off the snowmobile like a misfired arrow, and when my safety cord pulled tight, the snowmobile engine turned off.

I landed with a thud in a soft pile of snow, laying there stunned for a moment. "Ow," I whispered as I rolled back to sitting. I looked left and saw Doris clinging to the seat of the snowmobile for dear life.

"I'm not falling off! I swear I won't fall off!" she shouted, though her helmet muffled the words.

"Are you okay?" I asked, then hurried to help her back up.

She flipped up her visor and looked at me with wide, shocked eyes. "Hey! I stayed on! I did it!"

"You did. This time, I fell off." I looked at the snowmobile buried deep in the snowdrift. "We need to get this thing pushed out and back on the trail."

Doris hopped off and started pushing with me, but we grunted and groaned and couldn't get the big machine to move. A minute passed before we saw Marge's headlights coming back our way, so I told Doris to run back out on the trail and flag her down.

"Marge! We're here! Marge!" she screamed as she jumped up and down.

The engine sputtered to a stop, and Alice and Marge leaped off.

"Are you hurt? Are you okay?" Marge asked.

"We're fine," I called back. "But I took that turn too fast and spun out. We need help pushing this thing out."

"I had a heart attack when I looked back and you were gone," Alice said.

“It happened so fast!” Doris pressed her hands on top of her helmet. “One minute we were on the trail then the next ... poof!”

“Come on, ladies. I didn’t hit anything so the snowmobile should be fine, but it’s really buried here. Help me push. We’re not missing this plane!”

They jumped into action, and the three of us pushed while Alice pressed on the reverse to try to get us unstuck. But after we pushed and pulled and tried to lift it, we collapsed into an exhausted heap.

“It’s stuck,” Marge said, puffing. “Really stuck.”

“Shit!” I cried out. “Now what?”

“Maybe two of us can keep going and two can stay behind and radio for Olavi?” Doris said. “Alice and I can stay.”

“I’m not staying out here with the bears,” Alice barked.

“Wait. Bears? Here? Right now?” Doris whipped her head back and forth. “Nevermind. I don’t want to stay with the bears either!”

“No one is staying with the bears,” Marge said decidedly. “It’s gonna be tight, but we can all squeeze on the one snowmobile.

“Will we all fit?” I asked.

“We’re gonna have to.” Marge shrugged. “No other option if we want to make it on time. We could radio Olavi to come get us, but that could take a while. Your call.”

“If we can fit, we go,” I said quickly. “I need to get to Rachel.”

“Then let’s get going.” Marge pushed up off her knees, and we followed her back to the remaining snowmobile. After getting it turned around facing the correct way, she climbed on first. “Okay. Sylvie, behind me. Doris, behind Sylvie. Alice, you’re going to sit sideways across my lap.”

“Won’t I fall off?” she asked.

“I won’t let you fall. And thank God for that puffy snowsuit so your boney ass doesn’t dig into my thighs. Now, everyone climb on. Squish tight and let’s go!”

I jumped on behind Marge, and Doris jumped on behind me. It was extremely tight, and taking a deep breath proved difficult, but it was manageable.

“You’re up! Hop on!” Marge patted her lap.

“But my dresses! They won’t fit!” Alice stared at the Louis Vuitton bag she’d laid across the hood of the snowmobile.

Marge huffed. “Forget the dresses, Alice! They’re gone! A lost cause!”

“But ... those are couture! I can’t just leave them here!”

“If you want to stay with them, that’s your choice. But we’re leaving. Now.”

Alice glanced at the dresses then let out a small wail as she lifted the bag and pressed it to her chest. “Mommy, loves you, my babies,” she said to the bag. “I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry. You didn’t deserve this fate. None of you did. You were wonderful couture, and you’ll live on in photos.”

“It’s okay, Alice,” I soothed. “Set them next to the other snowmobile, and Olavi will find them when he comes for it.”

“They won’t survive in the wild that long,” she sighed. “It’s over. They’re goners. A true fashion tragedy.”

“Should we say a few words?” Doris asked.

“Cripes! We don’t have time for this!” Marge said. “Drop the bag and get your bony ass on my lap.”

Alice frowned then gently laid her bag on the ground on the side of the trail, blowing it a soft kiss before climbing onto Marge’s lap.

“Chin up, Alice,” Marge said. “On the bright side, there are gonna be some well-dressed bears trouncing around Finland.”

Alice glared, and Marge flipped her visor down. “Visors down, and let’s go!”

We flipped our visors as well, and I grabbed Marge’s waist tight and prepared for the impulsion I knew was coming. We took off like a shot, and I heard a little muffled squeal from Doris behind me as her grip tightened. We flew down the trail, our lone headlight illuminating the winding path through the woods, though the increasing snow made it more and more difficult to see as we progressed.

I glanced at my watch. If Olavi was right, we should be arriving near the outskirts of the city soon. I stared over Marge’s shoulder and Alice’s head as I watched with bated breath for any sign of civilization. Finally, when I’d started to lose hope and worried we’d taken a wrong turn and were lost in the woods, a flicker of lights shone through the trees.

The city! We’d made it!

With hope fluttering inside my heart that I may be reunited with Rachel tomorrow, I squeezed Marge tighter as she guided the snowmobile down the small hill toward the lights ahead.

She slowed to a stop and flipped up her visor. “This is it! We can hop off the snowmobiles here and call for a cab to grab us on the road right up there. I’m going to hide the key for Olavi and take a quick picture. I’ll let him know

where this snowmobile is and about where we left the last one. He should have no problems finding them tomorrow.”

“I can’t believe we made it!” Doris squealed as she jumped off.

“Well, not all of us.” Alice cast a longing glance back at the woods. “Some of us made the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good. I think my couture deserves a medal or something for taking one of the team.”

“I think you mean *you* want a medal.” Marge chuckled before she trotted over to a large tree and lifted a big rock to hide the key.

“Fine. *I* sacrificed a lot.”

“I appreciate it, Alice. So will Rachel.”

With a sigh, she tossed an arm around my shoulder. “You’re worth more than couture dresses to me.”

I smiled and leaned my head against her. “That means a lot coming from you.”

Our helmets clunked together when she pressed her head against mine.

Marge radioed Olavi who was thrilled to hear we’d made it safe, and after she gave him the locations of the snowmobiles, she bid him goodbye then turned to face us. “Okay, soldiers! We still have a few miles to cross before we reach our destination! Let’s get to the road and find a landmark we can use to call the cab.”

Not wanting to deal with our large helmets in a cab, we placed them on the snowmobile. The snow whipped against my face, but I ignored the discomfort as we trudged through the snow toward the small city ahead. When we reached the outskirts, we followed the road until we got to some local businesses alongside a plowed road.

“Okay! Call the cab and tell them the name of this business, and the street name,” Marge said.

We all stared at the building, then turned toward the street sign.

“Can anyone pronounce that?” I asked as we tipped our heads.

“Shit.” Marge grumbled. “I’ll try. I’m pretty good at Finnish now.”

“No!” I echoed with Doris and Alice. “You are *not* allowed to try to speak foreign languages after what happened in Mexico. I’ll call.”

I pulled out my phone and searched out a cab company, then called them up. After much confusion and finally spelling out the letters of the street and the business, I felt confident that a cab was on its way. Five minutes later, the small white and yellow vehicle pulled up beside us. The man inside stared at

us with a puzzled look on his face as we approached. I realized then how ridiculous we looked in our snowsuits.

“We need to get to the airport!” I said as I whipped open the back door, ignoring his strange leering stares.

“Airport?” he asked.

“Yes! Please!” I answered, jumping in the front seat. The three other Widows grunted and squeezed into the back together.

“I can’t move in this thing,” Alice complained.

“These suits are really uncomfortable when you’re not on a snowmobile,” Doris agreed.

Even though I was just as uncomfortable, I ignored it and begged the driver to hurry. He sped us off down the winding streets of the city, and when we reached the airport, I nearly broke down and cried.

“We made it!” I shouted as we pulled up at the terminal. “I can’t believe we made it!”

“You and me both,” Alice said, then she pulled out a wad of money from her suit and tossed it in the front seat. “Keep the change.”

The four of us left jumped out of the taxi and rushed inside the airport doors. I glanced at the clock. We had an hour left. With gate security, it would be tight.

“I need to get this suit off,” Alice said.

“Not until we get to the security line. No time!” I shouted as I rushed toward the security line, grateful we had our tickets on our phone this time and could skip the check-in gate.

When we finally arrived at the security line, I took my first deep breath.

“We’re going to make it,” I said, my throat constricting with the emotions inside. “We’re going to make it.”

The people surrounding us stared at us in our snowmobile suits, and I realized how ridiculous we looked. Sweat beaded on my forehead from wearing the insulated outfit in the heated airport, and I noticed all the Widows had smooshed, wet hair. Alice’s makeup ran down her face in dark streaks, and I realized mine likely did as well from the wet snow pummeling us in the face during our helmetless hike from the snowmobiles to the cab. But I didn’t care about our strange, disheveled appearance as my joy in being one step closer to Rachel overpowered any embarrassment I’d usually have felt standing in public looking like a strange side show.



“Now can I take this horrifying ensemble off?” Alice waved a hand over her figure.

“Yes.” I smiled. “Now we can take them off.”

“Thank, God,” Marge said as she unzipped her suit. “I’m sweating so much they’re going to think we’re up to no good.”

We unzipped our snowsuits, and all took a deep breath of relief when we finally stepped out of them.

“What do we do with them?” Doris asked.

“Does anyone want a snowsuit?” Marge called as she spun in a circle. “Free snowsuits!”

The security guard gave her a concerned stare.

I grabbed her arm. “Marge! Don’t you dare make them think we’re trying to leave a b-word here! We’re not getting pulled in for questioning this time!”

“Oh, yes! Whatever you do, don’t let them think you have a bo—” I slapped my hand across Doris’s mouth.

“Doris! No! Don’t say that word again!”

“Sorry,” she mumbled behind my hand.

“Put them on the conveyer belt, and after they are scanned, we can ask the security guards what to do with them.” I folded mine up and put it in the plastic tub. “I already told Johanna and Olavi we would pay for anything that didn’t make it back to them, so if they toss them in the trash, it’s fine.”

The Widows followed suit, and after we made it through the security scanner without Doris almost getting arrested, we gathered our belongings on the other side.

“It’s a long story, but we don’t need these snowsuits on the plane,” I said to the guard. “If you want them, they are very nice. If not, is it okay if we just toss them out?”

He looked at the suits and shrugged. “I’ll take them. These are nice.”

“Wonderful!” I grinned. “Enjoy!”

“That one rides up in the crotch,” Marge said as she pointed to hers. “But otherwise, it’s a great suit.”

He smiled back and waved as we hustled through the terminal to our gate. Early boarding was starting, and since Alice had booked us first class, we got to walk right onto the plane. We found our seats and collapsed into an exhausted heap.

“We made it,” I breathed, still stunned those words were real. “We really made it.”

“I didn’t doubt us for a second,” Marge said. “When we Wilder Widows put our minds to somethings, nothing can stop us.”

I smiled on a sigh. “You’re absolutely right, Marge. Nothing can stop us when we’re together.”

Once I knew the plane wouldn’t be delayed due to weather, I sent off a text to Tom that we were on our way and with the arrival time. The other three Widows did the same with their spouses, each asking them to take a flight to meet us in L.A.

“They don’t have to come,” I said after the last message was sent.

“I can’t wait to see Roxie. I’m going to show her that we aren’t just roommates, and there is still plenty of romance left for us. And I’m not waiting until I get home to do it. Plus, she’ll love L.A.!”

“I need my husband,” Alice said. “I haven’t gone this long without sex in as long as I can remember. And we’re not leaving L.A. until Rachel is safe and sound. Alejandro can meet me there.”

“I left a message for Axel, but he won’t come to L.A.,” Doris said with a soft frown and a shake of her head. “He’s a rancher. You know how much he hates the city.”

“Well, that’s okay, Doris. We’ll fly you home to see him as fast as we can.”

“I do want to see him.” She stuck out her lip. “But I want to see the baby too!”

“Maybe he’ll come. You never know.”

Doris frowned deeper. “He won’t. But that’s okay. I would never expect him to come to a big city like L.A. for anything. No worries though.” She lifted her chin. “This trip is about us, and now it’s about that baby! I can’t wait to meet it!”

“You are all the best.” I reached over and squeezed Alice’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Sylvie,” she said with a wink.

After the other passengers boarded and we started taxiing down the runway, I held my breath until we finally made it into the air.

*Mama’s coming, Rachel. Hold on.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Outta the way! Outta the way! Move!” Marge shouted as she barreled through the airport crowds at LAX.

We all hustled along behind her, my feet moving a mile a minute as we raced to the doors outside where we could catch a cab to the hospital. We burst out the doors, and when we saw a man about to get into a cab, Marge barreled down harder and charged toward him.

“Emergency! This is an emergency! We’re confiscating this cab! Move!”

The startled man jumped out of the way, and we all dove into the backseat.

“UCLA Medical Center!” I panted at the cab driver. “Please hurry!”

As he started off, I pulled out my phone and dialed Tom. When he answered, I exhaled a sigh.

“We’re here! We’re in L.A. and on our way! How is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s okay,” he answered. “But they can’t get her blood pressure down, so they are going to take her in for a c-section soon.”

“Right now?” My heart rate sped to racing.

“In a couple hours. She’ll be okay after the baby is out, and they said she’s far enough along that the baby will be alright.”

“Oh, thank God.” I closed my eyes and exhaled a deep sigh of relief. “Tell her I love her, and that I’ll be there in thirty minutes!”

“She is so excited to see you. And so am I. Room 407. We’ll be waiting. Oh! And Axel, Roxie and Alejandro caught a flight this morning together, and arrived an hour ago. They are in the waiting room waiting for you all.”

“Oh, that is wonderful news. Thank you. I love you, Tom. I’ll see you soon.”

“What’s happening?” Marge asked. “Did we make it in time?”

I hung up the phone and collapsed back in my seat. “We did. They are doing a c-section soon, and they said she’ll be okay. But we’re going to make it in time. I’m going to be there when my grandchild is born.”

“Wonderful!” Doris clapped.

“So happy they are taking such great care of her,” Alice said.

“Oh! And all of your spouses are there waiting.”

“They made it?” Marge sat up straight then pulled out her phone. “I haven’t even had a second to check this thing!”

“Me neither!” Alice grabbed her phone and turned it on. “Yep! Here it is. Alejandro said they all flew together and will meet us at the hospital.” She clutched her phone to her chest. “I’m dying to see him.”

“Wait.” Doris sat up. “*All* of them? Axel came? He’s here?”

“That’s what Tom said,” I answered.

Doris’s smile stretched all the way across her face. “I can’t believe Axel came to L.A. For me.” She sighed. “He hates big cities. That means ... he really loves me.”

“Of course, he does,” I said. “I knew he would come. I can’t wait to see Tom. I need his big arms to wrap around me and make all this anxiety go away.”

“I’m good for a bear hug if you need something to tide you over.” Marge tried to open her arms but the way we were squished in the back prevented it. “Well, when we get out, I’ll be good for it.”

“Thanks, ladies. I’m so glad we’re going to make it in time. I can’t tell you what it means to me what you all went through to get me on that plane.”

“You know we’d do anything for you, Sylvie,” Alice said.

Marge grinned. “A chance to snowmobile across Finland in a blizzard? Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“The Lord was with us and guiding us.” Doris pressed her hands together and mouthed a silent prayer.

The cab drove us toward the hospital, and when we hit traffic, I nearly jumped out and ran. But I took deeper breaths and reminded myself there was time, and soon we were on our way again. When we arrived at the hospital, we paid the cab driver fast and took off at a sprint into the large building.

“Which way?” I spun in circles, trying to make sense of the signs.

“Left!” Marge shouted after pointing at a sign, and we took off after her.

After working as a nurse for years, she understood the signs better than us, so we followed along at a jog while Marge veered us left then right, up an elevator, and finally we spilled into the maternity ward.

“Sylvie!” Tom shouted.

The moment I saw him, the breath whooshed out of my lungs. Sobs shook my shoulders, and I ran into his arms. He caught me and pulled me against him, cradling me against his body while I cried.

“Is she okay? Is she okay? Oh, my God. I missed you! Where is she? Did they do it yet? Did I miss it? Can I see her? I can’t believe this is happening!” I blubbered out.

Tom leaned back and took my face in his hands, pressing a long kiss to my lips. I sighed into his mouth and kissed him back, then he smiled and touched his forehead to mine.

“Breathe, baby. Breathe.”

I looked into those eyes I loved so much and together we took a deep breath. “She’s in with the doctor and Blake now getting an exam, but we can go in in a few minutes.”

“Thank God,” I answered. “I didn’t miss it.”

“She waited for you I think.” He winked.

“Roxie!” Marge shouted when Roxie walked around the corner carrying a cup of coffee.

“Baby!” Roxie shouted back, almost dropping her little paper cup before she bolted toward Marge.

When they reached each other, Marge snaked an arm around her waist and bent her back into a knee-quaking kiss. Roxie squealed with delight as she wrapped her arms around Marge’s neck, returning the kiss with the same gusto.

“Why didn’t I get a kiss like that?” Tom asked with a smirk.

“Later. When Rachel is safe, I’m going to give you all the kisses I’ve been saving up while I’ve been gone.”

“Deal.” He grinned.

Marge pulled Roxie back to standing. “Damn, girl. I missed you.”

“Wow!” Roxie teetered on her feet. “That was some reunion!”

“Nah,” Marge said, slipping an arm around her waist. “That’s me reminding you that I love you, and I’m not going to be your roommate.”

“What?” Roxie furrowed her brow.

Marge shook her head. “I just mean that we’ve been in a rut, and it’s my fault. But the rut is over. We’re going to get the romance back in our marriage, and I’m gonna show you every day how damn much you mean to me.”

Roxie flushed red. “Oh, Marge. I haven’t wanted to say anything, but I’ve been missing the romance too.”

“We aren’t roommates, Roxie. We’re not platonic friends. I loved what I had with Percy, but I don’t want that with you. Let’s make a vow right here and now not to let the romance slip away.”

Roxie took a deep breath then tossed her arms around Marge’s neck and kissed her so deeply, I could feel it right down to the tips of my toes.

When they finished their kiss, Roxie looked back and tipped her head. “Marge! What happened to your face? Oh, my God! Does it hurt?”

“Surfboard. Kangaroo. Doris. Tree,” she said, pointing to each wound. “It’s a long story, and I can’t wait to tell you all about them.”

Roxie made a face then shook her head. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Alice!” Alejandro called as he came down the hall with Axel beside him.

“Alejandro!” she cried back, rushing off toward him.

Doris and Axel ran toward each other, and as the two couples folded into their embraces, my heart soared to see their happiness.

“I smell like an airplane. I apologize,” Alice said as she finished kissing Alejandro. “And snowmobile exhaust. It’s still permeating my entire being. Sorry, but I don’t care. I’m kissing you anyway.”

“Is that what that smell is?” He chuckled and smelled her hair. “Snowmobile exhaust?”

“Long story,” she responded.

“I imagine it is, Cariño. It always is when you ladies are together.” He swiped a hand through her hair and kissed her again.

Alice broke the kiss and her eyes lit up. “Hey! This is my first time kissing a man in a hospital!”

“What?” he asked.

But instead of answering him, she turned to us and pointed at him then said, “First time! I had another first!”

“Yes, you did!” I grinned back, laughing.

“And my first time kissing a man smelling like a snowmobile. Two firsts!” She lit up like a light as Alejandro stared at her looking confused.

“Do I want to ask?” He slipped an arm around her waist.

“No. Just know that I loved my first kiss in a hospital, and my first kiss smelling like a snowmobile.”

“Well, then I am happy to hear it, Cariño.”

They kissed again, and meanwhile, Doris was smothering Axel with a barrage of small kisses that never seemed to end. Finally, he gave her one big one, then she fell into his arms and hugged him tightly.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Axel. I can’t believe you came to a big city just for me.”

“And miss seeing you the day you got home, darling? Never.”

“You love me. You love me like Jamie loves Claire.” Doris sniffled. “I can’t believe you love me like Jamie loves Claire.”

Axel furrowed his silver brow. "I have no idea what that means, but I love you like crazy, Doris. And I'd do anything for you. Even come to a big city so I can get you back in my arms."

"Oh, Axel," she swooned.

They kissed again, and my heart swelled to bursting as Tom slipped an arm around my shoulder and squeezed.

"Sylvie? You made it?" Blake's voice interrupted our happy reunion, and I spun to see him standing in the hallway wearing a blue hospital coverup.

"Blake! I'm here!" I raced over and hugged him, squeezing him tight and thanking him profusely for taking such good care of my baby girl.

"She's going to be so excited you're here. She really wanted her mom to be here for her."

Tears welled up in my eyes. "Can I see her now?"

He nodded. "Follow me."

He didn't move nearly fast enough as I followed him down the hallway to her room, and when he opened the door and I saw my baby girl lying in the hospital bed, I erupted into tears.

"Rachel! I'm so sorry I wasn't here!" I flew to her side and took her hand in mind, kissing the back of it. "Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

"I'm okay, Mom. I'm just so glad you're here. I'm so sorry I ruined your trip."

"Never," I said. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but at your side. I'm so sorry we didn't get those extra couple weeks to get you prepared for the baby. I had so much shopping to do."

"Guess you'll have to stick around for a while afterward and help me get settled."

"Of course, baby. I'm here as long as you need me."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"How's my girl?" Tom asked as he stepped into the room.

"Fine," we both answered at the same time, then looked at each other and laughed.

Tom chuckled then came up behind me and slipped his arms around my waist. "I'm so glad your mom could get here in time. I'm new to this whole father thing, and I have no idea what to do in these situations."

"You were perfect, Dad," she said, and hearing her call him that made my heart flutter like it always did.

After all these years, we finally got to be a family. And now, after today, our family was going to be a little bit bigger.

“Can we see her quick?” Doris’s voice called from the hallway.

“Are all the Wilder Widows here?” Rachel asked.

“Yep. We all made it together.”

Rachel smiled a tired smile. “Send them in.”

One by one, the three Widows tip-toed into the room, each coming up to give Rachel their best wishes and a hug. When Marge got there, Rachel recoiled and said, “Whoa! Marge! What the hell happened to your head?”

“Surfboard. Kangaroo. Doris. Tree.”

Rachel tipped her head. “I’m gonna need to hear this whole story.”

Marge grinned. “It’s a doozy.”

“They’re ready,” a redheaded nurse said when she peeked into the room. “Time for everyone to clear out.”

It took everything I had to pull myself away from Rachel after working so hard to get to her side, but after giving her a last kiss on the forehead, Tom guided me out into the waiting room where we joined the other spouses. When they wheeled Rachel past, Blake gave us a wave, and though I was sad I wouldn’t be with her during the procedure, I knew she was in good hands.

An hour passed as we practically wore holes in the floor waiting for news. Finally, Blake walked into the waiting room with a smile so wide I was certain his face would tear.

“Rachel did great. She’s going to be okay. And ... it’s a girl.”

“A girl!” I screamed, and the Widows joined me as we jumped up and down holding hands.

I turned to Tom and tossed my arms around his neck. “You’re a Pops! You’re a Pops!” I cried out as I hugged him tight.

“Congratulations, Nana,” he said back.

My tears flowed freely as I hugged him, the wonder of this miracle of life happening because of our love for one another. Even though it had taken us a long time to find each other again, it was all worth the wait for this moment when we got to celebrate the birth of our granddaughter together.

“Want to see her?” Blake asked.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and nodded fast. “Yes! Of course!”

“Come on,” he said with a wave.

“We’ll be back soon,” I said to the Widows who were still grinning as widely as me.



“Take your time. We’re more than happy here. We’ll see the baby later after Rachel recovers,” Doris said. “Enjoy this special moment.”

“I will,” I said with a soft smile, still shocked I was so close to meeting my granddaughter.

When we got to the recovery room, Blake gently pushed open the door. I stepped in first, and when I saw Rachel holding the baby to her chest and she looked up and smiled, I pressed my hands to my mouth and cried.

“Come and meet Emma,” Rachel whispered.

“Emma?” I smiled, my heart cracking wide open knowing they’d given her my middle name.

Rachel nodded and gestured for us to come in. Tom and I tiptoed in, and Rachel pulled back the blanket just enough we could see little Emma’s face. When she opened her eyes and looked up at me, I gasped.

“She has your eyes,” I said to Tom. “Your exact eyes.”

“That she does.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her head. “Hello, my baby girl. I’m your Pops.”

“And I’m your Nana,” I said. “And we love you so much already.”

“I’m so glad you made it, Mom. I wouldn’t have wanted you to miss this.”

“You can thank my Widows,” I answered. “I never would have gotten here without them.”

As I said those words, I realized I meant more than just here in the hospital. I’d never have gotten here to this place with Tom beside me greeting his grandchild. Without them, we never would have reunited. Without them, we never would have married. Without our marriage, Rachel never would have met Blake. And without Blake, baby Emma never would have been born.

My life was infinitely better because of the three women who I knew would be by my side always. The three women I had to thank for all the blessings in my life.

After we spent some time with Emma, Rachel started getting drowsy, so we kissed her goodbye and went back to the waiting room to the excited Widows. They swooned over her pictures, and everyone agreed she had Tom’s eyes and my nose.

“She’s perfect. A miracle.” Doris pressed her hands together and closed her eyes.

“So freaking glad we didn’t miss this,” Marge said.

Alice nodded. “We went through hell to get here, but this was completely worth having to wear a snowmobile suit.”

I chuckled and gave Alice a bump with my shoulder.

She smiled then said, “Well, now that everyone is safe and sound, I say we go check into our hotels and wash this nasty snowmobile/plane smell off so when we come back to meet Emma later, we don’t scare her.”

“Good idea,” Marge said as she stood. “I stink.”

“Same,” I agreed. “Tom, did you call the realtor? Is the house we were renting next month ready early or are we getting a hotel?”

“We got in early. I’ll drive you there now.”

“Perfect,” I sighed. “We have a place to stay while we help Rachel get settled. How about we all meet back here later when Rachel is rested? I can’t wait to introduce you all to my granddaughter.”

“She’s a lucky girl to have a badass Nana like you,” Marge said. “Oh, man. The things we are going to teach her!”

“How to dress. How to dance. How to pick the right shoes for the right dress,” Alice started.

“How to knit! And bake!” Doris added.

“How to suture a wound. How to shoot a gun. How to surf.” Marge paused. “Okay, maybe I shouldn’t be the one to teach her to surf.”

I laughed and shook my head, then pointed at her tooth. “Please don’t.”

Everyone started laughing, then we gave each other a group hug. “See you ladies later.”

They all started walking out, then Alice paused, dragging Alejandro to a stop. “You know, I’ve never done it in a hospital bed. Want to be my first?”

He lifted his dark eyebrows then tugged her inside the empty hospital room door, and we could hear their giggles as we walked away.

“Do I want to know?” Tom asked.

“All you need to know is that I missed you, and now that Rachel is safe and Emma is safe, all those kisses are coming.”

“Then hurry up, woman. I missed you too.”

He spun me around and bent me back into a kiss that reminded me of the very first one. When he stood me up, he took my hand and said, “Let’s go home.”

## EPILOGUE

“Wookie gookie wookie,” Marge baby talked at Emma. “Who’s the pwettiest girl I know? Who’s the pwettiest one?”

“Emma is!” I answered, squeezing her tighter in my arms as Marge leaned over and booped her nose.

“I suppose I had to give up my title sometime,” Alice sighed. “It’s only right Emma wears the crown now.”

Chuckling, I shrugged. “Well, sorry to say, Alice, but you’ve been dethroned, because Emma is absolutely positively the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

“I can’t argue that,” she responded. “I’m happy to have the honor pass to someone in the family.” She lifted her martini in a cheers, then took a swig.

“I can’t get over those cheeks!” Doris squealed. “They are so big! Just wait until she can eat solid food, and I can start baking her muffins and cookies! Oh, they are gonna swell up so big once she starts getting Auntie Doris’s cooking in there.”

“Easy there, Sugar Pusher. Let’s not give her diabetes at the ripe old age of one,” Marge joked.

Doris waved a hand at her. “A little treat now and then won’t hurt her.”

“When she visits, don’t go shoving her full of sugar before you leave me with her.” I laughed.

Doris giggled and winked.

Emma reached up, and when her tiny fingers wrapped around my pinky, my heart nearly burst. “Oh, I’m going to miss this when I go home. I hate that I’m not going to see her every day anymore.”

It had been a week since Emma was born, and the Widows and their spouses had all stayed in L.A. to enjoy some vacation time in the sun while Tom and I bonded with Emma. They were all flying out tomorrow, and Tom and I had a few weeks left before we’d be heading home too. My heart hurt thinking about being separated from that beautiful new baby girl.

“Pizza’s here!” Tom called from the kitchen. “Let’s go sit out by the firepit and eat.”

“Coming, hon!” I called back, then scooped Emma against my chest and stood.

“It’s still winter back home,” Doris said. “Eating outside sounds good. I want as much sun as I can get before we head back to the cold.”

“I’ll get my sun hat.” Alice set her martini down and stood. “You may love cooking your skin like a fried egg in the sun, but I still have to keep my skin youthful.”

“I like the sun,” Doris responded with a pout. “Don’t make me feel bad about it.”

“I’ll sit in the sun with you, Doris,” I said. “I’m not scared of a few wrinkles. I think they make us look more distinguished. Like we’ve lived a good life.”

“Then I’ve lived one hell of a life!” Marge laughed.

Alice strolled over to the door and grabbed her hat, then the four of us went out into the backyard of the house Tom and I had rented.

“There she is!” Rachel crooned when I came out with Emma.

“Did you get a little nap?”

She gestured to the chaise lounge behind her. “Oh, yes. I fell asleep in that. It was heaven.”

“Good.” I kissed her cheek then reluctantly handed Emma back to her.

Tom came over and gave Emma a little kiss, then slipped his arm around my waist. “I got your weird pizza for you. The rest of us are having sausage and pepperoni.”

“My pizza isn’t weird. A lot of people like anchovies on pizza.”

“No. No they don’t,” Rachel said, and the Wilder Widows nodded in agreement while they pulled faces.

“What? My dad used to eat it, so I started too! They’re good!”

“I’m not kissing you after you eat that.” Tom leaned down and kissed me once. “There. That’s gonna have to tide us over until you brush your teeth.”

I smacked his shoulder. “Jerk.”

“And my salad? Did that come too?” Alice asked.

Tom gave her a look then nodded. “Yes, your salad came too.”

“Oh, good! Where is it?”

“Alejandro has it.” Tom pointed and she hurried over to him.

“Baby! I’ve got you a slice!” Roxie called to Marge, and she trotted over to join her girl ... the one she couldn’t stop passionately kissing even though the rest of us had told them to get a room more times than we could count.

“I’m gonna go by Axel.” Doris hurried off to where Axel sat beside the pool.

“It’s pretty cool your friends stuck around, Mom,” Rachel said.

We both looked around at all my favorite people laughing and talking while they dove into the pizzas we’d ordered.

“Yeah. I’m pretty lucky I found them. Not many people I know would snowmobile through a blizzard to get me to the airport so I could get home to my baby.”

“No one would.” Rachel laughed. “Literally no one else on the planet would have done that for you.”

I looked at Doris, Alice, and Marge and smiled. “You’re right. No one else would. I sure got lucky when they came knocking on my door.”

“Yes, you did.”

Blake came over and offered to take Emma. Rachel handed her over then gave him a kiss.

“And you sure got lucky with that one,” I said to her as he walked away kissing his new little girl.

“Yeah. I did.” She smiled.

“Come on. Let’s eat.”

“Just keep that gross pizza away from me.”

I gave her a gentle shove, then we walked over together and joined the group. After pizza was done and the sun started to set, Tom lit up the fire in the middle of the firepit. We all gathered around it and passed the beers around.

“This is the perfect last night,” Doris said. “We’re sure gonna miss you until you guys get back.”

“Yeah, we’ll miss you too,” I said. “But we want to stick around until we’re sure Rachel and Blake are all set with Emma, and I want to get a few more weeks in with that precious baby. I don’t know how we’re going to stay away from here. Too bad I hate L.A., or you’d be stuck with Tom and I living in your back yard.”

“Hey! You can’t leave us!” Marge protested. “We’re the Wilder Widows. We live on Wilder Lane. That’s the rule.”

“I’m not leaving you,” I said. “I’m just saying it’s going to be hard. I hope you’re ready for me to visit. A lot.”

Rachel looked down at Emma and smiled, then she gave Blake a look. He gave her a little nod back, and the two of them got matching sinister smiles.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking between them. “Why do your faces look like that?”

“Well ...” Rachel started. “You aren’t the only ones that hate L.A. Blake and I have been talking for a while about leaving here, and now with Emma, we really want to raise her up in a smaller town. A community. We think that’s really important.”

“You’re moving?” My mouth formed an “O” as I stared at her. “Really? Where?”

They looked at each other again. “We actually closed on a house today. It was a surprise.”

“Where? Where are you living?”

Rachel’s smile, the one that looked a lot like Tom’s, spread wider. “We bought a house on Wilder Lane.”

My mouth dropped open as I struggled for words. “Wilder Lane? *My* Wilder Lane?”

“Yes. Your Wilder Lane.”

Tom grabbed ahold of my hand and squeezed. “You’re ... you’re moving by us? Are you serious?”

Rachel nodded. “You and I lost so much time together, Dad, and I don’t want to miss any more. And I could use Mom’s help with the baby, and all of yours too.” She gestured to the Widows who nearly burst with the sizes of their smiles. “It’s a beautiful little community. Great schools. So safe. It’s where we want Emma to grow up. So, we did it. We bought a house there.”

“Oh, my God!” I screamed and leaped up, racing over to tackle her with a hug.

My shriek woke Emma, who started to coo and almost cry, but Tom hurried over and scooped her in his arms, gently lifting her up and down as he smiled and said, “Don’t cry, Emma. Pops has got you. That’s right, Pops has got you, and he’s gonna get you all the time now!”

“I love this so much.” I pressed a hand to my chest, my mind running wild with all the wonders awaiting us as we watched Emma grow up just down the street.

She stopped fussing as Tom held her against him. He looked up at Rachel, his eyes welling with tears. “You have no idea what this means to me. I dreamed of this. I didn’t dare believe it would ever be a reality, but my God did I dream of a world where I could see my daughter every day. Make up for so much of that lost time we never got.” He looked down at Emma and kissed her head. “And I can experience some of those missed moments now

with my beautiful granddaughter. First steps. First words. First ... well, everything.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy, Dad. I can’t wait for those things too.”

They locked eyes, and he reached out and slid an arm around her shoulder, pulling her up against his chest along with Emma. My heart nearly exploded as he cocooned both those girls in his arms, his chin resting on Rachel’s head as she hugged him tight.

“I can’t believe this,” I said as I turned to the Widows. “Now I’ll have everything. You gals. Tom. Rachel and Blake. Emma. It’s too perfect. It’s just all too perfect.”

“We’re going to have so much fun!” Doris clapped and bounced up and down.

“Oh, Emma, darling. Aunty Alice is going to spoil you so rotten.”

“I call dibs on babysitting!” Marge lifted her hand.

“No! I do!” Doris planted her hands on her hips and frowned.

Alice sat there and then shrugged. “I don’t babysit, but I will pay for a nanny if you need one.”

After we all finished talking about the exciting new turn of events, Marge snuck off and returned holding our basket, a bottle of whiskey, a notepad and pen. “It’s our last night here. What do you say we Widows kick out the rest of these old farts and get down to wish making business?”

“I think that’s our cue to go home,” Rachel laughed. “We don’t want to expose Emma to your whiskey-fueled insanity.”

“Yet.” Alice lifted a finger. “Someday, we’re going to teach her about whiskey and wishes. We don’t want her to wait to be a widow to live life to the fullest.”

“Let’s just stick with milk for now,” Rachel said with a smile. “But someday, yeah. Let’s do that. I want Emma to learn from all of you how to live ... really live. And I don’t want her waiting her whole life before she does it.”

I gave Emma a kiss. “If there’s anything I know I can teach her, it’s that she needs to find some of the bestest friends and start making a list of wishes long before she’s looking back on her life thinking she missed it.”

“I would love that, Mom. And now that we’re going to be living only two blocks away, I look forward to watching you do it. It’s part of why we decided to move back. The way you live your life now has taught me to go after what I want with both hands and never let go. And I want this. I want to

raise my daughter with you and Dad, and the Wilder Widows, in her life every single day, teaching her to be the best person she can be.”

I hugged Rachel tight, kissing her on the forehead as I threw up a silent prayer that even though I’d made a ton of mistakes, somehow I’d raised the most incredible woman ... and now she was going to raise my granddaughter to be as strong and confident as she had become.

With my heart full to bursting, we bid goodnight to everyone. They all went home, and Tom went upstairs to go to bed early. The Widows and I gathered around the fire, each taking turns swigging off the whiskey as we laughed and regaled in the tales of our latest adventure.

“Remember? It was just like ‘Pow!’ and boom. Down I went. Man, I can see now why they used to have kangaroos box. That baby packed some power!”

Alice pointed at Marge’s face. “At least your one eye isn’t black anymore. Only a little yellow. The rest of your face still looks like shit though.”

Marge grinned her toothy grin, leaning toward Alice to freak her out.

“Stop! God! When can they get that implant in?”

“Never,” Marge responded. “It’s worth missing a tooth just to watch you gag when I smile.”

“Monster,” Alice turned away. “A real monster.”

We finished drinking enough whiskey to catch a good buzz, then we grabbed our notepads and pens.

“Here we go, ladies. Make ‘em good,” Marge said.

“And no haunted houses, Marge! That was the deal!” I pointed my pen at her.

“No haunted houses.” She raised her hand and pressed to her heart. “I swear.”

“Good.” Doris breathed out. “That was scary.”

“Don’t worry. The wish I have planned is soooo much better.”

The way her eyes sparkled as she said it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. “Marge! What are you planning?”

She smiled and covered her paper, then laughed hysterically as she wrote it down.

“Marge! Don’t you dare write down whatever it is you’re writing down!” Alice scolded.

“I’m scared.” Doris scrunched her face.



“Come on, you ninnies. Get wishing.”

With a lengthy sigh, I tried to push aside all the horrors I envisioned Marge could be writing, and then I smiled when I wrote my big wish. With matching silly grins, the Wilder Widows and I all folded them up then dropped them in the basket.

I sat back in my chair. “Well, that’s done. Now what are we going to do for the next year while we wait for our newest Wilder Widows trip?”

Alice answered, “We’re going to go home, dote on that darling baby together, keep the passions going in our marriages with our Wilder Wives outings, and grow our business so big that every aging woman in the world gets to walk around in comfortable *and* fashionable shoes.”

She pointed to her feet, and we all grinned.

“Now that sounds like a great plan.” Marge nodded. “I’m all in.”

“Me too.” I smiled.

“Me three.” Doris shimmied in her seat. “We’re so lucky to have each other.”

“Yes, we are,” I agreed. “My best friends for life. My partners in crime. The other halves of my heart. May we have many years of adventures together.”

“I’ll second that,” Alice said as she lifted her glass.

“To the Wilder Widows!” Marge cheered.

“To the Wilder Widows!” We cheered back.

And with the clink of our glasses, we sealed our friendship.

A soft breeze blew across the fire, and the flames danced a little higher.

“Does this remind you of anything?” Marge said with a smile.

“It reminds me of the night we spent with the tribe in Africa,” Doris answered. “When we danced around the fire.”

We all looked at the flames burning bright between us, then Alice arched an eyebrow. “Are you ladies thinking what I’m thinking?”

Marge leaped up and slipped out of her sandals. “Already ahead of you! Kick off those shoes and let’s get tribal!”

Excitement fluttered inside me as I hopped up beside her, my flip flops flying through the air as I sent them sailing then started shaking my hips. Doris squealed with excitement, and I grabbed her hand and pulled her up, her own body starting to wiggle as well.

“Wait!” Alice grabbed her phone and stayed planted in her chair.

“Come on, Alice! We’re dancing! You love to dance!” Marge stepped in front of her chair and started shimmying her shoulders at her just like she’d done when she was wearing her beaded costume.

Alice ignored her and typed away on her phone, then a moment later, tribal music started flooding out of the speaker. Alice grinned. “Now we’re ready to dance.”

She held out her hand, and I grabbed it and pulled her up. With the sounds of the African drums and chanting flooding the air around us, we started dancing wildly around the fire just like we had that night in Africa. We let our bodies free to move to the pull of the beat, and we lost ourselves in one another. We laughed and leaped around, our bond growing deeper with each step we took, then we reached out and grabbed each other’s hands. As we skipped around the fire, our hands and hearts intertwined, I felt our connection deepen, and I knew more than ever what I’d already known before.

We belonged together.

I smiled across the flames at the three faces grinning back at me—the faces of my three best friends.

My sisters.

My Wilder Widows.

The women who had changed my life in ways I’d never be able to truly comprehend. The women I owed all of my happiness to ... happiness that wouldn’t exist without them in my life every day. They had saved me, and I had saved them. We had forged an unbreakable bond that I knew would be there as long as we lived.

And live we would. We would live wild and free together. For adventure. For love. For friendship. Always pushing each other to experience everything life had to offer, and always supporting each other as we went out and made our wildest wishes come true.

But my greatest wish had already come true.

I had them.

Forever.

# THANK YOU FOR READING

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