

DIAMOND COVE ROMANTIC COMEDY SERIES



CRAZY LITTLE THINGS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Crazy Little Thing

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First edition

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Prologue Pt. 1

AXEL

The Jell-O shot to the head at the after-party was a surprise, but not the biggest one of the night.

For three years, Axel Clayton had performed on small stages to small audiences, and even occasionally in bars, all across the country. Getting the opening act for Midnight Panther had felt like a dream come true. He sang in front of sixty-thousand people at St. Mary's University stadium in Florida. First real gig.

He'd never forget the way the stage vibrated under his feet as the crowd stomped, cheered, and shouted, or the bright lights shining down over him, the crisp night air in the open stadium, and the adrenaline. It'd been the most fun he'd had performing ever.

The members of Midnight Panther had been so encouraging too.

"You were amazing!" The drummer swatted him on the bum with his drumsticks as he passed to the stage after Axel's opening.

The lead guitarist ruffled his hair. “You did great!”

“Best opener we’ve ever had,” the bassist added, giving him a fist bump.

Then came Callum Sloan, their lead singer, one of the best rock vocalists out there, and one of Axel’s singing heroes. He had a five-octave range while Axel sat comfortably at four and a half. But that wasn’t all. The man knew how to write lyrics. Midnight Panther was a hard rock band, so much so Axel had been surprised when they’d asked him to open. Hard rock wasn’t his thing. That said, Callum often got songs on the album with real soul and Axel respected that.

Callum stopped and clapped him on the shoulder. “Do you hear that crowd out there?”

Axel nodded, so shocked Callum was taking this time to talk to him when he should be heading on stage.

“That’s all you, man,” Callum said, the faintest hint of alcohol on his breath, and pointed out to the cheering crowd. “You did that. You’ve got a great talent, kid.”

“Thank you,” Axel said, not even caring he’d been called kid.

“No, thank you.” Callum chucked him on the shoulder and jogged out to the stage to more veracious screams.

Axel was humbled.

Watching Midnight Panther perform from the side of the stage had been one of the more exhilarating experiences of his life.

Then the concert ended, and their shared manager started bringing groups of fans on stage for an after-party. By fans, he meant people of the scantily clad, female persuasion with questionable sobriety.

Axel wasn't exactly surprised; that kind of thing happened all the time in the music business, but it'd been the first time he'd *seen* it happen. He spent a good chunk of the night feeling awkward as he'd gently pried the fingers of many a lady off his chest, arms, and parts best left unspoken.

Movement. Movement quickly became his friend as he darted from one place to the other, one group to another, one temporary sanctuary to another. At least the band members seemed to be enjoying themselves, all except Callum, who'd absconded to a couch in a dark corner with a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels, and a scowl that had left Axel questioning what'd happened to him. He'd been running the performance high when he'd come off stage.

Their manager, Chaz Collins, sidled up to Axel, offering him a beer.

He waved it off. "No, thanks."

"Suit yourself," Chaz said, slinging an arm over Axel's shoulder and turning him from the group he was currently standing with. He smelled like cheap perfume. "Walk with me."

Axel shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. "What's up?"

Leaning in like he was about to whisper something conspiratorial, Chaz said, “They want you.”

An ick-shiver ran down Axel’s spine, and his face scorched with the fire of his embarrassment. The women? Most of them had many years on Axel’s twenty-three. Was this really a conversation he should be having with his manager? He rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh, yeah ... I figured.”

Chaz squeezed his shoulder, stopping near the back door with a jolt and making the beer in his hand slosh out the bottleneck. “They told you?” He peered over his shoulder to see who might be listening.

Axel’s brows shot to his hairline as he glanced over his shoulder too. They were out of earshot. Chaz didn’t normally get drunk. He didn’t seem drunk. “They’ve been telling me all night.”

“It’s confidential!” Chaz set his beer down on a nearby table and faced him, hands on his hips. “So, what do you think?”

Uh ... he was starting to think he was thinking something totally different from whatever Chaz was thinking. “I ... don’t know. What do you think?” he hedged.

Chaz ran a hand through his greased-back blond hair and let out a low whistle. “I think you jump on it.”

His brain stuttered to a halt. “It?” Axel blinked. Then shook his head. “Okay, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Then came the big surprise of the night. “You replacing Callum Sloan as the lead singer of Midnight Panther,” Chaz

said, his teeth nearly vibrating in his excitement.

“What?” Axel practically yelled, not that anyone could hear him over the throbbing bass beat of the overhead music.

“Shhh, lower your voice,” Chaz said. “They haven’t told Callum yet.”

Callum knew. He’d bet a half a bottle of Jack Daniels Callum knew. Axel felt a pang of regret for the man who was currently being stabbed in the back by his own band and manager.

Axel shook his head. “Midnight Panther’s great, but they don’t play what I do. And even if they did, I’d feel like a real sleaze doing that to Callum. Besides, I don’t know why they’d want me when Callum’s talent is so beyond mine.”

“He’s a drunk, and you aren’t.”

Axel had smelled booze on Callum when he’d taken the stage earlier—after he’d been kind to Axel.

Chaz shook his head. “The band’s fed up with him going on stage three sheets to the wind. Sick of his moods, sick of him missing practices, sick of it all. That’s on Callum, not you. Tonight was your audition. They loved you. So did the crowd. And ...” Chaz pulled his phone from his pocket and turned it on before handing it over to Axel. “This is what they’re offering.”

Chaz had opened his phone to an email from Midnight Panther, and they had highlighted two numbers for him. Axel’s jaw dropped. “Is that ...?”

“A six-figure signing bonus?” Chaz nodded. “Yes, it is.”

A *high* six-figure signing bonus. He pointed to the number below that. “And this—”

“Your estimated yearly income, though it’s probably underestimated by at least half a million,” Chaz said.

Axel swallowed. Hard.

Chaz smirked. “Now, what do you say? Tempted?”

Yeah, he was. There were a lot of zeros in those numbers, but He handed Chaz his phone back. “It’s not me. Sorry, can’t do it.”

Chaz gritted his teeth. “At least think about it. You aren’t likely to get another offer like this ever again. It’s a great opportunity.”

Axel nodded. “I understand.”

Chaz squeezed his shoulder. “Good. Good. We’ll talk about it again in a few days.”

He wouldn’t change his mind. He’d keep working small shows for another ten years, longer even, if it meant he could sing what he liked. And at least when he worked small shows, the biggest surprise he’d ever gotten was being flashed by a woman in the front row.

Speaking of that ...

“Hey, Axel,” a woman sniggered.

He turned at the sound of his name to see her standing by the snack bar, which consisted mostly of booze, booze, more

booze, and junk food. She stood with two other women and the lead guitarist. Before he gathered what was happening, she arched her arm back and swung it forward in a pitcher's throw. "Catch!"

The red Jell-O shot flew through the air, and the world around him seemed to slow. In a blink, he processed three things: one the band members and their groupies were drunk and laughing hysterically at him, two, the Jell-O was going to hit him in the side of the head before he could turn all the way, and three Callum Sloan stepped out the backdoor.

Then splat! The little plastic cup hit him at his hairline above his temple, and gelatinous liquor exploded across the top of his head in a sticky, lumpy, cool mess.

Nice. Classy.

At least his hair was black. After it dried, no one would be able to tell he had red Jell-O in it.

The world returned to normal speed, the laughter filled the room, and Axel stepped back in shock.

"You were supposed to catch it in your mouth," the woman yelled, to more uproarious laughter as she nearly toppled over, taking an equally tipsy guitar player with her.

Right, he could see now why they were so eager to get rid of Callum—*he* was making *them* look bad. Also, who catches a Jell-O shot in their mouth from thirty feet, with little warning from someone with bad aim?

Chaz was nearly doubled over with laughter too, but he still managed to hand Axel a handkerchief.

“Here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson,” he sang under his breath as he gave a friendly wave to the woman, then wiped his face and gave the hanky back to Chaz. Axel instantly wanted to be anywhere but here. He’d wanted that for the last couple of hours, but now he was ready to do something about it because he knew this wasn’t where he was going to end up. Having decided not to be part of the band was freedom and it felt so sweet.

He made his excuses. “Got some Jell-O down the back of my shirt.” He really did. It was cold, and he wanted a shower.

More heaving laughter.

“I’m just going to—” He pointed off to the side and started moving. No one noticed he didn’t head for the bathrooms or that he’d stepped out the back door.

He pulled his long-sleeved, black T-shirt away from his back as he stepped outside onto the roped-off sidewalk behind the stadium, and flapped it until the lump of Jell-O fell out. Two security guards stood at either end of the path with a golf cart in the middle they’d used to cart him and Chaz from the parking lot. One lonely overhead light lit the dark path by the security guards, and the bigger of the two gave him a two-fingered salute.

He waved back and turned his attention to the golf cart. Maybe he could commandeer it and get out of here. It was

late, and now that he was sticky, he was way past ready to head back to his hotel for the night.

A smooth tenor sang out lyrics to Axel's most popular song, Amelia. "And I tried, tried so hard to make you proud, but life's never so easy as picking a path."

Axel spun on his heel and peered into the shadows of the building. A lone figure leaned against the concrete wall, one foot up, the tip of a lit cigarette the only substantial light around him. He kind of reminded Axel of a cowboy—all smooth and cool looking.

"Callum?" Axel took a hesitant step forward. If he was being honest, this was the reason he'd come out here. To talk to the man. See if he was all right. But now that he was here, he didn't know what to say.

Callum took a deep drag from his cigarette, then sent out a poof of smoke before dropping the bud on the ground and snuffing it out with the toe of his shoe. He continued with the song, "They say stop dreamin', you say dream on, my world's in tatters ...". He moved from the shadows like he was coming off a step, only there wasn't one, and he nearly tipped all the way forward before catching his balance.

Axel mentally took back his compliment; right now Callum wasn't cowboy cool, he was a toddler learning to walk on shaky legs. The man had one hand still wrapped around the now almost empty Jack Daniels' bottle, and he looked drawn, sad—lost. "Those are s-uh-some beautiful lyrics. The crowd

eated—ate them up.” He stumbled over his words as much as his feet—though he sang as if he were sober.

“Thank you,” Axel said cautiously. The man may be a crazy-talented singer, but he did have a reputation for being a grumpy drunk. So far, Axel just wanted to get him something warm to drink, a blankie, and Queen’s, U2’s, or Journey’s greatest hits to listen to. That’s what his grandma always did for him when he was upset as a kid. Come to think of it, Nonna still did that on occasion ...

Callum ran a hand through his chin-length brown hair. “They offer you the job?”

Axel nodded. “Yeah, but I’m not taking it.”

Callum took the last swig of his Jack Daniels, then stumbled to a bin by the back door and dumped it in. He glanced up. “Always recycle.” That was the trash can.

Axel almost grinned at him. The man was drunk, alone, and had likely performed for the last time with Midnight Panther, and instead of throwing a fit and shattering the bottle on the ground, like most rock stars would, he was being courteous—holding on to his dignity. Or at least trying.

“How old were you when you started in the biz?” Callum asked.

“I got my first gig when I was nineteen.”

Resting his hands on his hips, Callum glanced up at the sky. He stared so long, Axel was afraid he’d forgotten he was there or that he’d fallen asleep. He stood at the ready to catch him

should he start to tip, then shot a glance at the two security guards. The little guy rolled his eyes and the big guy shrugged a shoulder. Callum cleared his throat.

“Twenty years, man,” Callum said, drawing Axel’s attention again. “That’s how long I’ve been doing this. That’s a really long time.”

Axel rubbed the back of his neck. “Hopefully you’ll have at least another twenty.”

Callum chuckled and let his chin drop to his chest, then glanced at Axel with a half-smile on his lips—he almost looked sober for a moment. “Nah, I’m done.”

“Don’t say that,” Axel said. “You’re the best thing about Midnight Panther. You don’t need them. They need you.”

“Care to lick my right boot too?” Callum asked, extending his right foot and losing his balance. He caught it against the trash bin before Axel had to jump in.

“You think I’m sucking up?” Axel asked.

“Aren’t you?”

Taking a cue from the big security guard, Axel shrugged. “Only person here worth sucking up to, but no, just telling the truth.”

Callum teetered and tottered over to him. “That’s the key, telling the truth, kid. Kid ... kid ... what’s your real name?”

Axel frowned, here it came. “*Axel*. Axel’s my real name.”

“No.” Callum’s eyes went wide in shock.

“Yes.” Why was Axel so hard to believe?

“No, way!” Callum said through a titter. “That’s hilarious. Did your dad like Axel Rose or something?”

“Nope,” Axel said, “Just spiting my grandpa.”

Callum gave him a blank look. That story might be too much for his current state of drunkenness.

“Never mind,” Axel said.

“What was I saying?” Callum scratched his head. “Something important?”

“Uh ...” Axel had to think. “The key is telling the truth?”

“Yes!” Callum clapped his hands once. “Telling the truth. Refusing to hear lies. Not putting up with the constant bull crap at every turn. You keep doing that, you’ll be just fine. This path you’re on,” he made air quotes around ‘path,’ making Axel think he was referring back to Axel’s song again, “will chew you up and spit you out if you let it.”

Life’s never so easy as picking a path.

“What are you going to do?” Axel asked.

Straightening his spine, Callum said, “I’m going to go back in there, eat some snacks, then quit.”

Axel nodded. Didn’t sound like a bad plan to him. “Well, just watch out for the Jell-O shots, they have a killer arc.”

Callum grabbed his shoulder. “Thanks, man,” he said with so much sincerity, Axel panicked for a moment the man might start crying. He didn’t know how to handle crying. That was

his dad's purview. Axel took after his grandfather. Not because he saw crying as a weakness like gramps, but because he turned into a panicked ball of uselessness when it happened ... like gramps. Axel had gotten as far as patting people on the shoulder and saying *there, there*, and that'd taken years of training from his very disappointed father. Callum's eyes glistened. "I'll stay away from the Jell-O shots for sure. You're a good pal."

Every muscle in Axel's body stiffened. Please don't cry. Pleeeeeeease don't cry. "O-kay."

Callum shook it off and reached for the handle. "There's a bag of Cheetos in there with my name on it." He held the door open and made a sweeping motion with his arm. "You coming?"

Axel also didn't do drama. If Callum was about to quit, he wanted to be as far away as possible. Not that he couldn't handle confrontation because he could, but drama, especially drama that had nothing to do with him? No, thanks. "I'm beat, gonna head out. You going to be all right?"

"Me?" Callum asked. "Yeah, man. I was born salty." He patted Axel on the shoulder one more time, then marched inside, head held high. For just a moment, Axel wondered if he should stop him, the guilt of having been offered the man's job hitting him full-force, but by now everyone was three sheets' times a hundred to the wind. If any of them remembered performing in the morning, he'd be impressed, let alone remembering anything anyone said or did.

The door banged shut behind him, and Axel breathed a sigh of relief.

Time to go. He had his wallet and the keys to his rental car, and nothing keeping him there. He turned left, about to head to the parking lot, when he heard *her*.

“I have to get through, please.”

Behind the red velvet rope, under the one street lamp, stood a young woman. Her golden-brown hair was pulled back in a messy bun; not an intentional messy, more like she'd nearly pulled her hair out in frustration, and she wore baggy, mom jeans and was drowning in a massive, ugly pink sweater. He couldn't even see her hands when she pointed down the path. It was eighty degrees out here.

None of that would have stopped him as quickly or intently as the desperation in her tone.

“You don't understand,” she said, gripping the straps of her black backpack. “I'm going to miss my train.”

Train? It was well after twelve, dark, on campus, and she was running to catch a train?

“Sorry, miss,” the big security guard said. “This area's closed for the concert.”

“Concert?” She threw her hands up. “What concert?”

The concert had ended a couple of hours ago.

“You're going to have to go around,” the shorter of the two guards said.

She narrowed her eyes, and there was something slightly comical about it, like she'd never done it before and couldn't quite get a handle on how to do it right. "If I go around, I'll never make it."

"You'll miss it for sure if you stay here and keep arguing with me because we're not letting you through," Shorty said.

Her face went beet red, and she took a step forward so fast, Shorty took a step back. She was taller than him but half his thickness at least, and behind a rope. "Listen here, buddy," she seethed. "I've had a really bad day, and if you think I'm going to cap it off by having to walk an hour home, in the dark, on my own, then you're sorely mistaken."

Shorty glanced up at the big security guy and chuckled. Guess he got his bravery back. "Oh, yeah, what are you going to do about it?"

She did that awkward glare thing again, then shot her gaze back to Axel and pointed. "You; are you in charge?"

Axel glanced at Big, who once again shrugged his shoulders. "*Are you?*" the gesture asked.

Technically, that would be Chaz, but maybe he could help. He headed their way.

"Wait. You don't know who that is?" Shorty snorted. "He's ___"

The girl turned her glare on Shorty again. "Am I standing here arguing with you? I don't think so."

Shorty's jaw dropped, and he went silent.

Axel didn't blame him. Girl was fierce, and Shorty was being ridiculous by not letting her through. Axel stopped in front of her, and felt his tongue go a little heavy—okay, so maybe she was a little ragged around the edges, with a crazed look in her eye, but she had the prettiest ivory skin he'd ever seen, a smattering of freckles over her button nose, and the most breathtaking eyes he'd ever seen. They were aqua green like a shallow strip of ocean, and he had the strangest urge to dive right in. "How can I help?"

She folded her arms, and nodded, but didn't look, toward Shorty. "This guy seems to think you're someone I should know."

"I'm Axel."

Her expression went blank for a moment. Had she figured out who he was? "Axel?" she asked, her eyes wide in amused shock. "As in axle *rod*?"

Nope, no recognition. "Yep, exactly like." He, Axel the rock singer, had been named after a car part—not Axel Rose like everyone and their pampered poodle thought. And to add to the fun, that fact was still creating major angst in his family to this day. At least his dad hadn't spelled it like an axle rod. He extended his hand. "Hi, my name is ..." he couldn't help but sing Eminem's popular Slim Shady song.

"What?" Big said and snorted, and picked up the counter verse.

Both Axel and the girl looked at him. Axel grinned. "Hi, my name is—"

Big pointed at him. “Who?”

“Slim Shady? Really?” the girl asked, arching a brow at Axel. “I’m guessing you get this reaction a lot?”

He looked away. Yeah, he did. He had a real love/hate relationship with his name. Sure, it was perfect for what he did, but no one ever believed it was his name. He was pretty sure he’d spent a good ten percent of his life explaining it to people.

“Well, *Axel*, Pinky and the Brain here, won’t let me through the shortest route to the train station where my train is scheduled to leave in less than thirteen minutes,” she said, a hint of that desperation coming through the fiery snark, and yanked on his heartstrings. “So far today I’ve missed the bus, my first class, and my sanity. I’ve been overlooked, straight-up forgotten, cheated and cheated on. I’m tired, I’m hungry, and I’m freezing. Please, I just want to go home.”

Okay, he didn’t know what she was talking about, but he loved the alliteration in her words and his mind started playing with song ideas. Cheated and cheated on? Brilliant! Also, he knew he was letting her through.

“Of course, you can go through,” he said. “And sorry about this.”

“Not your fault,” she said, and the words hit him like a fist to the gut. *Not your fault.*

Not. Your. Fault.

It wasn't. None of what'd happened tonight was his fault. With that realization, the dissonance inside him faded away. Callum was his own man who'd walked this way for twenty years. The band had a choice to make, and they'd done so without his knowledge or input. Axel turned down a huge salary, which probably set his career back a few steps, but he'd stayed true to the music inside of him.

He should hug her for opening his mind. Even though he'd just met her. Was that weird?

He stepped forward and lifted the rope, and she let out a gasp.

"You're bleeding," she said, those big eyes of hers going wide.

He brought his hands to his chest and glanced down. "I am?" What? "Where?"

Before he knew what was happening, she had her backpack slung around in front of her chest, pulled out a little flowered bag with a zipper on it, and alcohol wipes from there. "Your head. With that much blood, you probably have a concussion." She pushed past the rope to him.

His hand flew to his head, and the sticky mess at his hairline where the Jell-O shot had hit. The *red* Jell-O shot. "Oh, that. It's not a concussion."

She tore the wipe open and started dabbing at his head. "That's what a concussed person would say. I never knew security could be so dangerous." *And* in a blink of an eye,

she'd gone from worrying about missing her train to worrying about him. No one outside his family had ever been that sweet to him, especially not in the last few years. Not sincerely.

He reached up and covered her delicate, freezing hand with his, stopping her progress. She looked at him with those gorgeous eyes, and it was all he could do to keep talking. He swallowed, and spoke in a whisper, "It's not blood, it's Jell-O."

She frowned, but didn't pull her hand away from his. "Definitely concussed."

He chuckled and pointed over his shoulder toward the door. "Someone threw a Jell-O shot at me inside a few minutes ago. Strawberry, if I'm not mistaken."

She was tall for a girl, at least five feet eight or nine if he had to guess, so when she went up on tiptoe to sniff his hair, he only had to bend his knees a little to help her. It was a weird night. First one girl threw Jell-O at him, now he was letting a different one, an intriguing one, smell it. Funny the turns life takes.

"Raspberry," she said, turning red again, this time for an entirely different reason, then slowly slid her hand out from under his. "Whoops. I guess a flyby Jell-O-ing isn't as bad as a fistfight or something."

"No, not as bad," he said.

She pointed to the door. "Who was playing?"

Security? She thought he was a security guard. “Midnight Panther,” he said. How did she not know? They’d been advertising for weeks all over campus. He’d passed a good half dozen posters on his ride here on the golf cart from the parking lot.

She cringed. “Are they the ones that scream?”

He nodded. “I take it that’s not your thing?”

“No, I like to not just hear, but understand my lyrics,” she said, and he snickered. “I’m more of a country, classic rock kind of girl.”

Just his type. He smiled.

She batted her lashes. “Uh, well, I guess I release you back to work, your job, your employ, then,” she said in a rush of words and pointed over his shoulder down the sidewalk, “and I’ll just be on my way.”

She glanced at her watch, and a ball of panic welled inside him. On her way? All by herself? Here? It wasn’t safe! And what if she missed her train? Even worse. Plus, he wasn’t ready to let her go yet. He liked talking to her, even though it’d only been minutes. If he stopped her. She’d miss her train for sure. He glanced up the path, his gaze locked on the golf cart, and a brilliant idea hit him. He turned to her and smirked.

Prologue Pt. 2

KATE

The last thing Katherine Hart expected was to lose her cool for the first time in her *life* behind her university's football stadium to one really big and one really little security guard standing watch over a red velvet rope.

She wasn't an angry person. No. Katherine was a peacemaker. Always had been. She'd had to be.

Kate came from a family of nine. Her parents had four boys and three girls, and she was in the exact middle of all that. She wasn't even the oldest of the girls or the youngest of them, but middle there too. She'd never been a whiner, always content to sit quietly as her siblings gave a whole new meaning to the words *squeaky wheel*.

And, yeah, sometimes that meant she got overlooked—she remembered one time her dad had come home with dinner for everyone but her, completely on accident of course, and she'd ended up sharing her parents' meals as they'd apologized profusely. Another time, she'd broken her wrist, and because she'd been so calm about it, her parents hadn't taken her to a doctor until the next day when she'd started crying at

breakfast. That'd been embarrassing. Her parents loved her, but she was just easy to overlook, she guessed.

Kate.

The quiet one.

The peaceful one.

The one *not* calling attention to herself.

The one *trying* not to call attention to herself.

Heck, she was going to school to become a librarian. Didn't get much more placid than that.

It also didn't help that her siblings were all overachievers. Her younger siblings demanded every moment of her parents' time with sports, plays, and parent-teacher conferences where the teachers gushed over how amazing they were at everything. Her older sister was married with two kids *and* a clothing line of her own. Her oldest brother already had a lucrative career as a lawyer, and her other older brother was heading the way of the attorney too. Why had they picked those careers? Because they loved fighting. *Fighting*. Arguing. Debate. Being right all the time.

That wasn't Kate. Kate liked hiding, usually under a thick blanket with a flashlight and Jane Eyre. Yes, please! Not that she hadn't done well in school. She'd actually been on the honor roll multiple times, but again, she didn't call attention. That just wasn't her. She wasn't a fighter.

Until tonight, that was.

Maybe the indignation had been building over years, she wasn't sure, but it'd absolutely been building all day.

First, her mechanic tried to charge her double what he'd quoted, and she'd had to leave her car with him, (she'd get her brother and his love of fighting career to help with that later,) and she'd missed the bus that would've gotten her to her first class on time. The driver of the second bus that would've gotten her to her first class before it *ended* decided to stop for a coffee and donut in the longest Dunkin' Donuts line she'd ever seen. She'd been the only one on the bus. He'd gotten off without saying a word to her, locking the doors behind him. The look of surprise on his face when he'd gotten back on thirty minutes later confirmed her suspicion that he'd forgotten she was there. Her bright pink sweater hadn't even made an impression ...

After that, her teacher in her second class forgot her name, even though Kate had already taken three of the woman's classes and passed them with flying colors.

Deep breath!

Things had calmed down after that for two more classes and several hours of study at the library. She'd brushed the nasty incidents of the day aside, and all but skipped down to the curb in her excitement to see her boyfriend of one and a half years, who was supposed to pick her up. Only, he wasn't there.

She waited fifteen minutes, then texted him.

Kate:

Hey, I'm outside the library. Where are you?

Nothing.

Not wanting to seem pushy, she'd waited another fifteen minutes.

Kate:

Is everything all right?

Still nothing.

Another fifteen minutes later, freezing, and worried out of her mind, she'd called.

He answered on the fourth ring. "Kate?" His voice sounded groggy. But not like a real groggy from sleeping, but like a fake groggy to make her think he'd been sleeping. If she weren't so irate he'd forgotten her, she'd be offended he'd think she'd buy that. She had four brothers, and they excelled at the fake groggy. Had made a freakin' art form of it. "Everything all right? It's so late."

She gritted her teeth but tried to stay pleasant. He'd *forgotten* her. These things happened. No reason to take her bad day out on him. "Um ... you were supposed to pick me up at school? Remember?"

"Oh, shoot," he said. "I'm sorry, babe. I totally forgot."

Yeah, no kidding. "Well, can you come get me now?"

He groaned. “Think you can take the train? I wouldn’t ask, but I’m so tired.”

Kate took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. “No, yeah, that’s fine. I know you’ve been doubling up on shifts and still working hard to get your homework done, and ...”

A feminine giggle came through the line, followed by a shushing noise, and the sound a phone made when you covered it with your hand.

... and busy two-timing, cheating, double-dealing! “Who was that?” she demanded.

“No one, it-it’s,” he stuttered. “I’m w-watching a m-movie.”

“Wait until you see what I’m wearing, Ambrose,” the female voice called out. “You’re going to love it.”

Her insides chilled. Kate cleared her throat and spoke with deliberate slowness. “A movie with a guy named *Ambrose*? What are the odds?”

“Babe, l-listen, it’s not what you think ...”

She hung up. Fisted her hands. Screamed. Pulled at her hair. Had a one-fifth life, existential crisis. Then very quickly gotten a grip.

She could freak out that she’d just been cheated on by a guy with a stutter named Ambrose later. Now, she needed to get home. The buses stopped running at eleven, and there was only one more train she could catch. Leaving in twenty minutes. Across campus. A good thirty-minute walk away.

She went into a jog, her backpack loaded to the hilt with four large textbooks and a binder thumping painfully against her spine with every step, and went through all her secret shortcuts in her head. There was only one way she could go that would get her to the train on time. Maybe. Hopefully. If she were lucky, and she was due some luck. She didn't want the over-hour walk home.

She headed straight for the path behind the stadium. She was going to make it. She would make it! There was no way she wouldn't make it!

She would've made it if she hadn't been stopped by Dumb and Dumber.

Then she'd seen *him* off a little in the distance. Tall, dark, and handsome. First time she'd ever been able to apply the cliché to someone in real life or had wanted to.

It was probably that spewing of frustration that had kept her from drooling all over him.

He'd sauntered over with long, sure strides, made with long, sexy legs in jeans that fit just right, he wore a black Henley, with the sleeves rolled up past his elbows showing the corded muscles of his forearms, his skin was perfectly tanned, though she thought that had more to do with genetics than the sun, he had ink-black hair that was just as shiny, a dark gaze that seemed to see right through her, and a smirk that called to mind all things ... *delicious*. A tingle of awareness shot up her spine.

Axel. That's what he was called. Ironically, the same part on her car that had needed to be fixed. Oh, irony, you hysterical but cruel fiend.

And now, after spewing all the horrible ways her day had gone wrong, begging to be let through, and jumping the rope, not literally though, to patch up the non-existent wound on his head, her anger from the day was starting to fade, her brain to mouth filter re-engaged, and embarrassment coursed from her head to her toes and back again.

“Uh, well, I guess I'll release you back to your work, your job, your employ, then, and just be on my way,” she sputtered, going off like a thesaurus like she always did when she got nervous and glanced down the path that was her only hope of getting home before the witching hour.

“Why don't I give you a ride?” he said with a smirk as he pointed to the golf cart.

She froze and blinked up at him. A ride? With this handsome stranger? In the middle of the night? “On that thing?” she asked, pointing to it.

“Also known as a golf cart, but yeah,” he said. “Come on, let me help you. We've already held you up for several minutes, and I'd like to be sure you get where you're going safely.”

He wanted to make sure she was safe? Her? This gorgeous apparition who'd appeared out of nowhere? When did something like this ever happen? And to her nonetheless? She

almost glanced over her shoulder to see if he was talking to someone else. Like her big sister.

She wrung her hands together. “I don’t know ...” Actually, something like this had happened to her before. In high school. She’d thought the quarterback had asked her on a date to a party; he’d wanted a designated driver. Of course, she’d found that out after he’d kissed her while drunk as a skunk. It’d been her first kiss too. If that wasn’t a cautionary tale, she didn’t know what was.

Axel arched a perfect, dark brow. “What time is it again?”

She glanced down at her watch. Seven minutes until her train arrived, and she was at least that, if not more, in a good, hard sprint away. She looked up at him and nodded. “Okay, let’s go,” she said, making a beeline for the golf cart.

Her dad always told her to trust her gut, and though she’d just met this guy, her gut told her she could trust him to get her safely to the train on time. He was a security guard, after all. If he had ulterior motives, she didn’t care at the moment, so long as she didn’t have to make the long trek home on foot. Plus, she had a Taser. Her dad had gifted one to each of his daughters last year for Christmas. “Better safe than sorry!” he’d said as they’d stared wide-eyed at the bizarre gift. Though they’d gotten much more interesting when her brothers had demanded they be Tased. Ha!

They hopped on the cart, she slung her bag onto her lap, and he started it up, revving it with a comedic little purr from the engine.

“Impressed?” he asked, wagging his brows, and backing up with a slow beep, beep, beep.

She rolled her eyes. Boys.

“Thought so.” He snickered.

They got going at a much faster speed than she thought possible of a golf cart, and she ended up grabbing the little armrest at her side and bracing herself on the dashboard. “Wow, these things can really move.”

He didn’t slow down, but his smile got bigger.

“Do you know where you’re going?” she asked.

“Train’s right by the stadium parking lot, right?”

“Yeeees!” she squealed as they went over a bump in the sidewalk, that nearly toppled her out.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he brushed a lock of dark hair out of his eyes, “what are you doing here so late?”

She gritted her teeth as she thought of her cheating Ambrose. She hoped he choked on his stutter.

Axel slanted a gaze at her. “Yikes, that bad, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said casually. “Is it bad if my boyfriend forgot to pick me up because he was cheating on me?”

“Yeah,” Axel said, sympathy coloring his tone. “Yeah, I’d say that’s bad. That happened tonight?”

She gave a stiff nod. “Can’t believe I wasted a year and a half on that guy.”

Axel let out a low whistle.

She faced him in the little cart. “Is it weird that I’m not even sad? I mean, I’m mad. I’m really mad. But I’m not sad. Not even a little.”

He scrunched his brow in thought for a moment, then said, “No, not weird.” He chuckled. “Well, not too weird. It just means he wasn’t the right guy.”

She did snort this time. “The right guy. I wouldn’t even know what that would look like.”

“You will when you see him.”

Tingles ran down her spine, and she glanced over at him, catching him in a stare. He glanced away and smirked.

“Maybe,” she said, brushing a lock of loose hair that had blown across her face out of the way. “Maybe not. I’m not much of a romantic. Or maybe I’m too much of one?” She tilted her head as she thought that over.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

What *did* she mean? “I’ve spent all my life reading the classics, Austin, Radcliffe, the Bronte sisters, Blackmore, Fitzgerald, Tolstoy, yet I somehow can’t imagine ever finding a love like that. I’ve never seen a love like that.” That wasn’t to say her parents weren’t in love, or her grandparents or her great-grandparents. It was just that they were all so ... comfortable.

He rounded a corner, and the parking lot and train station came into view, brightly lit by multiple street lights. They both

went silent as he pulled up out front and parked. Then he faced her, turning his entire body until he was looking right at her, and giving her his full attention. “It exists,” he said. “I can promise you that.”

An unexpected lump formed in her throat. Not because of Ambrose, not because of her horrible day, but from the sincerity in Axel’s voice. He wasn’t just saying that. He knew. And she wanted to believe him. She had to believe him. “How are you so certain?”

His dark brown eyes glittered, brighter than the stars currently filling the night sky, and she got the feeling he knew exactly what she’d been thinking. “I’ve seen it.”

Her heart swelled in her chest, but she didn’t have time to answer before the little toot of the train horn announced its arrival.

Axel nodded toward the platform with his chin. “Now, small-town girl, stop living in your lonely world, and go take your midnight train to anywhere.”

She smiled. “I love that song.”

“You know it?”

She snorted. “Of course I do. Who doesn’t? Journey’s classic. And I must say, I’m relieved. I was worried there for a moment that your tastes leaned toward the Slim Shady variety.”

This time he laughed, and it was glorious. Kate was pretty sure somewhere an angel had just gotten its wings. “You’re

fierce. I like that,” he said as his gaze darted down to her lips.

Tonight was full of surprises. Kate hadn't expected to lose her cool for the first time *ever* in her life behind her university's football stadium, but she also hadn't expected to do the bravest thing she'd ever done in her life either. Hadn't expected to really, truly be fierce. And that was what counted, she decided.

Before she could second guess herself, she leaned forward, wrapped an arm around Axel's neck, and planted a kiss on his cheek, skimming the edge of his lips on accident. But she couldn't bring herself to care. Especially not when one of his arms wrapped around her, when he splayed his fingers over her back. Those gloriously warm fingers that had covered her hand at his temple only a few minutes ago when she'd been trying to clean his nonexistent wound. And when she pulled back to look at him, and his gaze dropped to her lips again, she reveled in it even as her stomach tumbled like clothes in a dryer.

She cleared her throat. “Thank you, Axel, the security guard. You're really good at your job, and incidentally, my hero.”

At that, she popped off the golf cart and sprinted to the train.

She thought he called out after her but didn't hear what he said, if he'd said anything, as she boarded the train and the doors whooshed closed behind her. Did it matter? It wasn't like she was ever gonna see him again.

As the train pulled away, she caught him standing on the platform watching her go, a look of disappointment? Regret? on his face, or maybe that was just her ... and suddenly her bad day didn't feel so bad anymore. And *suddenly* she knew she was going to be making some changes. Her days of being the quiet, peacemaker, unnoticeable Kate, were over. She liked being fierce too.

Chapter 1



Don

“Is that what I think it is?”

Don clutched his green messenger bag to his side as Harry scented the air like a hound dog, the bill of his plaid pageboy hat in the air.

“Cocoa’s cookies?” Walt twitched his mustache as he came up behind Harry.

Don brought a finger to his lips and shushed just as Winnie, Polly, and Rosa came around the corner from the foyer and into the hallway where the offices at The Palms were located. They hadn't done a ton of Halloween decorating yet, but Samantha had a Frankentine's monster cut out hanging from her office door.

All three men straightened their spines as the women sauntered past.

They were looking mighty smart today, as usual. Winnie wore a lime green wrap dress with a bold pattern that she had, no doubt, made herself, Polly was in pressed khakis, with her typical moccasins, and turquoise jewelry, and Rosa wore a Mexican embroidered T-shirt, and light-colored Chino pants.

Polly and Rosa both shot glances toward his bag before heading in, and Winnie simply smiled and said, “Morning, gentlemen.”

Don was fooling no one. The delicious smell of pumpkin white chocolate chip cookies wafted from his bag like a stink bomb. A good smelling one that made your mouth water instead of your eyes.

As soon as the female persuasion of The Secret Seven, minus one, had passed through the frosted glass door into the war room, Walt and Harry were on him like heat-seeking missiles.

“When did she slip you the recipe?” Walt’s gaze homed in on Don’s bag.

By “she,” Walt meant Cocoa, The Palms’ cute-as-a-button baker extraordinaire.

For weeks Cocoa had been teasing her secret recipe, teasing them about how amazing these cookies were, and how she would only make them in October. Don had practically been

able to taste the sweet flavors of pumpkin, spice, and white chocolate from her descriptions alone.

Then she'd had to go and get married and run off on her honeymoon, leaving without a cookie in sight.

Don was fond of Aaron, the alligator wrangler who had served in the Navy with his grandson, Sean, but Don wasn't happy with him taking Cocoa off on a honeymoon at the same time she promised to make these particular cookies. And it seemed neither Walt nor Harry had been very happy about it either.

Don had also found it suspicious that Aaron had become surprisingly absent in the weeks leading up to the wedding after Cocoa had announced that they would be leaving.

That last fact made Don a little proud, and he straightened his spine just to think of it. He may be eighty-four years old, but men three times his minor still feared him.

Cocoa didn't fear him. He tried to glare the recipe out of her, but she'd simply giggled and patted his big bicep with her diminutive fingers. It might have been irritating if Don hadn't been so proud of her. In his entire life, he'd never been able to successfully scare a woman. Never wanted to. Too many childhood years of his parents beating into him the importance of having respect for women and treating them like queens.

Thankfully, a love of baking was a favorite pastime Don and Cocoa shared, and this morning, the morning after her wedding day, when Don had gotten up, he found her recipe shoved under his door.

Walt reached for the flap on the bag, and Don slapped his hand away with a thwack. Walt cradled his hand to his chest.

Harry pointed. “You better give us one of those before—”

Nancy came around the corner then, and Don threw out an arm across Harry’s chest in a botched attempt to shut him up before she heard him. Don wasn’t sure if she’d heard Harry, but he was certain she’d seen Don’s soccer mom seat belt move.

At least that’s what Rita, one of the high school interns here, called it. Don knew because he’d spent several hours here in The Palms parking lot, and on the roads of Diamond Cove helping Rita practice for her driving test. She needed *a lot* of practice. And he had employed the soccer mom seat belt move more than once when they’d been out.

Nancy narrowed her eyes just a smidge, then her lips tugged up on one side. She tucked a loose strand of her blonde bob behind her ear and marched forward like a woman on a mission. She wore a navy-blue tracksuit, which she’d ironed to create a crease down the front of her pants like they were dress pants. Woman loved business. So much so, that even after her doctors had made her retire from her successful company because of a heart condition. Her love of meetings, organizing, and leading the charge had seeped over into The Secret Seven.

Don appreciated her no-nonsense attitude when it came to their mission to set up their grandkids, but sometimes wished she was a little more slack when it came to baked goods in meetings.

All of the men froze as she approached.

Her smile brightened. “I guess Cocoa got you her recipe after all?”

Don nodded. “Found it under my door this morning.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Nancy said. “That girl has a soft spot for you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Don thought Cocoa had a soft spot for all of them. If it hadn’t been for the Secret Seven, Cocoa and Aaron might not have ended up together. He tilted his head in thought. Although one might argue that the only reason they needed help in the first place was because sweet, little old Betty had put her foot in it. She’d tried to set Aaron, her grandson, up with Samantha, The Palms’ Activities Director, and their now co-conspirator, instead of Cocoa.

Nancy clapped her hands together in a chop-chop motion. “Well, let’s get in there and get business taken care of so we can eat those cookies.”

An audible groan came from one of the men beside him, and Nancy quirked a brow in their direction. Harry took a step back, and Walt frowned.

Don removed his satchel, no point trying to sneak one now, and handed it to Nancy. “Go ahead and go in, I have to make a quick phone call.”

Nancy glanced at her watch, then nodded. Woman did not like to waste time. She headed inside with the baked goods, and Harry and Walt followed in tow.

After months of watching the Secret Seven successfully set up their grandkids, it was finally his turn. Don had a lot of grandchildren, but there were three in particular who were in desperate need of his help.

He knew exactly who he wanted to set up for his first round, but there were some obstacles in the way. Obstacles he was afraid were bigger than The Secret Seven would be willing to work with.

Taking a deep breath, Don stepped away from the door to the war room to call his grandson.

He and Axel didn't talk much these days, but recent events in Axel's life had been smeared all over the news and tabloids and had convinced Don it was time to get rid of the bad blood between them. Axel needed his family right now. With slightly shaky fingers, Don pulled out his phone and dialed. It rang twice, then went to voicemail. A clinching ache settled deep in Don's chest as he realized his grandson had denied his call. He'd learned that from Samantha's cell phone class. Two rings and straight to voicemail meant call denied.

He waited for the beep and left a message. "Hello, son, this is your Grandpa. Give me a call. It's about time we talked."

He disconnected at that and rested his hands on his hips. He'd let this nonsense between them go on long enough. It had been almost two years since he'd seen the boy and nearly a year since they'd last spoken. Don hadn't meant for Axel to get caught in the middle of the feud between himself and Wayne, Don's son, and Axel's father, but it'd happened, and

Axel had stormed out of dinner two Christmases ago and hadn't been home since.

Don knew he could be overbearing. Eighty-four years of life experience had taught him a thing or two about how to live a good life. That was all he'd ever wanted for his family. If only they'd listen to him, maybe they'd be happier. More settled. Content. Wayne was the poster boy for discontent. Always had been. He never listened to Don. Not ever. And neither did Axel. Instead, Axel'd decided to stay in California with those weirdos he worked with. Bunch of hippies.

No matter. Don was the grandpa, and he'd make this better. Starting with the boy's love life. Axel was thirty-five, with no serious love interest in sight. The last girl he dated had spread the news of their break up everywhere, part of the tabloid problem Axel was currently having. It was also a big part of the reason why Don was convinced Axel should be his first target. The boy needed a good woman in his life. Not a blabber mouth who couldn't decide if she wanted him back, or wanted him thrown to the wolves. Her mind changed from interview to interview.

Also, the woman had bright purple hair. Bright *purple*. What kind of world were they living in? And where had Don gone wrong? How could he have done better?

He shook off the questions that often kept him up at night, and marched through the frosted glass door into the war room.

Samantha, the Activities Director who hadn't ended up with Aaron, the alligator rescuer, sat at the back of the conference

table and smiled at him as he entered. His heart immediately buoyed. She was always a sight for sore eyes. Sweet, thoughtful, one of the hardest workers he'd ever met—she might as well have a halo around that mop of curly strawberry blond hair.

When they'd started The Secret Seven, she'd agreed to help them as long as they all promised not to try and set her up with any of their grandkids. Don had managed to get out of making that promise and was determined to see her family one day. But he wasn't sure she was the right one for Axel. She definitely had a strong enough personality for him, and he was pretty sure he'd heard her listening to Axel's music in her office once.

"Ready to work hard, Samantha?" He extended his fist to her.

She bumped it. "For you, Don, absolutely."

"Well, don't forget Sam's got all the Halloween activities to take care of this month," Nancy chimed in.

"I'll be okay," she said, good-naturedly. Yep, Samantha was a keeper.

He marched to the front of the room and stood behind Nancy's chair at the head of the table, facing the evidence board. It was covered in photos of happy couples/success stories, maps, names of restaurants, romantic locations, hobbies they all enjoyed, and red string pinned with magnets from one place to another. If anyone saw it, they might think

this was a murder board, like the ones they used in those crime TV shows.

Don stared at the three pictures of his grandsons that he'd put up.

Technically, he'd only put up pictures of Johnny and Sean. He'd used a silhouette image for Axel, simply because he was so well known. Don hadn't wanted to draw unnecessary attention.

"I went to have lunch with Remi today and met the nicest man," Polly said, chatting away with the other women. "He came in to offer his compliments on Paxton's work."

"That is so sweet." Winnie smiled from ear to ear.

"I'm surprised more people don't drop in," Nancy said. "Paxton is a real artist with a trowel. Just look at the gardens around here."

Don's shoulders stiffened a little. He liked Paxton, a lot, and was happy for him he'd made such an excellent match with Nora, The Palm's water aerobics teacher, but he still couldn't help but think Nora would've been perfect for his grandson, Sean. He was a Navy Seal, and she was a former Olympic diver. Water babies to say the least. Nothing to do about it now.

"And he has one of those big houses over by the lighthouse, too. A cliff side," Polly said. "Paxton landscaped the entire thing from scratch. Did a bang-up job of it too."

“One of the cliff side houses?” Rosa asked. “He must be very wealthy.”

Walt let out a low whistle and straightened his NASA ball cap on his head. “Richer than Croesus.”

“I believe so.” Polly nodded. “I think he said he was in film; a producer or something.”

“Too bad we can’t see Paxton’s work,” Harry added.

Everyone chimed in with positive affirmations.

Don grinned. They didn’t want to see Paxton’s work. They wanted to see that house. And Don couldn’t blame them. He kind of wanted to see it too. But first, he had bigger fish to fry. Like convincing this group that Axel was the right choice for this, his first round.

So far they had a one-hundred percent success rate, and that was nothing to spit at.

“He’s invited the family to dinner, actually,” Polly said. “I’ll tell you all about it.”

Don spun to face the group, then marched to the table.

“I believe Don’s ready.” Nancy waved a hand to silence the group, and silence descended like a nuclear blast. The woman could’ve been an army general herself. Impressive.

Don cleared his throat and leaned his palms on the table, letting the cool metal surface seep into and calm him.

Walt rubbed his mustache. “So, who’s the lucky young lady you want to set Sean up with?”

Don groaned. “There isn’t one.”

“Don’t worry,” Rosa said. “We have many señoritas to choose from.”

“Ooo!” Polly sat up tall. “Nora’s neighbors with the cutest gal—”

“What about Cass from the salon?” Harry adjusted his page boy cap and tugged on the end of his own mustache. “She’s a doll.”

“Or Silvia from the pizzeria,” Winnie offered.

The group descended into suggestions right and left, talking and even shouting over one another. He glanced toward Samantha who grinned down at her notepad. The smile on their activities director’s face was the only thing keeping him from freaking out. Couldn’t scare away one of his future granddaughters by yelling at the knuckleheads.

Don stood tall and let out a whistle.

Quiet fell heavy as everyone whipped their gazes to him. That’d do.

Winnie brought her hand to her chest, her eyes held wide.

“We’re not setting up Sean,” Don said.

“Johnny?” Walt asked. “I thought he was too busy?”

“Not Johnny, either.” Don walked to the board and pointed at the silhouetted photo of his prodigal grandson. “Axel.”

“Ah, the mystery one.” Polly rubbed her palms together.

“Doesn’t he live in California?” Harry asked. “Gonna be kind of hard to set him up from across the country, don’t you think?”

“That’s not the half of it,” Don said.

Winnie blinked, then her eyes went wide. “*Axel ... Clayton?*”

Don nodded.

Winnie pulled her phone from her purse and started messing with it.

Harry sat up tall. “As in Axel Clayton the lead singer of The Venturists?”

Don ran a hand down his face. *Here we go.* “That’s the one.”

“Here.” Winnie held her phone up and showed it to the group. “Here’s a picture of him.”

Rosa grabbed Winnie’s hand and pulled the phone closer. “¡Santa Maria!” She fanned her face.

“Let me see,” Polly said. Rosa pushed the phone, in Winnie’s hand, toward Polly. Polly leaned closer to have a look. “Oh, goodness. He’s a looker, isn’t he?”

They passed the phone to Nancy, whose big blue eyes went wide before she let loose a brilliant grin.

“Forget his looks,” Harry said, cutting a hand through the air. “He’s one of the finest artists of the last two decades. His music is up there with Creedence Clearwater Revival,

Hendrix, The Stones! He's your grandson and you never *told* me?" He narrowed his eyes at Don. It sounded like the worst of accusations. Like Don had personally offended him—betrayed him even.

Don rolled his eyes and looked at anyone but him. "There are complications with this particular mission. As Harry mentioned before he lost his mind, Axel lives in California, he's also just gone through a very public break-up, and ..." He glanced down.

Nancy leaned toward him. "What is it, Don?"

He swallowed the lump in his throat. He could do this. He'd been through wars, seen death and pain, this should be a cakewalk. "Axel and I aren't on speaking terms."

No one said anything for several moments.

Nancy patted his arm in a show of comfort. And it helped. The people in this room were like family to him, and he knew they'd have his back, just as they knew he'd always have theirs.

Walt leaned back in his chair and breathed out long and loud.

Rosa played with her cross pendant. Good. He'd take all the prayers he could get.

"A famous kid like Axel is bound to be busy," Winnie said.

"He's not busy." Don slapped the table, and the clap reverberated through the room. "He's his father's son!"

Nancy nodded. “One of Wayne’s boys, then,” she said in a knowing tone.

Don spun around. “That Wayne has always been a troublemaker.” He turned back and pointed down at the table. “Boy didn’t even get married until he was twenty-nine. No wonder all three of his kids are unwed and in their thirties.” They were a mess, but He softened his tone. “They’re good boys. They just need a little push in the right direction. Axel especially. Boy needs himself a good woman.”

Winnie held her phone up again. “This is his ex. Lillie Anne Mae Ellis.”

The purple-haired troublemaker. Don glowered.

“She’s pretty,” Rosa said.

“Her hair’s purple,” Polly said like it wasn’t a bad thing.

Winnie pointed to her phone screen. “According to this article, she’s real down about it.”

Polly lifted her phone. “In this article, she’s cussing him to the winds.” She cleared her throat.

They all leaned toward Polly and squinted like they could read her screen.

“Lillie Anne Mae Ellis had nothing good to say about her ex, Axel Clayton, lead singer of The Venturists, Friday night after the two got into an all-out screaming match at Club Hyde where Clayton purportedly chucked her drink against a wall before storming out. ‘He’s a loser,’ Ellis said. ‘I’m just glad I’m finally free of his particular brand of crazy ...’ There’s just

a bunch of cuss words after that.” Polly turned her phone off and set it down. All the women looked anywhere but at Don.

Deep down, Don didn’t believe a word of that story. Axel was a good boy. But it’d definitely been him. He’d seen the photos. Sure, they were dark, and he’d been wearing a ball cap, but Don would recognize that build and strong jawline, just like his own, anywhere. It just didn’t make sense, but it looked bad. Real bad. “This is exactly my point. Axel needs a woman who won’t spread news of their breakup all over the tabloids. A woman who isn’t so fickle, and who has a nice normal color of hair.”

A snicker came from the back of the room, and Samantha hid her head behind her notepad.

Or her nice normal strawberry blond head of hair behind her notepad. Samantha and Axel? Don almost grinned as he stared at her, but schooled his expression. He’d wait and see.

“Now, really,” Nancy scolded him. “Misty has pink streaks in her hair and you told me multiple times you like the way it looks.”

Don brushed her statement away with a wave of his hand. “That’s different.” He liked Misty, The Palms’ Receptionist. And she only had a few pink pieces, not her whole head. “The point is, we’re going to have to work hard on this one to get it done.”

“Why? Because he doesn’t live here, just went through a breakup, probably won’t be interested in dating, and because

you're not speaking to one another?" Walt spread his hands wide over the table. "Anything else?"

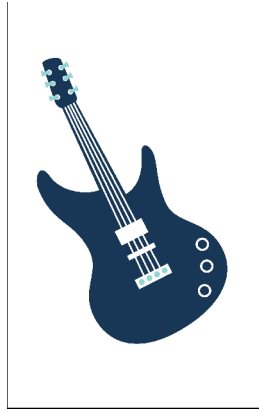
Don rested his hands on his hips. "I have no clue who we're going to set him up with." Couldn't say he wanted to try him with Samantha *with* Samantha *in* the room.

Nancy leaned on the table on her elbows. "First things first. Are we going to him? Or do we need to come up with a plan to get him here?"

Everyone glanced from one person to the other, everyone just as lost as the others, then finally back to Don.

He had to get him here. It was the only way.

Chapter 2



AXEL

Warm, moist heat wrapped around Axel Clayton like a big wet towel the moment he stepped out of the main terminal at the Orlando International Airport. He tightened his ball cap over his shaggy hair, then ran a hand over his shaggy beard. October and it still felt like a sauna.

A bus went by with a picture of him smeared over the side. Marketing for his next world tour in eight months. A tour that would start in Florida and where Axel was supposed to surprise fans with his new songs. Songs he'd yet to write.

He hiked his large duffel bag up his shoulder, carefully using it to hide the guitar case underneath, then shot a glance right and left. So far, no one but one flight attendant had recognized him. His new do was doing its job.

This was good. He could already feel the creative juices flowing. This was perfect. This was just what he needed to get writing again. He glanced around pick up, the rows of cars moving in and out of lanes, people carting their bags around, greeting friends and family, and the sound of honking horns, and airplanes taking off overhead looking for his uber. There had to be a song in this.

“Cars, planes, and trains, noise in my brain ...” He dropped his head to his hand. “Ugh, that’s terrible.”

Okay, not a big deal. He was still at the airport. Inspiration probably wouldn’t strike until he passed the city lines into Diamond Cove. That’s where the real stories were. The place where he’d penned some of his most popular songs.

He just had to get home.

At least he hoped that was it. He pushed back the unsettling thought that had been popping into his head more and more frequently since he’d dropped his last album two years ago, which had bombed. And yes, he understood the irony of an album called Train Wreck failing—that taunted he might not have anything left to say; that his days of writing music were long over. Or that would explain his complete lack of interest in even trying to write anymore.

The thought brought him up cold.

He’d moved to Florida with his family from North Carolina at thirteen, so Florida always had a special place in his heart, but he’d only ever officially lived in Orlando, and he’d moved to California when he’d been twenty-five. Still, somehow,

Diamond Cove felt like home. Even though he'd never lived there; had only spent some good times there with his grandparents since they'd moved there ten years ago.

As he stepped up to the curb to wait for the Uber he'd ordered, his phone trilled in his back pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. Chaz Collins, his manager. Probably calling to pester him about his next album again. Axel frowned down at the phone, sent the call to voicemail, and shoved it back into his pocket. Later. He'd deal with Chaz, his scheming, crazy exes, and even crazier fans later.

Axel took a deep breath, as the lyrics of a popular song came to him. "All around me are familiar faces, worn out places, worn out faces."

A car pulled to a stop with a screech in front of him.

He closed his eyes and let the lyrics flow quietly from him. "Bright and early for the daily races ..."

"Going nowhere, going nowhere ..." Came the dulcet tones of someone ... not him.

Axel's eyes popped open. Before him stood a man with dark skin, black hair, and an infectious smile. The smile encompassed his entire face, and Axel couldn't help but return it. It was the kind of smile that spoke of inner light; like he held the secret of life in his hands.

The man continued singing, "Their tears are filling up their glasses ..."

Grinning, Axel jumped in and harmonized. “No expression, no expression, hide my head, I want to drown my sorrow. No tomorrow, no tomorrow ...”

The man laughed and patted Axel on the back. “Those are some impressive vocals you have there, my friend.” He had a hint of an accent in his tone.

“I could say the same for you.” Axel grinned.

The man brushed the compliment away with a wave of his large hand and a shrug. “It’s a good song; sad though.”

Now it was Axel’s turn to shrug. “Some of the best songs are.”

“True that.” He laughed and held out a hand. “Are you Sonny Crockett?” The guy was taller than Axel’s six-foot-two inches, a lot taller, and built. First time in a long time that Axel felt small next to someone.

Axel smiled and took his hand with a good shake. “You must be my Uber driver.”

He nodded. “Names Mackenson, but you can call me Mack.” He took Axel’s bag and tried to take his guitar.

Axel gripped one end of the handle, and Mack gripped the other. “Be careful with her.”

Mack smiled.

“She’s my baby,” Axel said. He’d had Odette since he was fourteen years old. She was his very first guitar.

“I understand.” Carefully, Mack stored Axel’s bags in the trunk of his tricked-out Toyota Corolla. It was black with red racing stripes, low to the ground, and had shiny red rims.

Axel let out a low whistle. “Nice ride.”

“Thanks,” Mack said, rubbing the roof as he headed to the driver’s side.

He went round to climb in the front seat, but a weathered old lady sat there cradling a large carpetbag in her arms, and holding a bottle of water in her hand. She saluted him with the bottle through the window and took a big swig. He paused, not sure what to do. Did Mack bring friends with him while driving?

Mack pointed down at where she sat through the roof. “That’s Consuela, I’m dropping her off at the next terminal.”

“Oh,” Axel blinked. “This is a ride share?”

“Yep,” Mack rested his arm on the top of his car.

Axel felt a chill run down his spine, then glanced at Consuela. She gripped the handle of her carpet bag like it was a lifeline, and slowly bobbed her head along to some tune he couldn’t hear, but could feel pumping through the metal door. “Do you have other customers you’re picking up after her?”

“Two, just down the road a ways from the airport,” Mack said. “That work?”

The last thing Axel needed was to be recognized, but he’d already waited half an hour for this ride. Consuela didn’t seem to recognize him or care, and with his hair grown longer than

normal, his full beard, his baseball hat, and sunglasses, he could probably pass under the radar. He nodded and opened the back door. “Sure, why not.”

They got to the next terminal and dropped off Consuela and were out of the airport in minutes. He stayed in the backseat only because airport security had rushed them off. Mack drummed his fingers on his steering wheel along with the Caribbean-sounding music and sang along to the song in another language.

“This has a good beat,” Axel said.

Mack’s already big smile got even wider. “Thank you. That’s a compliment coming from you. This is my band. We play at a bar and club in Miami on the weekends. We’ve done a couple of covers of your songs. Born Salty is a classic and 23 Lions. And Amelia—legendary, man.”

Axel’s spine stiffened.

“Didn’t know I recognized you, did you?” Mack laughed and stared back at him in the rearview mirror. “I thought you looked familiar when I pulled up at the curb, but it was the Sonny Crockett that did it. Miami Vice? Woeeee! That’s a fun show. Not a great code name, though.” He tapped at the steering wheel with his long fingers.

Axel inched forward in the back. “Listen, Mack, no one can know I’m here.”

Mack waved a hand in the air. “I’m a firm believer that a man’s business is his own. No one will hear you’re here from

me.”

Letting out a breath, Axel sank back in his seat. “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

They pulled over outside a farmer’s market a few minutes later. The potent smells of cooking meat and citrusy fruits wafted through the open windows. A couple stood at the curb, and before Axel could get out, the woman climbed in the backseat making him squish over to the other side. She had her hair wrapped in an orange scarf and wore bright red lipstick. The man opened the back door on the opposite side and shoved in a basket with a chicken sitting on top before getting in the front. Not a dead and packed-in plastic chicken, but a living, breathing, squawking chicken. And Axel was trapped between it and the woman.

The man spoke to Mack in French, and then they were off.

The chicken stared him down, one beady little eye locked on Axel’s face. Axel tried leaning away, but the woman squirmed in the seat next to him, shoving him in the ribs with her bony elbow, making him freeze.

He cleared his throat. Okay, he’d agreed to this. He just had to make the best of it. At least they didn’t recognize him. That was good. “You speak French, Mack?”

Mack nodded. “And Creole.”

The chicken bock-bocked and he whipped his gaze to it. It lowered its head, and Axel got a bad feeling. “I don’t think this chicken likes me.” He forced a chuckle.

Mack went into French again, and a moment later, the woman replied, speaking rapid fire. After a couple minutes of that, Mack turned to him.

“She says you probably remind her of her ex-boyfriend’s cousin’s friend, Chewy, who threatened to cook Kyle if he squawked one more time.” Mack laughed again.

Axel gave the bird a side-eye. “His name’s Kyle?”

“Her name. She’s a hen,” Mack explained as he turned onto the freeway.

Kyle ruffled her wings, and Axel flinched. “Good bird. I promise I won’t cook—” Then she attacked.



Forty-seven minutes later, Mack pulled to a stop at the end of Diamond Cove Dr. in front of the row of brightly colored bungalows at The Palms Retirement Community. A few of the bungalows had blow-up Halloween decorations in their front yards, and one a flock of plastic flamingos. To each their own.

The sounds of waves lapping at the shore hummed in the background, and the rich smells of the ocean air surrounded him. Mack had dropped off Kyle and his owners thirty minutes

ago, but that had still left Kyle seventeen minutes to express her dislike for Axel. And she'd expressed it with her wings, her beak, and her claws. She'd attacked with everything in her, and now he was sporting scratches on his arms, his neck, and he was pretty sure she'd gotten a good peck under his eye. It felt a little swollen now.

Mack pulled his bags out of the trunk and approached him slowly. Good thing really, because Axel thought he might be in shock. He took his bags, and Mack pointed to his beard.

“You have a feather.”

The feather was partway in his mouth and had a surprisingly tangy aftertaste. He removed it. “Thanks. How much do I owe you?”

Mack waved a hand through the air. “I think after that,” he signaled to the car with his thumb, “*ride*, you’ve earned a freebie.”

“I can’t let you do that. The gas alone to get here has to cost a pretty penny,” Axel said.

“Well, when you put it like that ...”

A green truck reading Mitchell Alligator Rescue on the side went by, and Axel grinned as he paid Mack, adding a generous tip. “It was good to meet you.”

Mack shook his hand and handed him a card. “If you ever need a ride again?”

“You’ll be the first person I call,” Axel said. “And good luck with your music.”

“You too,” Mack said, hopping in his car.

You too. He’d take it. He needed all the luck he could get. Still feeling a little battered, he yanked his sleeves down, hiked his large duffle over his shoulder, gripped the handle of Odette’s guitar case, and turned toward the truck they’d passed. It’d parked beside the community center on the red brick-paved road.

Aaron Mitchell, the man who owned and ran Mitchell Alligator Rescue had served in the Navy with Axel’s brother Sean. The two had been in the same SEAL unit together for years. Aaron was Sean's closest friend, and practically a part of the family. He and Sean had even come to several of Axel’s concerts, often bringing the rest of the guys in the unit—all twenty-three of them. Only seven of them lived in Diamond Cove. Fun bunch.

It’d been a couple of years, though. He hadn’t seen any of his family, except for his brother, Johnny, in all that time. Johnny often traveled for his career, so drop-ins at Axel’s Hollywood home were often and expected.

Axel jogged over to the truck, and came around the back looking for Aaron, then skidded to a halt.

He didn’t find Aaron.

“Axel?” The man who was practically Axel’s twin from the black hair, to the olive complexion to strong build, to the dimples in their cheeks, (the genes in their family were strong,) stared in shock through light hazel eyes, (nothing like

Axel's dark brown irises,) for just a moment before smiling, then jumping on him in a squid-like embrace.

Axel nearly fell over as he hugged his baby brother. "Sean!"

Sean backed away, patting Axel on the back as he did. "What are you doing here?"

Axel shrugged. "Popping in on Grandma and Grandpa." He left out that his manager was pushing him to write an album he had no interest in and that he was pissed at the man for a commercial stunt that was supposed to increase interest in his career. Axel also didn't mention that Grandpa had called him a few days ago to talk. He'd been in a meeting and hung up, but had meant to call him back. He'd wanted to after hearing his message. Only he couldn't. *Couldn't*.

After two years of near radio silence, he'd felt weird. Felt like he just wanted to see the old man. Like somehow that'd be easier. So, here he was.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were deployed for another two months?" His relief was instantaneous. Sean was home. He was safe, and as far as he could tell, in one piece. Sean had done two tours of duty that had bracketed Axel's last world tour, which meant it'd been a while since they'd seen one another.

Sean shook his head. "Something came up; another mission. They sent us home a month ago."

Axel frowned. If they got another mission, why would they be at home? He started to ask when Sean looked him over.

“You okay? Did you get in a fistfight?” Sean asked.

“More like a chicken fight.”

“You mean a game of chicken?” Sean scratched his head.

Axel sighed. “Sure. Whatever.”

“Are you going to be in town for a while?” Sean asked.

“Maybe a little while,” he said, though he wasn’t really sure. At this point, and at the rate he was writing songs, it could be months, even years. Axel’s heart constricted painfully, and he winced. Stress pangs, the doctor had said. Yet another reason he’d come home. The thing was, he didn’t have years. He had months. Weeks really to get his new songs written, and he was coming up blank.

Sean’s gaze narrowed in on him, and he barely managed not to grab at his chest. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Axel shook his head. “Just work stuff. You know how it is.”

Sean backed up to the truck and opened the tailgate. “I don’t actually, but maybe you’ll tell me about it someday?”

Axel didn’t want to get into work with Sean. He pointed to the truck. “You steal Aaron’s truck?”

“This piece of junk?” Sean asked. It was a 2019 Ford F-150. Not a piece of junk. “Nah, Aaron’s on his honeymoon; asked me to pick up Sweetie and take her to his Rescue while he’s gone.”

Sweetie was The Palms' blind alligator. She'd only been here a year, but he'd heard about her from Sean before. There were more important things to think about than an orphaned alligator. "Aaron got *married*? I can't believe it!"

Sean barked out a laugh. "Right? And his wife's a real cutie too. Blond, blue eyes, and a sweetheart to boot. Way too good for him. She works here as their pastry chef." He thumbed over his shoulder.

"Wow, Aaron got married ..." He couldn't believe it. Not because he wasn't a great guy, but because he seemed so young. He was only four years younger than Axel's thirty-five. Well ... maybe that wasn't so young. He grinned.

A guy came out the back door holding a leash attached to a small alligator in a harness that had to be Sweetie. She had scars across her eyes, deep ones that looked like they had to be painful. Axel cringed, a pang of sympathy shooting through him. All this time he'd thought she'd been blind from birth or something like that.

"She won't hurt you," the young guy said. "She's harmless, plus we always keep this leather strap around her mouth while she's out and about."

Axel chuckled. "Thanks."

The boy gave him a thumbs up, glanced at his watch, then faced Sean. "Do you need help lifting her in the truck?"

Sean glanced at his watch. "Busy today?"

“Rita’s teaching a pumpkin carving class, and they’re bringing in the pumpkins now.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I promised her I’d help unload and set up.”

Sean gave the boy a knowing smile, and Axel thought he understood what was happening here. He liked Rita. “My brother can help me,” Sean said. “Get out of here, Aston, and help your girl.”

Aston smiled from ear to ear, did a finger gun shoot at Sean as he jogged off backward, then turned and dashed back inside The Palms’ main building.

“Rita must be really cute,” Axel laughed, setting his stuff down at the curb.

Sean grinned at him. “She is. Even Grandpa’s taken a shine to her. Helped her pass her driving test and everything.”

That sounded like Grandpa, all right.

Sean glanced down at Sweetie. “Heads or tails?”

Axel took one look at Sweetie, and her snaggle-toothed grin, leather strap around her mouth or not, and said, “Tails.”

Sean shook his head at him. “Wimp.”

Axel shoved his shoulder as he went by to Sweetie’s tail, nearly toppling Sean, and reminding him he could still whoop him, regardless if he was a Navy SEAL or not. Whether or not that was true was yet to be tested.

“Watch it,” Sean said.

They each hoisted their end lifting under her legs, and slowly headed to the tailgate. Sweetie, thankfully, remained perfectly still.

“Does Grandpa know you’re here?” Sean asked, maneuvering her front into the back of the kenneled truck bed.

Yet another topic he wasn’t interested in talking about. A warm stream of liquid down his front right leg saved him from having to talk about it. He jolted, and lifted Sweetie higher, peering underneath her as pee ran over his hands and down his arms.

“Agh!” He yelled and scooted her the rest of the way into the truck. He stood back and glanced down at his light worn weathered jeans, holding his hands out in front of him. There was a big dark spot right at the crotch of his pants. “Crap.”

Sean burst into laughter, pointed, then snorted before bending in half, wheezing. “It—” Snort. “looks like—” Gasp. “you peed yourself.” He slapped the side of the truck.

Axel dropped his hands to his sides. “I’m glad you’re amused.”

Sean wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes. “Oh man, what I wouldn’t give to see Grandpa’s face when he gets a look at you.” He closed the tailgate and hatch.

Axel took a step forward. “You’re not staying?”

Sean pointed toward the truck. “Can’t. I gotta take Sweetie to the Rescue, then I’ve got some work to do. Sorry. But maybe record it for me?”

Axel clapped a wet hand on Sean's shoulder, leaving a mark on his shirt. "Sure, I'll do that," he said with all the snark he could muster.

Sean swatted his hand off and stared at Axel's revenge on his t-shirt. "Oh, great. Thanks."

"Any time, bro. Any time."

Sean headed to the driver's side of the truck, and he called over his shoulder. "You have feathers in your hair, by the way."

Axel reached up, almost touching his hair with his peed-on hands. The punk. He threw his hands up. Perfect. He was a total mess.

As Sean drove off, Axel headed to Grandpa and Grandma's cottage. In the row of white, yellow, coral, sea foam green homes, there stood out. It was bright aqua. Grandma's favorite color. His throat constricted at the thought of her. How would she be? How far along was her disease? Would she be mad at him for not visiting or calling?

Grandpa had hung a string of ghost lights along the porch. Axel stopped at the hose in front of their house and rinsed his hands, taking his time, buying his time as he scrubbed every finger. Finally, he decided he'd delayed enough. He'd never know about Grandma unless he faced up to what'd happened two years ago between him and Dad and Grandpa. And there was only one way to do that.

Axel marched up the path to the front porch, and then, taking a deep breath to steel his nerves, he knocked. And waited. And waited. And knocked again. He looked at his watch and knocked once more. Okay, it was only one-thirty in the afternoon ... on a Tuesday. They were probably doing some activity. Grandma loved the arts and crafts they had here and the baking. She was probably at one of those classes while Grandpa pumped iron at the gym.

He walked to the edge of the porch by the swing and sat his bags down. Leaning over the rail, he stared down the side of the house toward the beach. He could see the glistening white sand from here, and the glare of the sun off the surf. It called to him. No point in sitting here to wait for them. Grandma liked a good nap in the afternoon. They'd probably be back in the next half hour or so. Might as well go for a walk until then. Dry off.

Placing a hand on the wood rail of the porch, he vaulted himself over the side, then made his way slowly down the path to the beach. He crossed the boardwalk that went the length of the bungalows and stepped off into the fine sand.

The beach was mostly quiet. A couple old men stood in waders thigh-high out in the water with fishing poles, and to the left and down a way, a beautiful woman walked along the beach with her Labrador Retriever who seemed perturbed every time she tossed something to four bright pink flamingos surrounding her.

Maybe there was a song in that?

That was when he heard it. Bohemian Rhapsody. Coming from the woman. She was laughing as she sang. “I’m just a poor boy, nobody loves me ...”

He grinned. The scene was so surreal. Then he frowned, thinking about his manager, agent, and producer. When Queen’s producer told them Bohemian Rhapsody couldn’t be their single lead-off on their album *Night at the Opera*, they’d told their producer to take a flying leap and made it their single anyway, and not only did it become a huge hit that was still popular fifty-plus years later, it also hit number one in the charts multiple times and was still making millions of dollars.

But Axel wasn’t Queen. He faced the ocean and kicked at the sand like he was kicking a soccer ball into the goal box. Axel had always heavily relied on his team, his manager, Chaz Collins, to lead his career, and they’d, he’d, never steered him wrong yet.

Still, he envied Queen. They always wrote what they wanted. No matter what. Maybe someday he could too.

The woman had progressed along to the rock section of the song. She’d gotten a little closer. Her long brown hair flowed in thick locks about her, and he could see her smile. There was something so familiar about it. About her ... He took a step closer, then another. Blatantly staring right at her.

She was still a way off, but he was pretty sure it was her. The girl he’d met behind his first real concert—what was it?—twelve years ago. The one who’d inspired an entire album out

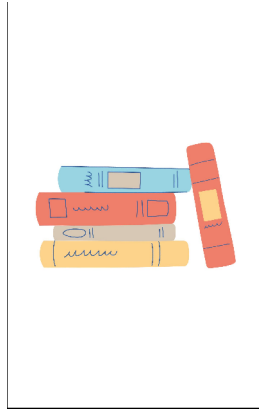
of him. The girl he'd gone back to find two years later after his first world tour as an opener. He sucked in a deep breath.

This couldn't be real. Was he dreaming? He looked again. He pinched himself. Hard. Nope. Not dreaming. She was better dressed, though still in a sweater in eighty-degree weather—he chuckled—and didn't look frazzled like the last time he'd seen her, but it was definitely her.

She turned, and everything seemed to move in slow motion from there. Glancing in his direction, she raised one hand and screamed. "Bear! Stop!"

Then Axel saw him. The white lab. Running right at him. The dog leaped in the air, and Axel opened his arms.

Chapter 3



KATE

Heading back from Bruno’s kitchen with a bag of shrimp and a moping dog at her side, Katherine Hart made her way to the beach.

Bear whined, no doubt already missing Sweetie. “It’ll only be a couple weeks, buddy.”

Bear had been Sweetie’s seeing-eye dog for nine months. In an unexpected twist, the two animals had bonded when Aaron had first brought the alligator here a year ago, and they’d practically been inseparable ever since. Kate loved that. She loved it so much. There was something magical about two rescues, especially ones like a baby alligator and white lab finding one another after traumatic pasts. They’d both been dubbed lost causes, and now here they were, living their best

lives. They were just part of the reason she didn't believe in lost causes.

Kate picked up her pace. "It's okay, buddy. We'll do lots of fun stuff while she's gone. Time will fly by." They were headed to the beach now to feed The Palms' flamingos that the residents had dubbed the Fab Four. Samantha, Kate's best friend and the woman who ran practically everything at The Palms, had been worried that the flamingos weren't getting enough shrimp in their diet, so employees rotated the responsibility of making sure they did.

They almost passed the library when her phone let out a foghorn blast alerting her to a text ... from him. Ugh. She came to a halt and pulled her cell from tomcat mother jeans, and glared down at the screen.

Greg Walters. Her ex-boyfriend. A month ago, he'd told her he thought she was too clingy. Her. The woman who worked sixty hours a week and spent more of her spare time with her dog than him. The last part was more his fault, and she'd mentioned it once. One time. That was it. And he'd freaked. After that, she'd promised him she wouldn't be clingy anymore on her way out the door.

At least he hadn't been stealing money from her like her last boyfriend or selling pictures of her feet to a foot fetish site like the boyfriend before that and don't even get her started on the multiple cheaters and liars that seemed to be attracted to her like bugs to a bug zapper. If she could, she would zap 'em. She had Tased one of them when she'd been in her early twenties,

but not even a court of law had seen her as anything but justified in that case. Even if her super successful lawyer brothers hadn't defended her, she probably still would've won, so ...

She took a deep breath and opened the text, eager to get it over with.

Greg:

It's been weeks, Kate. Don't you think it's time we talk?

Uh ... she glanced heavenward, spotting blue skies through massive palms, then shook her head. No. Nope. It's not time for us to talk. Not ever. Never again. In fact, she was done. Not just with him, but with men in general. For good. In her thirty-one years of life, she'd had at least a dozen boyfriends, and all of them had seemed so nice when she started dating them and had ended up total losers by the time they were through. Men just weren't the romantic souls lyrics from the best love songs claimed them to be. She'd decided that the only good men were her dad, brothers, Bear, and the old men who lived at The Palms. And none of them would do, for obvious reasons. So the only *reasonable* course of action was to quit men.

She took a deep breath, soaked in the sun through her yellow cardigan, let the salty breeze lift her spirits, and felt the weight of the dating world come rolling like boulders off her shoulders.

Yep. Done.

Another text came through.

Greg:

Don't you think you're overreacting?

She deleted his messages and shoved her phone back into her pocket again. No time for that nonsense. She'd blocked him before, but he'd just contacted her on someone else's phone. And then someone else's. Said he wouldn't stop until she talked to him, so she'd unblocked his number, called him and tore him a new one. This was the first time she'd heard from him since then.

Looked like another warning was in order. Or a cease and desist on her brother's stationery. But not today. Today was for sunshine, walks on the beach, and Bear.

Bear hopped up and down on his front legs, sending his ears up and down, trying to get her attention. Kate laughed. She loved it when he did that. She called it his jumping Jacks.

"Come on, Bear," she said, glancing down at the only male she wanted around at all times. His tongue lolled out to the side. "We have some flamingos waiting for us."



Bag of shrimp in hand, Kate raced Bear to the surf belly laughing and losing handily. Bear was stinkin' fast! The Fab Four stood in the water, preening their bright pink feathers. Bear ran back and forth at the water's edge, barking at them. Down the beach, Harry and Virginia strolled hand in hand. Harry had on crocks and a plaid pageboy hat. As the couple walked, he lifted Virginia's hand to kiss the back of it.

She smiled, remembering how only a few months ago the pair had been at each other's throats until they'd decided to join that bike race together. Now they were the picture of wedded bliss.

Her phone played the fog horn alert again. Ugh. Well, she wasn't checking it. She was determined he wasn't going to ruin this beautiful day for her!

Bear splashed through the surf, going into a downward dog pose that nearly sunk his entire upper body below water and wagged his tail back and forth as he stared at the flamingos taunting him from a little further out on their much taller legs.

Come out, come out! Bear barked. *I want to play!*

They barely acknowledged him, one slightly angling his head in Bear's direction while giving him a bored look before going back to preening his feathers. Kate put her hair into a ponytail and pulled her EarPods from her pocket. She put on her favorite playlist of classic rock and smiled when Bohemian Rhapsody came on.

Is this the real life, is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality. Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see ...

Singing along to the iconic song, she raised the large bag of shrimp over her head and shook it, making the shrimp slosh around inside. The Fab Four and Bear all whipped their heads in her direction as one.

She laughed again as they slowly headed her way on tall, spindly legs, all except for Bear, who bounded to her side. He sat in front of her, back straight, head up. His posture was impeccable for a dog. She'd be sure to save a few pieces for him. When the flamingos stood a few feet away from her, she opened the bag and tossed each a piece.

Bear whined at her feet.

"I'm saving you some, pal," she told him, and threw a piece to George, or maybe it was Ringo. She wasn't very good at telling those two apart. They were both lighter in color over their entire bodies. John and Paul were easy to tell apart though. John had a dark pink neck and head and more of his beak was black than the others, and Paul had darker coral wings than the others and was a little taller.

Something heavy landed on her foot as the song moved onto the operatic section and the Galileos of the song. She glanced down. Bear had dropped one of his massive paws on her foot.

“Just a minute,” she said. She had to peel the shrimp for Bear, so he had to wait until she was done with the Fab Four, who could deal with the shells by themselves.

She tossed another piece to Ringo. He jumped and flapped his wings to catch the piece she’d thrown too high, but still caught it. She clapped her hands and cheered for him, then tossed out a few more wonky throws ... she wished she could say intentionally, but really, she just couldn’t throw to save her life. That gene had skipped her and had fully embedded itself in her youngest sister who played Women’s Professional Fastpitch or her second to youngest brother, who’d been drafted to the Minor Leagues straight out of high school and the Majors just a few short years later.

Bear barked, then before she could react, the bag of shrimp yanked from her hand and Bear took off down the beach, shrimp bag hanging out of his mouth and flapping back and forth over his head as he sped away. Seconds later, John, Paul, George, and Ringo sprinted after him, wings flapping as they went. All of that happened in a matter of seconds, leaving her reeling.

Kate shook her head to rid herself of the shock, then went into motion, darting after him. “Bear! Stop!”

But she was too late. Too late to stop it. A man stood down the beach, right in Bear’s path. He turned when she yelled.

The man opened his arms, and Bear jumped right out of the sand, sending sprays of it up and over the guy's head, and went into his arms. The guy's hat and sunglasses went flying as the bag of shrimp went up, and then sprayed down over the top of his head. Bear licked him then—all over his face.

She stumbled in her run, breathing in a quick breath of salty air. Oh no, oh no, oh no!

The man set Bear down. Bear circled behind the guy, snatching a shrimp from the sand, then he glanced up just as the man reached for his hat and glasses. Bear caught sight of something on the man's back, reared up, and dropped his paws on the man's backside, sending him sprawling face-first into the sand.

That was when the Fab Four caught up, and the real chaos ensued. Wings flapped, Bear's tail whapped back and forth. The man covered his head and tried to stand as the animals circled him this way and that, racing for shrimp in the sand.

Kate waved her hands over her head and yelled as she got closer. "Shoo! Get away from him!"

She reached them then, swinging her arms and yelling at the Fab Four who were walking all over him. They flapped their wings and scattered as she grabbed Bear's collar and pulled him off.

"No, Bear," she scolded. "Sit."

He sat immediately, and the rustling of clothes as the man pulled himself up came from behind her.

“Stay,” she said.

Bear wedged his butt deeper into the sand and lifted a paw. He wouldn't budge now he'd been given a direct order.

She spun around, and her heart sank as the man stood before her covered in sand. He wiped at his pants where it really seemed to stick around his waist, then at his shirt, and in his beard and hair. Man, he was a mess.

“I'm so sorry,” she said, coming over and wiping at his shirt as he flipped sand out of his beard and spit it from his mouth. “He's never done that before.”

“It's okay,” the man laughed, a genuine laugh, a deep laugh that sent rolling waves through her belly. “Believe it or not, this isn't my first animal encounter today.”

“I'll pretend I believe that,” she said, then froze when she spotted a shrimp stuck in his black curly hair. Her eyes went wide in horror.

“No really ... what? What is it?” he asked.

She pointed, eyes homing in on that crustacean. “There's a ...” she reached forward, and he caught her wrist, his darker, naturally tanned skin a distinct contrast to her pale Irish skin. She turned her gaze on his, really looking at him for the first time, and her throat seized up. His dark, almost black, brown eyes were crinkled a little at the sides and held her enthralled.

He was gorgeous. Like some kind of mountain man. She didn't normally like men with that much hair, facial or

otherwise. His hair hung just below his jaw, but he pulled it off like he was born to it.

His grip tightened on her wrist, the tips of his callused fingers skimmed over her pulse, reminding her of what she'd been doing. Then his gaze dropped to her lips.

“You have shrimp in your hair,” she whispered.

He blinked, then he dropped her hand and went for the pink intruder, missing it entirely. “Where?”

She grabbed it, showed it to him, and then, because it was shell-less, tossed it to Bear who caught it without moving an inch.

“Thanks,” he said, pushing up the sleeves of his dark blue tee, exposing his corded forearms, which were covered in scratches. Oh man, she hoped that wasn't from the Fab Four walking on him.

“I'm so sorry about that.” She signaled wide to include the Fab Four, who lingered, hoping to find more shrimp. “My dog's best friend, Sweetie, went back to the alligator rescue today, and I was trying to cheer him up by feeding the Beatles, and he just got excited and ...”

He blinked, his long dark lashes fanning over his high cheekbones. “Really, it's fine, though I must look homeless.” He lifted his arms and glanced down at himself.

Why did he look so familiar?

He looked her in the eye. “This wasn't how I pictured our
—”

Kate stepped closer to him and he stopped talking, his gaze dropping to her lips again. “Do I know you? You seem really familiar.”

His body tensed. “We’ve met.”

“Where?”

He smiled, and his posture eased. “It’s been a while, over a decade,” he said. “At St. Mary’s University in the middle of the night.”

She scrunched her brow.

“After a concert?” he ventured, staring into her eyes like he was searching for something ... recognition, probably.

“I never went to concerts.”

“I figured,” he said with a smirk. “You didn’t go to this one. You were trying to get past the stadium and got stopped by—”

Her eyes went wide as recognition hit. “You’re that security guard!” What was his name? “Gauge?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Bumper?”

“Bumper?” he sounded incredulous as his eyebrows shot up.

“Your name was a car part, right?”

He smiled outright. “Axel,” he said.

“That’s right! I remember now because my car was having the axle rod fixed. You totally saved my butt that night.” Wait, had he said ... she looked him over. He was a mess. Dirty

clothes, messy hair, definitely disheveled. Probably stinky, not that she could tell. (Her nose was so stuffy from fall allergies; all she could smell was sand.) Oh no! The poor guy. “You’re homeless?”

He furrowed his brow. “What?” A blush rushed to his cheeks as he glanced down at his person, and she immediately felt horrible. “No, I—”

“Transient? Hobo? Vagrant? Drifter?” She felt her cheeks heat and grabbed for the four-leaf clover pendant she’d purchased years ago, and she stroked it with her thumb. A habit she had whenever she felt like she was losing it. “I’m sorry. What do you prefer to be called? I don’t know the proper terminology.” She was crazy. That had to be it.

He arched a brow. “Uh—”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. You’re totally fine. It’s me, I—”

He grabbed her shoulders. “I’m not homeless.” She stopped talking, and he let her go. “Believe it or not, an hour ago, I didn’t look like this.” He glanced down at himself, then somewhat dramatically dropped his hands to his hips.

She quirked a grin. “So you didn’t go from security guard to bum?”

He chuckled. “No. Well, yeah, I did. Moving on up.”

She laughed.

“So what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Visiting family,” he said. “You?”

“I work here.” Her phone rang. Ugh. Greg better not be calling her. She pulled it from her pocket just in case it was Samantha contacting her during her lunch break. Kate normally ate earlier in the day, but she wasn’t worried about anyone at The Palms needing the library at almost two in the afternoon. Most residents were napping, golfing, or taking a class.

“Visiting my grandparents,” he said.

Kate was just about to ask him who when she saw the caller ID: Library Times. She let out a little squeal and clapped her hand to her mouth.

“Are you okay?” Axel asked.

She answered her phone with shaky hands. “Hello?”

“Kate Hart?”

“This is she.”

“This is Janet Lyons from the Library Times. I’m calling to let you know we selected your library as a finalist for our Library of the Year contest.”

Yes! Finally, after years of hard work. It had to be the entrance video her filmmaker littlest brother made for her. It’d been brilliant! And that had clearly shown. She’d kiss the goober when he came home from Princeton for Thanksgiving.

She took a deep breath. She had to play this cool. “Oh, that’s so grea—”

“Congratulations,” she said in a monotone, almost bored voice. “There’s an e-mail in your inbox that explains all your next steps. We’ll be in touch.” She disconnected.

Kate stared at her blank phone screen.

“What’s happening?” Axel asked.

Her gaze shot up to him. She’d almost forgotten he was there. Almost. Her skin tingled every time he made the slightest move; like she was tuned into him on some invisible radio network. She blinked, excitement coursing through her. “I’m in,” she whispered. Then she screamed. Jumped up and down. Threw herself at him.

He lifted his arms in a staying motion and his eyes went wide. “No, you don’t want to hug—”

He didn’t finish his sentence as she squeezed him around his surprisingly hard as rock middle, bouncing on her toes and squealing as she did.

Bear barked his congratulations behind her.

Axel chuckled against her ear, sending chills down her spine, and then his arms came around her, holding her tight. “Obviously we’re celebrating. What’s the good news?”

She yanked back, nerves ratcheting as she took in the breathtaking smile that encompassed his entire handsome face.

Greg had never once smiled like that for her and this guy didn’t even know her. She cleared her throat. “Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry. First, my dog jumps you and then I do. I’m sure you’ve had enough of being jumped on today.”

If possible, his smile brightened. “Ten minutes ago, I would’ve said yes to that, but you can hug me anytime.”

She wanted to. Badly. So, she made her excuses. “I have to go. I have so much work to do!” She started backing up.

“Hang on—”

“It was ... interesting seeing you again,” she said. “I’m really so sorry about Bear and the Beatles and the ... shrimp.” She signaled to her lab, who was still sitting with a paw up, and the flamingos who’d wandered back into the surf as she kept retreating.

“Come, Bear.” She turned and picked up her pace in her excitement and nerves. Bear caught up with her in a flash, wagging his tail wildly as he kept pace. There was so much to be done. She’d need to clean ... everything! First order of business: Call Samantha.

“Wait,” he yelled after her, and she spun in the sand to face him. “What’s your name?”

She smiled, couldn’t help it. “Kate,” she said, and immediately regretted it. She shouldn’t have told him her name. She shouldn’t even be talking to him. He was too tempting, and she *really* was giving up men.

He lifted a hand in a wave. “Nice to officially meet you, Kate. Finally.”

Finally? Why did that sound like he’d been counting on it? Waiting for it? Stop it, Kate! You’re reading into this. He’s just being nice.

She waved back, then darted off, feeling uneasy. He was just visiting. In no time, he would be gone. He certainly wouldn't come to the library. Probably wouldn't give her a second thought. She'd never see him again.

A pang of uneasiness hit her at the thought, and she glanced over her shoulder before turning up the path toward the main building. He was still watching her.

Chapter 4



DON

“All right, everyone,” Samantha called from the front of the class while Don glued together his last Halloween decoration. “Five more minutes.”

Don stared at his paper reef made of cutouts of bats and pumpkins, glitter, and silver wire, and grinned as the smell of rubber cement surrounded him. He held the last bat down until he was sure it wouldn’t fall off, then lifted it and sat it on top of his pile of crafts he’d made today.

It was a good-sized pile. A couple inches thick at least. Don glanced around the classroom at the other crafters. Nancy and Polly sat across from him.

“How many did you make?” Don asked them.

Nancy quirked a brow but didn’t glance up.

Polly shook her head. "Four each."

He grinned. "I made twenty."

"This isn't a competition, Don," Nancy said.

He glanced over her head at the two men sitting behind her, Robert and Allen. "How many did you make?"

"Fifteen," Allen said.

"Seventeen for me." Robert adjusted his gallon-sized cowboy hat.

Don's grin widened. He totally won.

"How many did you make?" Robert asked.

"Twenty," Don bellowed so everyone in the room could hear him, then straightened his spine and sat just a little taller.

Samantha came up beside him. She had a cute dress on today that reminded him of the kind of outfits Amelia wore in the sixties. Wide skirt, belt at the waist. High collar. It had pumpkins around the base in fall leaves. Definitely one of Winnie's creations. And she'd pulled her strawberry blond hair back in a curly ponytail. "Twenty?" she asked. "I'm impressed."

Nancy and Polly's piles were much smaller and the rest of the class was in the same boat.

Everyone was keeping at least one of the decorations they'd made, but the rest were going to the library so The Palm's librarian, Kate, could decorate with them.

"Who won?" Don asked.

“This wasn’t a—” Samantha started, but he narrowed his eyes at her. “You did, Don.”

“Darn right, I did!”

Samantha patted him on the shoulder and wandered off.

Nancy cleared her throat just as Don considered trying to make one more.

He glanced up.

“So,” she lowered her voice as she shoved a lock of her blond hair behind her ear. “Do you know who you want to set up Axel with?”

Samantha rang the bell that signaled the class was over, then went around the room gathering the crafts.

Don groaned. “Nope,” he said.

Polly shook her head, her pin-straight posture making him proud. “We’ve got to come up with some options and get started.”

Options? He shot a glance at Samantha. No, that was for later; he still hadn’t even figured out how he’d get the lad here.

“How about Misty? You love her,” Polly asked.

He shook his head. He did love Misty, The Palms’ receptionist, but there was no way he was putting two free spirits together. That would be a recipe for a disaster. And Axel ending up with pink streaks in his hair on a dare. He waved off the suggestion.

“And have you figured out how to get him here?” Nancy asked, echoing his thoughts.

He’d decided in the meeting he would figure out how to get Axel here. Don wasn’t interested in setting up his grandson with one of those yahoos in California. Plus, he wanted Axel to move back to Florida so he could be closer to family. They were definitely bringing him here.

“Yep, got tons of ideas,” he lied and glanced up. “He’ll be here in no time.”

Nancy narrowed her eyes, and he had the sneaking suspicion she was on to him. He swore the woman was a mind reader.

“Can’t wait to hear what they are,” Nancy said. “At the meeting tonight.”

Right, they were meeting tonight. Well, he was sure he could come up with something before then. If it came down to it, he’d call in one of the many favors owed him by his buddies with the 76th Special Investigators and get them to fly out there, put a rucksack over Axel’s head, and drag him home. Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea ...

“We’re not going to kidnap him,” Nancy said.

Darn woman.

Nancy and Polly stood, and after kissing Samantha on the cheek, left class.

Don grinned as Samantha continued to gather the decorations and waited for her to collect his. He flexed his

bicep nearest her in a little jump against his t-shirt sleeve, just to get her reaction. She rolled her eyes. Don stifled a chuckle, which made her laugh.

She shoved his shoulder. “Yes, Don, your muscles are very impressive,” she said in a mocking tone. “Well done.”

He made a straight face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Right, sure you don’t.” She picked up his impressive stack of decorations.

He stood. “Be sure to tell Kate that most of those are from me.”

“Trust me, she knows,” Samantha said as he headed out the door. “Hey, give Amelia a hug for me.”

He waved over his head as he marched out of the hall behind reception where they did all their classes, out to the main foyer, and straight to the elevators with a bounce in his step. This was the best part of his day. Picking up Amelia from Physical Therapy and the salon. He dropped her off for her PT at ten. She had lunch at noon and then went to the salon for an hour after that.

He jammed the elevator button with his thumb and hurried in as soon as it opened. Second floor, here I come. The doors swung open, and right across the way, he spotted her. Amelia. His wife, best friend, and reason for getting up every day.

She sat in her wheelchair in her flowered skirt and pink sweater. Her silver hair had been curled in large curls around

her head. She stared down at her nails, now a bright pink shade that matched her dress, and had a serene look on her face. Don's heart clenched in his chest. He loved that look on her face.

Ty Curtis, her physical therapist, and Cassandra, the lovely aesthetician who always took his girl from being agitated after her PT appointments to relaxed and happy. Woman had magic fingers or something. Though Ty was amazing at what he did too. If he wasn't so good, Don doubted Amelia'd put up with it every day. Cass played with her hair, floofing it, and Ty knelt beside her, holding her hand and chatting at her.

Ty smiled. "You look so beautiful, Amelia. I love what Cass did with your hair."

Amelia kept staring at her nails.

"Did you see her nails?" Cass asked.

"I did," Ty said. "What a pretty color."

Don made a beeline for her, dropping to a knee in front of her. She'd brought him to his knees when he'd been nineteen years old and had proposed, and she was still bringing him to his knees sixty-five years later. Gently he took one of her hands, rubbing his thumb over the back of it, before leaning down and pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles—her hands were soft and smelled of cherries and vanilla, a lotion they kept in the salon. "Hello, Amelia, my love."

Cass let out a long sigh and brushed her blond ponytail over her shoulder. "Okay, I've got my daily dose of romance in. I

can go back to work now.”

Don smiled up at her. “You’re a catch, Cass. You’ll find the man who’ll love you to the moon and back.”

She scoffed. “I’ll pretend I believe you.” Her phone rang from her back pocket and she pulled out the sparkly monstrosity. “Ooo, I have to take this. See you tomorrow?” She glanced at Amelia.

Don nodded. “She can’t wait. Pedicure, right?”

“Best this side of the Mason Dixon line,” Cass said as she answered her phone, went off in Spanish, and strutted off in her ripped jeans. Don could never understand ripped jeans. Who would buy jeans that were already falling apart?

Ty cleared his throat, calling Don’s attention.

“How’d my girl do?” he asked.

“Good, good,” Ty said. “Since we can’t get her to walk anymore, I’m going to need to show you some full range of motion leg stretches you’ll need to do with her every morning, I’ve got some good ones to replace squats and lunges.”

“Lunges?” Don quirked a brow. “That’d be a step forward.”

Ty shook his head and smiled. “Good one, Don. We can start on them next week.”

“Monday,” Don said. He wasn’t asking. If his girl needed new stretches, he didn’t want to put it off forever.

Ty smiled. “Sure thing.” He stood, and Don followed, keeping his hold on Amelia’s hand. “I know you worry about

her, Don. I'm sure I would too if it were Landry, but you *know*, because I've told you before, that you're doing an excellent job with her. I've never seen a patient this advanced doing as well as Amelia."

Don shrugged. "There's always room for improvement."

Ty chuckled. "You're probably right."

They shook hands. "Thanks, Doc," Don said as he went around Amelia's chair and pushed her toward the elevator.

"Not a Doc, just a physical therapist," Ty reminded him for the hundredth time.

Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. The man worked miracles. Don waved over his head and jammed his thumb into the elevator button. "Yep."

Misty was back at her desk when Don wheeled Amelia out of the elevator into the foyer. She leaned to the side so she could see them around the fountain, and waved. The pink streaks in her hair were brighter today than yesterday. She must have gotten them done again. "Hi, Amelia, Don."

That was one reason Don loved Misty. She always included Amelia. Carefully, he wheeled his precious cargo around the large fountain to Misty. He hadn't seen the girl yet today.

Amelia stared up at the atrium ceiling, transfixed by the tiger ferns and flowering baskets that hung all over. She loved flowers.

Misty came around the desk, and the massive jar of candy corn she had out for anyone who wanted them, and squatted in

front of Amelia. “I love your nails! And your hair looks amazing.” She waited a moment for some reaction, but as normal, Amelia kept her eyes on the flowers hanging from the ceiling.

It was one thing Don loved about this place. While Florida had flowers blooming throughout the year, including the arch over their doorway covered in Bougainvillea from October to March, The Palms always had bright colorful baskets of flowers in the foyer year-round. Perfect for his flower girl.

“You look fantastic,” Misty told her, then stood and looked at Don. “How’s our girl doing?”

“Good, good,” Don said. “Ty gives her high marks.”

She extended a fist for a fist bump, and he pounded it. “That’s what I like to hear,” she said.

He turned Amelia toward the back exit and started walking ... slowly. “What happens when a witch gets new shoes?”

Misty grinned. “What?”

He pointed at her jar of Candy Corn.

She went silent for just a moment before bursting into laughter. “Good one, Don,” she said.

He waved over his head as he continued on. The balmy air hit him as he reached the exit and made his way down the flower-lined path and to his bungalow.

Don wasn’t a big fan of the color of the cottages. Coral, sunflower yellow, sea foam green. Those were the official

names of the colors. He just saw pink, yellow, and green. Rolling his eyes, he continued toward their aquamarine-colored home. He shot a glance down the row of bungalows that went from here almost all the way to the downtown pier, shooting an envious look at Polly's white home. It was so starch and clean. The perfect color.

But as they approached their home of ten years, he didn't regret a moment of living here. He slowed as they reached the curb, and came to a stop on the sidewalk in the shade of their massive palm tree, one of many that lined the road out front of each of the units. He crouched down next to Amelia and glanced up at her beautiful face. For a moment, her gaze danced around their surroundings, then finally it landed on their home. Her face lit up like the fourth of July. His heart burst in his chest like it did every time he saw that recognition there.

Amelia loved this house. Loved everything about it. From the pitched roof to the porches on the front and back to the yard full of flowers. And the inside had been her dream. The bungalow had an open concept plan with the living room flowing into the kitchen. They had wood floors, eggshell white walls, wispy curtains Amelia had made herself, plush furniture, and beach décor throughout, and right in the middle of it all sat Amelia's chestnut-colored grand piano.

Nowadays, seeing the cottage was one of the few things that made her smile. The only thing she recognized. She hadn't had a lucid moment in months. Ten to be precise. Ten months, one

week, three days, and—he glanced at his watch—sixteen hours.

She'd woken up at 2303 hours, sweetly calling out to him to help her go to the bathroom.

Don had flown to her side, wanting to hug her, kiss her, tell her he loved her, but you couldn't do that with Alzheimer's patients. At least not this one. She didn't remember she had Alzheimer's, so in her moments of lucidity, he had to act like everything was normal.

So, he'd helped her out of bed and followed behind her as she'd inched to the bathroom.

“Thank you, dear,” she'd said as she'd tried to shut the door on him. But he couldn't leave. If she lost her lucidity while in there, she'd panic and he'd need to help.

He pretended to brush his teeth.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” she said. “You're not fooling anyone. I love you, Don, but sometimes you're smothering. My hip barely even hurts! I can walk on my own.”

She'd hurt her hip nine years ago, that's why they'd moved into the then brand new Palms Retirement Community, that, and because of her Alzheimer's diagnosis.

He'd just winked at her and continued to scrub his teeth with vigor, cherishing her every word.

“You've never forgotten to brush your teeth a day in your life.”

“Don’t you just love the tiled walls in our bathtub? They’re just warm and inviting, aren’t they?”

“I swear, if you try to help me wash my hands, I’ll beat you with my spatula!”

His sweet wife had always been chatty with him, their son Wayne, and their grandson Axel, and a little more reserved with everyone else, their other four kids, thirteen grandkids, and seventeen great-grandkids; content to listen to them talk instead of doing the talking herself.

She started losing coherence on the way back to the room, hit and cussed at him as he scooped her up, and her lucidity was completely gone by the time he got her back in bed. The woman had never sworn a day in her life until this bloody disease took her. After he’d gotten her tucked in and calmed down, he’d gone to the living room and cried. Third time he’d cried in his life.

He’d made his peace with everything then, after hours of fervent prayer. He knew that was likely the last time he’d ever get to talk to his Amelia in this life. The woman he’d known and loved was all but gone, but he’d do everything in his power to protect her beautiful body that had housed that marvelous mind and spirit. Still, as her condition worsened and her body weakened, he held out hope that he might get to talk to her one more time. Tell her he loved her like he should’ve done that night.

Now all he had left were these fleeting smiles when she saw their bungalow and fell in love with it all over again, a whisper

of a time when she was whole. And it made him feel whole.

Her eyes glowed as she took in their home, and she even let him take her hand today. He rubbed a thumb over the back of hers.

“Grandpa?”

Don’s gaze whipped up the path to his porch. Axel stood there, beard and hair overgrown, covered in sand, and he squinted out of one eye that looked a little red. Don stood and slowly pushed Amelia to the ramp, trying to figure out what he was seeing. He stopped and stared. And stared.

Axel ran a hand over the back of his head. “Surprise?”

“The heck happened to you?”

Axel laughed and glanced down at himself. “Uh, the long and short of it is that I got attacked by a chicken, peed on by an alligator, jumped on by a Labrador retriever, and pooped on by a flamingo. Oh, and there was a bag of shrimp involved, which probably accounts for most of the smell.” He sniffed himself.

“Where are the rest of your pants?” He was wearing those “designer” shredded things.

He sighed. “This is the style, Grandpa,” he said and rambled about today’s fashions, and Don could hear how unsure he sounded—like maybe he wouldn’t be welcomed here. Don hated it and was going to do something about it.

Putting the brake on Amelia’s chair with an audible click, Don marched up the ramp and threw his arms around Axel.

Axel went stiff in his embrace for just a moment, then hugged him back.

Don's throat tightened, so he cleared it before saying. "Welcome home, son."

Axel let out a deep breath, and Don felt like he could breathe properly for the first time since the boy had left.



Don wheeled Amelia inside, and Axel followed. "We sure missed you." He got Amelia set up next to the window and turned on all the lights in the house. They wouldn't turn them off until bedtime. It helped Amelia stay awake during the day so she'd sleep well at night.

"I missed you too." Axel closed the door behind them, setting his bag and that guitar of his by it.

"Where are you staying?" Don pulled out his phone and snapped a picture while Axel wasn't looking.

"I think Sean would let his big brother sleep on his couch. Either that or the motel." Axel shoved his hands in his pockets and shot a glance at Amelia.

"Nonsense, you'll stay in the guest room here." Don flipped the light on in the kitchen.

“Thanks, Grandpa,” Axel said, and Don thought he sounded relieved.

“Grandpa, how’s Grandma doing?” He hadn’t taken his eyes off of her.

Don took a deep breath. A lot had changed in the two years since Axel’d last been here. When he’d last visited, Amelia still had moments of lucidity regularly. “Physically, she’s doing better than anyone’s expectations.” He kissed her cheek as he leaned across her to turn on the lamp.

She had her gaze out the window.

“Mentally?” Axel asked.

“Not great, son,” Don said, feeling a lump of guilt build in his stomach. If he hadn’t fought with Wayne, Axel wouldn’t have left. And if he hadn’t left, how many more memories would he have with his grandma? “She barely recognizes me anymore.”

Axel nodded and slowly crossed the room to her, squatting in front of her. “Hi, Grandma,” he said. “It’s Axel.”

He waited, but she kept her gaze out the window.

Axel dropped his head to his hand. “I didn’t know.”

Don leaned against the wall and folded his arms. “I know.” He cleared the lump in his throat. “Why don’t you get showered and cleaned up, maybe find a whole pair of pants, and then we can go to dinner? Yeah?”

Axel nodded, then slowly came to his feet. “Okay. Thanks.” He picked up his bag and Odette and headed down the hall.

As soon as he was out of sight, Don pulled his phone from his pocket and sent the message.

Don:

Target rewired.

He went into the kitchen and sat at the table while he waited for a response. This group wasn’t exactly quick at texting. A simple conversation could take them half an hour to get through. Especially while he was fat-fingering things. Though he thought the term wasn’t fair. His fingers weren’t fat, the buttons on his phone were just really small!

A message pinged through.

Winnie:

What does that mean?

Don looked at his message. Darn it to heck.

Don:

Thermos acquired.

He sat his phone down and waited again.

Winnie:

Target acquired?

He sent the picture of Axel he'd snapped by the door.

Rosa:

□

Don:

I concur.

Seriously, the boy was a mess and that hair! He needed a good cut and shave. The sooner the better. At least he was in the shower now. Don could hear the hum of running water.

Nancy:

Rosa, that's the "puking" emoji, not the "overflowing with joy" emoji, remember?

The bubbles wavered and a few minutes later, another text came through.

Rosa:

Right.

Walt:

What the heck happened to him?

Don:

Something about a bunch of cannibals.

Nancy:

Cannibals???

No! Taking his time so he wouldn't push the wrong buttons,
he typed it again.

Don:

Animals.

Harry:

That's still weird.

Don:

Tell me about it.

Winnie:

How'd you get him here?

Don:

He came to me.

More wavering dots.

Walt:

Details?

No way he was typing this out. They were already ten minutes in, and that would take him at least another ten.

Don:

Later.

Walt:

□□

Polly:

About time.

Rosa:

I'm so excited!

Nancy:

We still need to figure out who to set him up with.

Winnie:

The trick is going to be finding someone who will want to date him for him and not his celebrity.

Harry:

My thoughts exactly.

The door to the bathroom cracked open, and steam flowed out. A moment later, Axel came out.

Don:

Got to go!

He shoved his phone in his pocket as Axel, in fresh clothes with his hair still damp, came barefoot down the hall, still looking like a backwoodsman, only clean, and went straight to Amelia.

“Showered already?” Don headed to the fridge.

“Yeah,” Axel said. “I wanted to try something.” He rolled Amelia over to her baby grand, then took a seat on the bench.

“Want a sandwich or something?” Don asked.

“No thanks, Gramps.” He started playing his song “Amelia,” and sang along. “Graceful fingers dance over ivory

keys; I found my joy from watching you. You taught me from a young age, Amelia, to follow my heart ...”

Don closed the fridge and leaned against it as the beautiful chords filled his home. Amelia looked at the keys, and Don lurched away from the fridge and watched her every move. Slowly, she lifted one hand and placed her small, delicate fingers above the keys.

Axel let loose a watery chuckle. “That’s right, Nonna. This is your song.” He kept singing. “They say stop dreamin’, you say dream on. My world’s in tatters, trying to make everyone happy, and pleasin’ no one.”

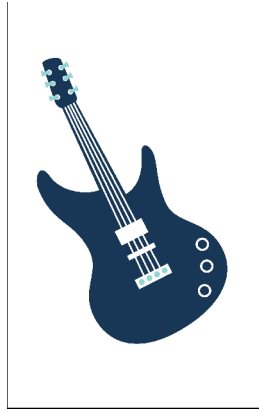
Don swallowed the lump in his throat.

“... but you, you see me clearly and know the truth. The thrum of the melody is under my skin. I can’t lose this gift given me by you ...”

From where he was, Don could almost swear her lips quirked just a little.

Axel finished the song strong, then gently placed his hand over hers on the keys, and Don wanted to hug the boy all over again.

Chapter 5



AXEL

Axel woke before dawn and lay motionless in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. His mind had been a jumble of thoughts last night, keeping him from falling asleep. How long had Grandma been this unresponsive? Had she really understood it was him when he'd played her song and she'd brushed her fingers over the keys? And would Grandpa ever forgive him for not being there through it all?

He didn't move until the first rays of dawn lit his room in a soft glow through the lace curtains Grandma had sewn years ago. Then he simply rolled over.

When the back door slammed shut and the sounds of heavy footsteps wandered the house, he knew it was time to get up and face the day. Grandpa would've already been out for his

predawn run, and about to shower, and the man did not like laziness. So, at a quarter to seven, Axel rolled out of bed, put on his running clothes, grabbed his black ball cap and sunglasses, and hit the boardwalk along the beach.

He hit it hard, monitoring his pulse and breaths between steps, and sucked in the deep salty ocean air. In California, he couldn't do this. Fans and paparazzos would bombard him in minutes. Gyms only. So this felt ... liberating. The beach was relatively quiet, with only a few other joggers out and about and seagulls squawking overhead, so he hoofed it all the way downtown, past the beachside shops, and down around the corner all the way to the lighthouse.

He got up cliff side, behind the yellow and white lighthouse tower, and placed his hands on his hips as he stared out over the ocean—the light pinks and yellows of the morning sun glimmered over the calm waters. He loved this lighthouse, and had written one of his most popular songs about it eight years ago. It'd been about that time his parents had dropped their latchkey kid ways and had started taking a solid interest in him and his brothers.

It'd been a tough adjustment. None of them, he and his brothers, had understood the sudden interest or were sure they'd wanted it. It wasn't even that they'd had a particularly bad relationship with their parents, just more of a need-to-know one. They'd all grown up fiercely independent, which they were grateful for, and had had a strict call-Grandpa policy when and if they needed something.

Like a ride to the hospital when his parents worked late and Sean had jumped off the roof and broken his arm, or when Johnny needed a suit for prom after he and Sean had shredded his in retribution for him putting itching powder in their beds, or when Sean's first girlfriend broke his heart—though that was a job for Grandma. His dad had been ticked about the broken arm—felt they should've called him; but they'd learned the lesson well when they were young: don't bother dad while he's in a session.

For all other fiascos, his parents had a very kids-will-be-kids-you-broke-it-you-fix-it attitude. His grandparents were not that.

And then, when he'd been twenty-seven, and Johnny and Sean had been twenty-five and twenty-three, his parents had decided they needed to know everything. Said that now their kids were well into adulthood and killing it, they wanted a more active part in their lives. It helped that his mom retired and his dad started taking clients on his own schedule.

Now they saved and scrapbooked every article Johnny wrote, were there for Sean every time he deployed, ready to take care of his house and business while he was gone, and had gone to multiple of Axel's concerts and had filmed every one of his TV appearances including his nine Grammy wins, even the year he'd taken them to the Grammy's with him.

He headed down the wooden staircase from the lighthouse, and on back to The Palms.

He wasn't sure what had prompted the change in his parents, but it'd been like a light had turned on. Hence the lighthouse imagery in his song. That was also the name of his fourth album.

Axel was so grateful, especially for Johnny and Sean, who'd always been disappointed as kids that Axel had been the one making them dinner and tucking them in most nights. Not that his parents were never there or that they doubted they were loved, but his dad had strong opinions about smothering children, like "his dad had done him" and what made "strong independent people," and, well, his mom was a flake, a lovable one, and a businesswoman to boot. It made her unavailable at best.

Thank goodness Grandma had taught Axel how to cook amazing Italian dishes she'd learned from her grandmother in Italy before she immigrated in her teens. He'd written them all down in a composition notebook that still held a place of honor in his kitchen to this day.

Not that he ate any of those dishes regularly. His agent and manager had him on a strict diet and exercise regime that made doing world tours with hundreds of concerts, countless press junkets, and days without sleep doable.

He stopped in at one of the shops by the pier and grabbed the biggest Dr. Pepper they had—forty-two ounces, come to papi.

Not technically on his diet, but Dr. Pepper was his vice. Especially when he was stressed.

The store only had a few people in it, and the teen behind the counter seemed more interested in her cell phone than the guy behind the scraggly beard.

Man, he loved his beard. He'd had it for six months now, and his anonymity had never been so good. Plus, it felt good to not have to shave so much, and it was just cool. Manly. Tough.

In a light jog, so he wouldn't spill his drink, he headed home.

The flag flew on the flagpole in a prominent display in the backyard, making Axel feel proud of Grandpa, Sean, every man and woman who served in the military, and his country. Grandpa had been up for a while, so he was bound to hear about it.

Grandpa glanced over his shoulder from his spot at the kitchen table when Axel slipped in the back door. "Finally, I thought you'd died in your room last night."

Exactly.

"I was out for a jog," Axel said. At least Grandpa was as consistent as the tide.

Grandpa sat across from Grandma, reading her the daily activities from The Palms' newsletter. "Rita's doing pumpkin carving classes Tuesdays and Thursdays through Halloween. Would you like to do that, love?" Grandpa asked.

Grandma kept her gaze out the window over the sink behind Grandpa's shoulders.

"Maybe we'll stop by." Grandpa frowned down at the paper.

Axel smirked. Grandpa had always hated Halloween, but Grandma loved it, so he kept his mouth shut and went along. Looked like some things never changed.

“Ooo, they’re serving Bruno’s famous Mac and cheese for lunch today.” Grandpa licked his chops.

“Morning,” Axel said to Grandma as he came into the room and removed his cap.

Grandpa’s eyes nearly bulged when he saw Axel’s drink. “What is that?”

“Dr. Pepper.” Axel grinned and kissed Grandma on the cheek.

She cringed away from him.

“My land, son,” Grandpa said. “That’s got to be a gallon!”

Axel sat, staring at Grandma and the way her expression softened after he’d pulled back, his heart sinking.

A large hand landed on his forearm. “It’s not you,” Grandpa patted his arm, “it’s the beard. It tickles her face.”

Axel forced a smile. “How long has she been like this?”

No need to explain what “this” was. “Almost a year.” Grandpa got a text and quickly pulled out his phone.

Axel swallowed the lump in his throat. He shouldn’t have stayed away. He was a fool.

Grandpa responded to his text and set his phone down. Axel furrowed his brow. Since when did Grandpa text?

Grandpa cleared his throat. “But she has a point. You look like a wild man. Did you lose your razor? I have extras.”

Of course he did. Not that he needed them. No hair would dare make an appearance on Grandpa’s prominent chin, lest he declare war on it like he was Saddam Hussein. (In fact, until proven otherwise, Axel was convinced Grandpa had scared Hussein into hiding in that underground hole where he was caught.) In all thirty-five years of Axel’s life, he’d never once seen Grandpa with stubble—not even a five o’clock shadow.

Axel chuckled. “I’m good.” Though a part of him wanted to shave just so he wouldn’t see that look on Nonna’s face again. But keeping a low profile was paramount. If people found out he was here, the tiny retirement community and town would be bombarded with reporters and fans. Axel had always been considered a hot topic, but now that his “breakup” with Lillie Anne was fresh, he’d draw the leeches like a fresh blood bag. He’d probably have to leave. And he wanted to be here. Needed to be here. Needed them.

Grandpa stared him down.

He took a big, long swig of his Dr. Pepper.

Grandpa leaned forward on his elbow, his abnormally big bicep flexing from the move.

Axel rolled his eyes but caved. “I know shaving was big in the Army back in the day, but the rest of the world is less restrictive.”

“I don’t shave because of the Army; I shave because your Grandma won’t kiss me if I don’t. All sixty-five years of our marriage.” He rubbed his chin. “Soft as a baby’s bottom.”

Axel grinned. He loved that. But Grandpa had always been a softie with Nonna.

Grandpa swatted his arm. “You should try it. Maybe you’d find yourself a good woman.”

Axel grinned. “Oh, has that been my problem all this time?”

Grandpa slanted a gaze at Axel’s guitar where he’d rested it against the piano.

Groaning, Axel squared his shoulders. “Yes, I’m a rock star. I know you hate it, but it’s not going to change. And speaking of being a rock star, this one needs anonymity right now. So he’s keeping his beard.”

“Is *he*?” Grandpa folded the community paper and shook his head, but Axel thought he’d caught a little smirk. “Stubborn. Just like your father,” he said under his breath. Another text came through, and after reading it, Grandpa swore under his breath as he slowly tapped out another text. “Darn keys are too small; I keep hitting the wrong letters.”

“When did you start texting?”

“Last summer.” He wagged his phone in the air. “Isn’t that what all the cool kids are doing?”

Axel didn’t know. He wasn’t much of a texter. Except when he didn’t want to talk to his manager. Which was a lot lately.

He preferred talking on the phone. Johnny was the texter in the family. “I guess.”

Grandpa responded to another text, then glanced up at him. “Go get showered and changed. We’re heading up for breakfast, and put on some whole pants instead of pants with holes in them. If we run into my friends, I don’t want them assuming you’re homeless.”

Like Kate had. Ha!

Kate ... he warmed all over at just the thought of her. Maybe he’d see her today.

Grandpa tapped his watch face.

Axel chuckled and pushed out of his chair. Grandpa hated wasting time. “All right, all right.”

He strutted down the hall, and Grandpa called after him. “There’s a razor on the bathroom sink in case you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” he called back.

“Breeding ground for fleas.”

Axel threw his head back and chuckled as he scrubbed a hand down his face. He’d missed Grandpa.

Twenty minutes later, Grandpa, Grandma, and Axel, in a pair of dark straight-leg jeans and a white raw V-neck t-shirt, that had Grandpa arching a brow at him, headed out. Grandpa’s reaction to his clothes always amused him. Okay, his shirt was a tidge tight across his chest, but Grandpa was

one to judge. His shirts bulged at his biceps all the time. The Clayton men were just big guys—plus it was one of Axel’s most conservative shirts. Best he could do.

They made their way up to the main building and straight to the dining room. They got there at seven forty-five, and the place was already teeming with people who all stopped to blatantly stare at him, making him wish he’d brought his ball cap.

A group of five sat together at one of the tables near a big window. They waved the moment they saw them, their grins getting bigger as they turned their gazes on Axel. Axel almost shirked back. He didn’t like the looks on their faces, too eager, but a bunch of senior citizens wouldn’t frighten him off. Grandpa was enough.

The men stood as they approached and waited until Amelia was situated at the table in her wheelchair before sitting again. Both had mustaches and caps, one a NASA baseball hat, that guy seemed stern, and the other a plaid page boy cap. That guy was grinning from ear to ear.

He reached out a hand, and Axel shook it. “Good to meet you, my name’s Harry,” he placed a hand on the back of the chair next to him where a woman sat, “and this is my wife Virginia.”

“You too,” Axel smiled, and looked at the woman, who stared up at him like she had stars in her eyes. She fanned her face. He glanced at the other two women, who stared with just as much awe. His face heated.

“You’re even better looking in person.” The lady with pole-straight posture, black hair, and turquoise jewelry fluffed her hair.

The woman next to her in a pretty floral wrap dress, with short grey hair, leaned into her friend and whispered, “I told you so.”

Kill me. Kill me now.

Don pulled out his chair. He pointed to the lady with the turquoise jewelry and black hair first, then to the littler, slightly older lady with short curly hair. “Axel, this is Polly and Winnie,” he signaled to the guy with the baseball cap next, “and Walt. And Harry and Virginia, of course. My friends.” He sat.

Axel pulled out his own chair and took a seat. Each of the tables had small, warty pumpkins in green, white, and orange on them.

Harry leaned forward, then signaled between himself and his wife. “We’re huge fans of your music.” Then he pointed to the cute old lady in the sundress. “And Winnie, too.”

Walt twitched his ‘stache and cleared his throat. “My future grandson-in-law, Tucker, tells me he’s a fan. Said something about your Midnight Rendezvous album. I’ve been listening to it. It’s good.” The tone didn’t sound like a compliment but the words did.

“Thank you.” Axel rubbed his knees.

“And don’t worry,” Winnie said. “Don told us you don’t want people knowing you’re here. Our lips are sealed.” She mimed locking her lips and tossing the key over her shoulder.

“Of course,” Harry said, “we’ll talk about it amongst ourselves. But we’ll be cool.”

Axel grinned. Yeah, real cool.

Don waved over a pimply kid with long hair pulled back in a ponytail.

The kid smiled. “Morning, Don, the usual?”

He nodded. “And my grandson here needs to order.”

Axel shrugged. “Do you have yogurt parfait?”

The kid scribbled it down. “Yep, anything else?”

“A coffee would be great, thank you,” Axel said.

Grandpa shook his head. “That’s not very healthy.”

“It’s very healthy,” Axel replied as seriously as he could. It was hard. The things Grandpa worried about were pretty hilarious to him. “Better than bacon and eggs all the time.”

“Yet my generation doesn’t have all these health problems the younger ones do.”

Axel shrugged. There might be some truth to that. Everything was processed now, and twenty years ago, autoimmune diseases were basically unheard of. Still, he felt pretty okay about yogurt.

The kid left and returned a few minutes later with meals for everyone, except for him and Don, but including Amelia.

Axel leaned closer to Grandpa as he put a napkin over Grandma's dress. "Does Grandma eat the same thing every day?"

Grandpa nodded. "Oatmeal for breakfast. She'll always eat it without fuss."

As everyone dug into their meals, Grandpa lovingly fed Grandma, being careful to give her small bites, wait until she was done chewing, and kept a steady conversation with her.

He wiped a little oatmeal from the side of her mouth. "Don't want to spill on your dress. I know it's one of your favorites."

For all Grandpa's displays of being a man's man, with his muscle shirts, army haircut, ridged routine, and no-nonsense attitude, he really was—always had—been a big softy. This was a good reminder for Axel.

Their food came out a moment later, and Grandpa pushed his eggs, bacon, and bowl of fruit to the side, and kept feeding Amelia.

Axel stared down at his yogurt, took a bite, then felt it go to ash in his mouth. He should've been here. He pushed it away. "Can I take over for you, gramps?"

"I've got it," Grandpa said with a grin.

"Don't worry about him," Winnie spoke up from across the table over a waffle. "He does this every day."

Axel faced her. "I'm sorry?"

She nodded her head toward Grandpa. “Feeds Amelia before he even looks at his own food.”

“Eats his cold most days.” Polly took a bite from her fruit bowl.

“My yogurt won’t get cold. You sure you don’t want me to do that?” Axel tried.

Grandpa fed Grandma another bite.

Walt took a bite of toast, getting a crumb in his Tom Selleck-esk mustache. “He’s a stubborn one, your grandpa. We’ve all tried to help, but he won’t take it.”

Virginia piped up with a laugh. “Says he likes his food cold, if you can believe that.”

Grandpa smirked. “I do.”

At almost the same time, Polly and Winnie’s postures both got a little straighter as they peered toward the lobby.

“Don,” Polly said, pointing toward the atrium.

Axel shot his gaze that way, a pang of fear wrenching in his gut that the paparazzi had found him, but the lobby was near empty except for a couple women by the front desk.

“Samantha,” Polly whispered.

That had Grandpa perking up and turning to look. He cleared his throat and nodded as Axel’s heart rate returned to normal.

Until his phone pinged and alerted him to a text message. It better not be Chaz. He really wasn’t in the mood to talk to him

yet. He checked his messages and froze when he saw it was from “Dad.” Shoot.

Axel scrubbed a hand over his face as he opened the message.

Dad:

When were you going to tell your old man you were home?

Another message pinged through.

Dad:

I’m guessing you’re staying in Diamond Cove?

Axel took a deep breath. Johnny had been right. He should’ve told Dad he was coming, but he’d kind of been hoping he could drop in and Mom and Dad would never find out. Not that he was opposed to seeing them, but they had just been for a visit last month, and he came here because he’d needed Grandpa and Grandma. Not that he could say that to them. Didn’t matter, Dad had figured it out, anyway.

Dad:

If you don’t respond, I’ll call your brother.

Axel shrugged and shoved his phone back into his pocket. Sweet. That should save him some time.

Don leaned closer to Axel and pointed toward the reception desk where the women stood, behind them at the rotating door, a large blow-up ghost swayed in the entrance from an air machine at its base. “See that pretty strawberry blond?”

Axel sighed and glanced at the women. One was on the phone behind the desk with a massive jar of candy corn on it, and the other was looking through some papers while rubbing her neck like she had a kink in it. “Um ... the one with the blond hair with pink highlights or the redhead?”

Grandpa’s jaw dropped, and he furrowed his brow in annoyance. “My land, son. Have you never seen a strawberry blond before? The one in the flared hunter green polka dot skirt and black top.”

“Looks like a 1950s housewife?” Axel asked. She had those thick, horn-rimmed glasses on and everything.

Grandpa stared at Winnie and Polly, brow furrowed.

Winnie shrugged.

“What about her, Grandpa?” Axel asked.

Grandpa cleared his throat. “Would you mind letting her know the cats out of the cradle and fish don’t swim upstream?”

Axel blinked. “What?”

“My word, Don,” Virginia said from her husband’s side.
“You can’t be serious.”

Grandpa grinned and nudged Axel with his elbow. “She’ll understand.”

“Grandpa, I’m not going to say that.”

“Chicken.” Grandpa’s smile turned into a full-on smirk as he folded his arms over his chest.

Axel glanced at Grandpa’s friends, who all smiled at him, except for Virginia, who seemed just as perplexed as he did. It was kind of freaking him out. Harry even gave him a thumbs-up.

“Is this some kind of weird initiation?” It was like his first world tour opening for Midnight Panther. It’d ticked off the other members of the band he hadn’t taken the job as their new lead singer replacing Callum Sloan, and spent the first week of the tour hazing him.

Vodka in water bottles on stage during performances and no water anywhere, glue on the microphone, telling him they were in different cities than they actually were, hookers knocking on his door in the middle of the night, reporters watching his every move—knowing where he’d be every minute of every day. He’d been so tired, and they’d traveled so much so quickly he’d spent most of the tour with no clue where he was or what he was doing.

The women laughed. “She’ll understand,” Polly reiterated.

Axel tossed his napkin on the table and stood. Fine. If this was a prank, he could take it. This was his Grandpa and his Grandpa's friends, for crying out loud. It couldn't be worse than Midnight Panther locking the men's room on stage right before he was supposed to go on.

"Her name's Samantha," Winnie said like she was being helpful.

Well, okay then. Squaring his shoulders, Axel marched across the foyer, past the fountain covered in blue, navy, turquoise, aqua, and white tiles shimmering under the clear surface of the water, and over to the women. They both glanced up at him. The woman on the phone nearly dropped it.

"Yes," she said to the person on the other end. "I'm still here. Sorry, what was that?" She might recognize him for who he was, or she might just be looking at him like he was a piece of chocolate she couldn't have while on a diet. And that wasn't being boastful, that was just life as a Clayton boy.

He and his brothers heavily favored his dad's side in looks, which meant they had their grandma's Italian genes, and Grandpa's height and build. The term tall, dark, and handsome had been applied to all of them, starting at about the time they'd each hit their first growth spurts at around fourteen years old. By the time Axel was fifteen, he was already six foot two.

The other woman, in her black Mary Jane stilettos—no, he wasn't embarrassed he knew that; he had a lot of female cousins he was close with—and dark green polka dot skirt

swiveled toward him and frowned. Her gaze raked him from head to toe, then she jutted out a hip and placed her hand on it—her nails were painted green too, but more of a lime green. There was a lot of attitude in her stare.

“Samantha?” he asked, concerned he’d just been sent into a trap.

She gave him a weary gaze through her Wayfarer glasses. “Yes?”

The revolving door at the front swished open, and they both looked. Three women entered, and one of them caught his gaze. She sucked in a gasp. The other women walked off in the opposite direction, heading for the elevators, but not before the first grabbed one of their arms and pointed over her shoulder in Axel’s direction. Axel turned his back on her and grabbed a piece of paper from a stack on the reception desk, holding it up by his face.

“Oh!” Samantha’s weary gaze vanished in a blink, and she smiled. “You’re here for the job?”

He peeked around the paper toward the women at the elevators. They were on the other side of the fountain now, blocked from view, but they were talking excitedly. Not good.

“What?” he asked.

“The job?” Samantha pointed at the flyer. “In the library? I can’t believe we already have a bite. I only posted that ad thirty minutes ago.”

The women headed around the fountain. Judas Priest! “Yes! The job. I’m here for that. Where is it?” He had to get out of here. “Can you take me there now?”

“Absolutely!” Samantha marched off at a surprisingly brisk pace considering her diminutive height and the size of her shoes. He hurried after her just as the women came around the fountain. He picked up his pace, catching Grandpa and his friend’s wide-eyed stares as he headed out the back door.

Sorry, Grandpa, I’ll explain later. He breathed a sigh of relief once they got outside.

Samantha marched down the flowered-lined path, and at the street hung a left. “I’m so relieved you’re here. Our library just got nominated for a prestigious award, and our librarian had me hauling books all over the place yesterday.” She rubbed at her neck.

Axel chuckled and pointed at where her hand rubbed her shoulder. “That why you’re sore?”

“Yep.” She laughed. “Just wait until the end of your first day. You’ll see what I mean.” Ahead of them, an arched wrought-iron footbridge with decorative railing went from a path across the lake to what looked like a building hidden in palms, and oak and cypress trees covered in Spanish moss. If he remembered correctly, the library was on the other side of it.

Okay, now he had to come clean. “Actually, I’m Don Clayton’s grandson, Axel.”

Samantha took a stuttering step, caught her balance, and slowed down. “Aw, okay. Everything makes sense now.”

“It does?” This should be interesting. “Why, does my grandpa like to tease you?” That would explain that ridiculous message he was supposed to give her.

She chuckled. “Oh, no. Don’s great. He’s one of my favs, actually. It’s just ...” She cleared her throat. “I thought you were your brother before I saw you.”

“Sean?” Axel frowned.

“Not that one,” she sounded irritated.

“Johnny?”

She breathed out, and a furrow formed between her brows. Oh, yeah, she’d definitely met Johnny. He loved his brother, but the guy was a handful. And Axel had seen the look currently adorning Samantha’s face on the faces of other women over the years. Contempt. “Anyway,” she said as they crossed the bridge. “Kate will be so glad to have the help—”

“Kate?” This time, Axel came up short. Kate!

But Samantha just kept walking and talking, so he rushed to catch up, his heart thudding heavily in his throat.

“That’s the librarian. Kate Hart. She needs to clean the place from top to bottom, but she’s the only one who works here and it’s a big job. A really big job.” She rubbed her neck again. “Unfortunately, with Halloween coming up, I don’t have time.”

They reached the other side of the bridge and walked up the grass-lined, shade-covered path to the dark wood double doors with frosted glass windows. He stared up at the building and froze.

It was made of granite blocks, had three stories, arched stained glass windows, and had a large stained-glass dome at the top—it nearly filled the entire island it sat on. It almost looked renaissance in its appearance. How had his grandparents lived here for almost ten years, how had he visited multiple times over that period, and never seen it? The community was so modern, and this, well, this felt like stepping back in time.

Samantha grinned. “Not a bad-looking building, is it?”

“Not at all,” he said. It was right out of a movie. He bet it looked amazing decorated for Halloween, and he was sure they decorated, considering the number of decorations The Palms had already started putting up everywhere else.

“Well, I can’t tell you how glad I am you’re interested in this job,” Samantha said. “Normally I’d run a background check, have you fill out a bunch of paperwork, and get references, but since you’re Don’s grandson, I think we can skip some of those steps. Plus, Kate really needs the help. It’s not going to be a long-term position, and probably won’t be terribly exciting, mostly hauling books around, but we’ll pay well. Think you can start today?”

A library this big? More like hauling *lots* of books around. “Helping Kate?” he asked, excitement building in his core.

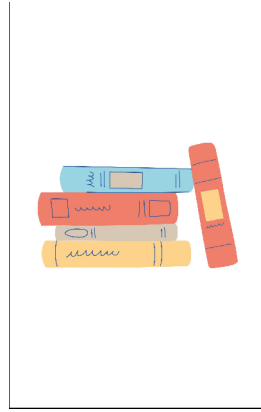
Ten. That's how many songs he'd written after having met Kate for a grand total of fifteen minutes, possibly less, twelve years ago. If he had to haul around thousands of books for ten more songs, it'd be worth it. Sure, maybe her inspiring him had just been dumb luck or a one-off. Maybe he was setting himself up for a lot of work for not a lot of payback, or maybe ...

“Yep.” Samantha nodded. “You’ll like her. She’s a good egg.”

He grinned and shook her hand. “Where do I start?”

Or maybe she was exactly what he thought she was all those years ago. *Maybe* ... Kate was his muse.

Chapter 6



KATE

There were a lot of reasons why Kate loved Diamond Cove library.

She loved the white and frosted stained glass windows with hints of gold and blue here and there, the bookcases with arched pathways between them, the wrought iron staircases that wound in a circle from the first to the second floor along with the rolling staircases against the bookcases throughout. The hidden alcoves and window seats were perfect for curling up into read, the leather and claw foot couches and chairs added a hint of class, and the gold silk-patterned curtains over the windows really topped the place off. And that didn't even count the green Tiffany Desk lamps that sat on every reading table and a massive fireplace that Kate wished lit all the time because she was always cold.

Summers were the worst because the air conditioner was on. It was October already, and it still ran, pumping the library full of icy air. She tugged at the sleeves of her tan fisherman sweater that she tucked the front of into her jeans. She had a T-shirt on underneath but doubted it'd see the light of day. She shivered.

Though older people often got cold, so the fireplace got used more than one might think it would.

The building had all the charm of old-school libraries, without all the troubles of them. Because this library had been fashioned to look old but had really only been around for a decade. Of course, the building itself had been around for nearly sixty years, it was an old observatory that had been abandoned twenty-five years ago, purchased fifteen years ago by a very wealthy man by the name of Adam Moreau, and refurbished into a library by a talented woman named Belle Moreau, who also happened to be Adam's wife.

The fact that it'd been an observatory had fascinated Kate in the beginning. Now it was one of her favorite things about the place.

It had a small modern kitchen, bathrooms with sinks high enough Kate didn't have to hunch over to reach them, and all-new electricity, plumbing, and heating. In fact, to light the fireplace, all she had to do was push a light switch. It was awesome. The place was nicer and more comfortable than her apartment. She'd move in if she could get away with it.

It was special. Unique. And so loved by the community.

Kate had come here seven years ago after seeing an ad in the paper in the public library she worked in for a year after getting her Masters Degree in Library Science. Fun fact: libraries did still get newspapers. The head librarian Louis Stansfield, had hired her right away, and she'd never looked back.

This place, and the people who frequented it, were almost as important to her as her family. Being here was the first time she'd ever been around people who treated her like she was more than just a wallflower, treated her like she had something special to offer. She'd poured herself into this community and this job because of that.

They were a week and a half out from Halloween, and the crafters had been busy at work making decorations. She had a pile of them on her desk that she would put up as soon as she'd dusted everything.

Two of those people, Nancy, a young retiree in her sixties who had replaced work for tracksuits, and Rosa, a legal retiree in her eighties who made the best tamales Kate had ever tried, inched their way into the library.

Or rather, Rosa had a death grip on Nancy's arm, keeping her from charging in like Nancy normally would, as Rosa carefully scanned the main room as they entered. Rosa had a duffel bag hanging over her shoulder.

From her place at the tall standing desk, Kate leaned forward and smiled, watching their progress.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Rosa,” Nancy said. “There is no such thing as ghosts.”

Rosa clutched at a rosary she held in her hand, and hissed a “Shhhh,” At Nancy. “He’ll hear you!”

Nancy rolled her eyes, then caught sight of Kate, smiled, and waved. “Morning.”

The “he” Rosa was referring to was another reason Kate loved the library. It had its very own ghost. His name was Chester.

Kate hopped off her stool and came out from around the standing desk to meet Nancy and Rosa, the heels of her brown ankle boots clacking against the mosaic wood floors until she reached one of the many runner carpets.

“Where’s Bear?” Rosa asked, peering around.

Kate pointed to the faded red oriental rug in front of the fireplace where Bear was curled up in a ball with his head resting on a big blue blanket he’d been dragging around since Sweetie left. He lay in a beam of sunlight that shone through the large stained window in the main area. The sun did a good job of keeping him warm while he took his morning nap. Though he wasn’t napping now, just sitting there staring at nothing with big brown mopey eyes. His ear twitched and he let out a pathetic sigh.

Rosa’s tense posture eased, and she let out a deep breath. “He must not be around then.” Rosa had told Kate dogs had a sixth sense. If Chester was near, Bear would be agitated.

“Who?” Kate asked. “Chester?”

Rosa waved a hand in the air, then clutched her bag to her side. “No digas ...!” She whipped her gaze around. “Don’t say his name!”

“The library is not haunted,” Nancy said.

Rosa patted Nancy’s arm. “You see; this is why I brought you. You’re so sensible, Nancy. No ghost would dare mess with you.”

Nancy lifted a hand, and for a second it looked like she might argue that point, maybe even point out that Rosa had been a very successful paralegal who’d helped her husband build one of the most successful law offices in the state of Florida, (Kate knew because she’d mentioned Rosa and her husband offhandedly at a family dinner and her attorney brothers had about croaked,) and because of her accomplishments, Rosa should be immune to these kinds of superstitions. Instead, Nancy just let her hand drop to her side and shook her head. “Never mind; I don’t know why I try arguing with the professional arguer.” That’s what Kate called her big brothers. Nancy turned her gaze on Kate. “How is Bear doing?”

Kate glanced at her white lab. “Well, Sweetie’s only been gone since yesterday and he hasn’t stopped brooding since. At this point, I’m thinking he could give Heathcliff a run for his money.”

Nancy laughed and Rosa awed, brushing a lock of her short silver hair behind her ear.

“Poor baby,” Nancy crooned in Bear’s direction.

“Sweetie will be back in no time,” Rosa added.

Bear turned his head and glanced mournfully out the window. Kate’s heart clutched in her chest. Bear really loved that baby gator.

Nancy faced Rosa. “So, what are we doing here?”

Rosa let go of Nancy’s arm, shoved her rosary in her khaki pants, and started rooting through her bag as she stepped forward to Kate’s standing desk. Kate and Nancy followed her. A moment later, Rosa pulled out a candle, a metal platter, a utility lighter with a long neck, and a bag full of what looked like dried herbs. “I heard about the library’s nomination. Felicidades, Kate,” she turned her warm brown gaze on Kate, her smile filling with pride.

Kate grinned. “Thank you.”

“You deserve it, mija.” Rosa reached past Nancy and patted Kate’s hand. “If people are going to be coming here to look at the place, we have to get rid of Chester. Can’t have him frightening people off.”

Kate chuckled and pointed to the bag of dried herbs. “What’s that?”

“Incense.” Rosa opened the Ziplock bag and poured the contents onto the metal plate. “We’ll light it and it will repel Chester. We’ll put the incense on the mantle of the fireplace and the candle can be on the desk here.”

Nancy sighed and pointed at Rosa's herbs. "Are you saying that's a ghost repellent?"

Rosa nodded. "Lavender, nettles, thyme, and sage. Sage cleanses spaces, thyme gets rid of bad energy, nettles get rid of bad spirits, and lavender cleanses and smells good."

Kate laughed, and Rosa winked at her. That got Nancy smiling too.

"We'll be here for a while," Rosa said, shooing her with waves of her hands. "You go about your business."

Kate shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"You don't believe this nonsense?" Nancy asked her as Rosa went to work. "Do you?"

Kate shrugged. "I don't *not* believe it."

Nancy grinned. "That's a double negative. I thought you were supposed to be a librarian."

"Let's just say weird things happen around here, and while it's all fun and games during the day, it's freaky at night." On more than one occasion, things had moved around, lights had turned on and off, and she'd heard voices when no one else was in the library.

Rosa lit the big candle on Kate's desk with her long-necked lighter, grabbed the platter full of herbs in one hand, and Nancy's arm in the other, and marched toward the fireplace.

Kate moved the stack of decorations made by the residents of The Palms to one side of her desk and looked at her to-do

list. She and Samantha had barely gotten one bookshelf cleaned on the third floor yesterday afternoon before closing. It had taken four hours to empty the shelf, wipe it down, dust the books, and put everything back where it was. Four hours for one bookshelf in a library filled with hundreds of them. Kate sighed.

The e-mail she'd gotten from The Library Times indicated she had two, possibly three, weeks before somebody showed up to do a walkthrough. Which meant, to her, that she had less than two weeks to get it done. She needed to clean the entire library before Halloween, just in case, and she wasn't sure how she was going to do it, even with Samantha's help.

The front door opened, and the candle on her desk flickered but didn't go out.

“Good news, Kate,” Samantha said, drawing Kate's attention. Her strawberry blond tresses hung in barrel curls about her shoulders, she wore red lipstick, square-framed glasses, and was in her typical sixties-inspired dress looking adorable as always. “I've hired someone to help you with the library.”

Kate smiled at Samantha as she came in, then her gaze went to the man following behind her, and her jaw dropped. It was the security guard, Axel. Even yesterday when he'd been a mess, she'd still found him attractive, but today “mess” didn't come close to describing him.

He made eye contact and strutted forward—yes, strutted—all six foot plus of lean, toned mountain man. He wore a white

wide V-neck T-shirt that showed just how toned his chest really was with a leather necklace that hung down into his shirt, a leather cuff watch, and well-fitted jeans. His hair hung in waves around his chin, and looked a little damp, and that beard. Why was it so attractive? Never in her life had she ever had the urge to run her fingers through a guy's beard. She bit the inside of her cheek and she died a little on the inside. Why. Was. This. Happening?

Samantha stopped in front of her, and he came up beside Sam, never breaking eye contact with Kate, his dark eyes peering into her soul. Oh man, she was getting poetic. That was never a good sign. He leaned against her desk, resting one very toned arm on top of a stack of Library Times magazines she'd been using for inspiration.

"Kate, this is Axel," Samantha said, and behind her, Nancy whirled around. "Axel, I'd like you to meet our librarian, Kate."

He smirked at her and tingles shot down her spine. "Morning, Kate."

Kate snapped her mouth shut, her gaze darting between him and Samantha.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Cat got your tongue?"

The scrambling of nails against the hardwood floor, a bark, and then a streak of white bolted in their direction. Next thing Kate knew, Bear was flying through the air, and Axel was holding his arms open. For the second time in two days, Bear leaped into Axel's arms. And Axel caught him like the dog

didn't weigh eighty-five pounds of pure muscle. Bear did knock his ball cap off, though.

"Bear!" Kate, Samantha, and Nancy yelled. Nancy scurried over as Rosa completely ignored them, continuing to do her thing with the herbs by the fireplace.

Axel laughed, dropped to a knee, and set Bear down. Bear thumped his tail back and forth, and made his happy whining noises. Axel scratched behind the dog's ears. "It's fine; Bear and I are buddies. Isn't that right, pal?" He grabbed his cap and shoved it back on over his wavy black locks that looked like silk to the touch.

Bear dropped to his side, then rolled over on his back, exposing his belly. Axel scratched it. Kate's jaw dropped once again. Bear was a friendly dog with everyone, but he had never been this demonstrative with anyone but her and Aston, one of the interns who worked here. Even then, he'd never jumped into anyone's arms.

Kate found Bear at a rescue when he was a year and a half old. He'd been saved from a breeder where he spent most of his life in a kennel. He'd barely been able to walk, and Kate had had to do extensive physical therapy with him to get him where he was today. So, yeah, he loved people, but he was always reserved around strangers. Bear had barely even been able to stand her boyfriends. Or *boyfriend*. He really only knew Greg. She'd broken up with Hank three months after getting Bear. Not that it mattered. It wasn't like Greg was some great guy with animals. Or women, for that matter ...

“You’re such a good boy,” Axel said, “aren’t you?” he gave him one more scratch behind the ears and stood to face her again, grinning even wider, exposing brilliant white teeth and a beautiful smile.

“I guess he likes me,” Axel said.

Kate’s knees went a little weak, and she grabbed onto her desk for support. She started to talk, and squeaked instead, then cleared her throat and tried again. “I’m sorry, what are you doing here?”

Samantha faced him. “Oh? You know each other?”

He kept his gaze firmly on Kate. “We’ve met a couple of times.”

Nancy sidled up to him. “Sorry to intrude, but did you say your name’s Axel?”

He faced her and reached for her hand. “That’s me.”

Nancy shook it, and he laughed.

“Good grip you’ve got there,” Axel said.

“I’m Nancy.” She smiled, then pointed to Rosa who was currently holding her rosary and muttering something in Spanish into her lit incense that was sending plumes of smoke around her head. “That’s Rosa, we’re friends of your grandparents.”

Axel’s smile widened. “Good to meet you.”

Nancy blushed and twirled a lock of her blond bob around one of her fingers.

Kate's jaw dropped again. Ugh. Did he just make everyone's knees weak? Even no-nonsense women like Nancy? She cleared her throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but you never told me what you're doing here?"

Samantha placed her hand on Kate's desk. "I hired him. He's gonna help you move the books and clean the library."

Kate sucked in her breath. Oh no, that couldn't happen. He was too much of a distraction. Too tall and muscly and tan. Her gaze ran down his frame. Yeah ...

She looked him in the eye, and he grinned. Her face heated, and she feigned interest in a book in front of her. She didn't like the way he—possibly the most handsome man she'd ever seen, even more so than when she'd seen him twelve years ago, and he'd been hot then—was looking at her like she was the best thing he'd ever seen. No. No! This could only lead to disaster. She shook her head. "Oh, no. That's not necessary. I can get by with your help, Samantha." She opened her book and stared blankly at the letters.

Axel reached across the desk, took the book from her, and turned it right side up, his fingers grazing over her ring finger, one of the only fingers on her hand that didn't have a ring on it. His grin got bigger.

She yanked her hand away and slammed the book down.

He chuckled.

"But can you manage by yourself?" Samantha asked. "Because unfortunately, I can't help you. I've got way too

much to do around here to get ready for Halloween. Plus, if I'm being honest, I don't really want to help you." She cracked her neck. "I've got so many knots in my back from yesterday, I could barely sleep last night. My knots have knots."

Axel chuckled.

Kate swallowed. "Well, how about one of the interns? Why don't you send over David or Aston?"

Samantha shook her head. "Nope. I've already called dibs. They're helping me, which is why I hired—" She pointed at Axel like a game show host signaling to a prize. "—tada! This guy. Also Don's grandson, by the way, so be nice."

She sucked in a gasp. Don's grandson? She loved Don. He was so good with the kids who came to reading buddies on Fridays, and he always made her laugh. Don was the salt of the earth. She bit her lip.

"And besides, Kate, you're running out of options here."

Kate let out a long breath. Maybe she could get her brothers to help. "No, I really don't want to inconvenience anyone. I'm sure I'll be fine. I don't need help."

Axel leaned against her desk again, and slightly over it, making her lean back. "You don't need help? Or you don't want help?"

Kate felt her face heat. "It's not that! It's just ..."

He quirked a brow, and Nancy sniggered from behind them. Kate shot her gaze to Nancy and didn't like the smile

spreading over the older woman's face. She didn't like it one bit.

"It's just what?" Axel asked.

Kate squared her shoulders and looked him in the eyes, refusing to be intimidated. "It's just that this is a passion project of mine. I don't think it's fair for The Palms to use money that would probably be used toward activities paying someone to help me clean the library."

Samantha bit her lip. Kate had her, she knew she did. Not that The Palms couldn't afford all the activities they wanted and to pay this guy to help her in the library, but Kate was a stickler for making sure money went where it was supposed to go.

Samantha waved a hand. "It'll be fine. I'll figure it out. Everyone is excited that you got this nomination for our library, Kate. And we don't exactly have a tight budget."

Shoot.

Axel narrowed his gaze at her. "Tell you what, to save you the hassle of trying to figure it out, how about I just work here for free?"

Samantha shook her strawberry blonde head, sending her wavy locks flying around her shoulders. "Oh, no. I couldn't let you do that."

Axel lifted a hand in a staying motion. "Listen, I'm here visiting my grandparents for a few weeks, and I'm happy to volunteer my time."

“We can afford to pay you,” Samantha said.

Axel laughed. “I’m sure you can, but I don’t need the money.”

Kate doubted that very much. Maybe he wasn’t a security guard anymore, but she doubted whatever he was doing was making him a lot of money.

“So, how about it, Kate?” Samantha asked.

She bit her lip, then immediately released it when she noticed Axel’s gaze drop to her mouth, making her insides tumble. She fought the urge to stomp her foot. She could do this. She could. She could be around this insanely good-looking man and maintain professional boundaries.

Technically, if he worked here, she’d be his boss. That would make it a whole heck of a lot easier to remember her plan to give up men. And, if she was being honest with herself, she needed his help with the library. She’d never get this place cleaned without him. Not even if she managed to get her brothers down to help for a couple of nights.

Plus, Axel probably really could use the money. From the way he looked yesterday—lost—maybe this job would be exactly what he needed to get things turned around. She would talk to Samantha about his pay when he wasn’t around, since he was so stubbornly refusing it.

Kate could do this. For Axel’s sake. For Don’s. Maybe this was just her crucible to see if she was really serious about giving up men, which she was. So, really. No problem. She

had this. She cleared her throat and frowned. “Fine. When can you start?”

He chuckled under his breath. “How about now?”

Her eyes about bulged out of her head. “Now?”

With a wide smile on her face, Nancy hurried off and grabbed Rosa’s arm, then whispered something to her that made Rosa perk right up. It also created a wall of nerves in Kate’s gut.

“No time like the present.” Axel dusted his hands together.

Samantha clasped her hands in front of her and popped up on her toes. “Axel, you’re a lifesaver! Thank you so much.”

Axel, grin still firmly in place, slanted a glance toward Kate. “My pleasure.”

Samantha looked at the watch on her left wrist. “I’ve got to go. I’ve got so much to do today.” She rushed toward the door, waving over her head as she went. “Good luck, you two. I want to see this library spotless in no time.”

Kate had to chuckle at that. Samantha was a pain in the butt, but she was an amazing friend.

“Where should I start?” Axel asked.

Rosa and Nancy headed their way in a stuttered clip, and just as they were passing the desk, the candle flame wavered, and then went out in a quick poof.

Rosa froze, her eyes bulging. She crossed herself. “¡Santa Maria!” She gasped under her breath.

“Well, we’re off,” Nancy said, dragging Rosa behind her toward the door. “We’ll come back to check the incense later.”

Axel turned back to her. “What was that about?”

Kate shrugged. “Just your regular, run-of-the-mill exorcism.”

His dark brows shot up to his hairline. “Oh, is that all?”

Resigned to her fate, Kate headed around the desk when her phone played the foghorn alert. Greg again. She rolled her eyes.,

“What was that?” Alex asked.

“Just my daily reminder of bad decisions I’ve made.” She came around her desk and signaled for him to follow her with a wave of her hand. “We’re starting on the top floor and working our way down.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said, but he was still giving her a funny look. She was fine with that. She could handle funny looks better than smolders.

She put him to work immediately. Bear followed, then refused to come back with her when she left, the traitor. When she got back to the front desk, Nancy stood there waiting for her with Rosa’s bag over her shoulder.

“Rosa didn’t want to come back in to get her bag after that candle went out,” Nancy said with a grin. “She’s waiting outside for me reciting the Lord’s Prayer.”

Kate sniffed the air that was now filled with the scent of lavender and other herbs. “Well, at least it smells good.”

She and Nancy laughed. Humming drew their attention up the middle of the library to the third-floor banister. From where they stood, Kate had a perfect view of Axel up on a rolling ladder, pulling books down and putting them onto a trolley she’d placed for him while she ran down to get the Swiffer, Pledge, and rags. Bear sat at the bottom of the ladder, wagging his tail.

Kate swallowed hard.

Nancy cleared her throat. “He’s handsome.”

Kate dropped her gaze to her desk. She couldn’t let anyone get any ideas. “I guess if you like that kind of thing. I prefer my men clean-shaven.” She grabbed the cleaning supplies out of the bottom cupboard. “See you later, Nancy.”

“You too, dear,” Nancy said.

Chapter 7



DON

Don, Harry, and Walt approached the second tee box of their golf game, or whatever the heck it was called, with their caddies following close behind. Don had been trying to learn how to play golf since Samantha had told Aaron he'd taken it up months ago, and he was starting to think he'd never have it figured out.

It didn't help that they always had teenagers following on their heels. Don would've preferred to carry his own bag, but Walt had explained that these young fellas were saving for college, and carrying their bags around for tips was a good thing. Don had begrudgingly handed over his bag like some invalid, reminding himself that kids needed good schooling these days to make up for what they lacked between the lobes. At least these boys were good ones.

Though, he swore the age of college kids was getting younger and younger every year. The one carrying his bag, Stew, looked like he was twelve and was as eager to please Don as Walt was with his Cocker Spaniel, Lady.

At least his caddie was smarter than most of them. He planned to go to a trade school and become an electrician. How so many kids decided against trade schools, Don would never understand. Stew would be making fifty grand a year starting, and one-hundred grand within five years, plus he wouldn't have mountains of school debt to pay off. He'd be able to provide a comfortable, practical existence for a family and be happy.

Axel and Johnny could learn from the kid, Axel with his fame-seeking career, and Johnny, who was still paying off his doctorate six years on.

Don checked his watch.

“No word from Axel yet?” Harry sidled up to him. He wore plaid crocks with white tube socks that went halfway up his skinny calves.

“Not a word.” Two hours the boy had been gone. Hadn't sent so much as a text. If Samantha hadn't come back to the main building ten minutes after she'd left with Axel, Don might have been excited by his ploy to see if they'd make a good pair had worked. But she had come back, and neither she nor Don had had a free minute to spare since so he could grill her about what'd happened.

He tried before he'd dropped off Amelia for her physical therapy and went to the gym, but Samantha had been accepting a delivery and had shooed him off.

“Fore!” Walt called, whacking his ball down the green.

Harry pulled the bill of his page boy cap down to block the sun so he could see where the ball went. Far.

“Nice one,” Harry said.

Walt shoved a hand in the pocket of his jeans and walked back with a self-satisfied smirk on his face, twirling his club around like he was Gene Kelly singing in the rain with an umbrella. He handed his club to his caddie, and Harry grabbed a club from his bag. Next up.

Harry dropped to a knee and opened the side pocket of his bag. “I need my gloves. Forgot last round.” The pocket opened, and his gloves fell out with a pair of socks. He grabbed the gloves. Man had made a habit of carrying spare socks around now that he only wore crocks and since the last maelstrom. He'd stepped in a puddle and squished and squeaked around all day.

Don smirked and pointed at the socks, getting Stew and the other caddies' attention. “Know why Harry brings an extra pair of socks with him golfing?”

Stew grinned; his cheeks red from the sun—he was a major toe head. Kid needed a cap. “No, why?”

“Here it comes,” Walt grumbled.

Suppressing a grin, Don said, “In case he gets a hole in one.”

The caddies all busted up. Okay, maybe they were smarter than Don originally thought.

Harry smirked and shoved his socks back in his bag, then sauntered over to set up his shot.

Unable to help himself, Don checked his watch again.

“He’ll be back,” Walt said. “His stuff was still at your place, right?”

Don nodded.

Walt rubbed his gray mustache. “Have you ever listened to Axel’s music?”

Bristling, Don nodded. “Of course I have. The boy’s always singing, playing around on that guitar of his.” He’d spent a couple of hours playing on his guitar last night, writing and then chucking lyrics into the garbage.

“I mean his albums?” Walt said.

He hesitated. “Yeah.”

Walt shook his head. “I started listening to his Amelia Album yesterday. That song he wrote for Amelia is a thing of beauty.”

Don’s heart clenched in his chest. “It is.” And Don loved it, even though it was a sign of his biggest shame. There was no denying that song had clear indicators of the feud between

Don and Wayne, even way back then when Axel had been a kid.

“Fore!” Harry called, then faced them. “It’s your turn. Try not to kill the ball this time.”

He and Walt laughed. You smash a couple of balls and you never hear the end of it.

Harry continued once their snickering stopped. “I love that song, by the way. “Amelia.” It’s one of my favorites. I bet Amelia loves it too. I wonder where he got that from,” he said with a grin.

Don grunted and shrugged a shoulder. “Just like his father; sensitive, creative types.”

Walt chuckled.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Harry said.

Maybe it was. His phone beeped a text, and he fumbled it out of his pocket. Axel!

Walt stepped toward him. “Is it Axel?”

Then Walt’s phone beeped, followed by Harry’s.

Don opened the message. A group text from Nancy. His heart sank. He hoped he hadn’t done anything to offend Axel this morning. It’d break his heart if Axel took off again.

“It’s a group text.” Harry walked over and read the message. “It’s Kate? What’s that mean?”

Don opened his messages.

Nancy:

It's Kate!

Winnie:

What's Kate?

Nancy:

Axel's match! I would've texted sooner, but I had to be sure it would work. According to Samantha, Kate broke up with her boyfriend a while ago. So, we're good to go. Her ex was apparently a real loser, and she's a little uptight about men right now. But she and Axel have met before, and let me tell you, their chemistry is off the scales.

Don frowned. He tries to talk to Samantha and gets shooed, Nancy tries and gets all the good gossip.

Walt:

How do you know?

Rosa:

Their chemistry is like this: □

Harry:

They're melting?

Winnie:

It is warm outside.

Rosa:

Because they are on fire!

Winnie:

Why were you at the library?

Rosa:

**Nancy and I were exorcising Chester for Kate. So he
won't ruin her competition.**

Nancy:

I was just there for moral support.

Polly:

Back to the point. Kate and Axel?

Don shook his head. This was his grandson! He needed to
get in on this.

Don:

How do you low they'd be good together?

Walt and Harry both shot glances his way.

“How do they *low*?” Harry frowned.

Don looked at his last text. “For crying out loud. I need a bigger phone. I keep hitting the wrong buttons.” He called on his knowledge from Samantha’s texting classes and fixed his mistake.

Don:

***Know**

Nancy:

Rosa and I went to the library this morning, and he showed up and volunteered to help Kate clean the library. He was flirting with her.

Don smiled. Kate. Of course! She was lovely. Such a dear heart. She treated the kids who came to reading buddies like they were her own, always slipped Red Vines to the seniors when Bruno, the chef, wasn’t looking, and her kindness toward Cameron, Don’s reading buddy, a sixteen-year-old with Down Syndrome, always melted Don’s heart. She’d started learning sign language along with Don so they could use it with Cameron.

Plus, and this was really important, she was a sucker for lost causes. That’s how she’d ended up with Bear and how Bear had ended up being Sweetie’s seeing-eye dog. She’d nearly

swooned at the very idea of pairing the two together, literally going on about how no one was a lost cause, even a breeder dog and a blind alligator. That was perfect because if Don had ever met someone who could be considered a lost cause, it was Axel.

Harry:

Don has a goofy grin on his face. I think he likes the idea of Axel and Kate.

Don shot a glare in Harry's direction, only to find both him and Walt grinning at him. He forced back a grin and scowled. "Quiet, you!"

Don:

She'll do.

Rosa:

Because they're ☐☐☐

Winnie:

Going to hell???

Rosa:

Santa Maria. No! They're on fire!

Winnie:

Emojis are confusing.

Polly:

What about Kate? Was she flirting with Axel?

Details. Don huffed.

Nancy:

No, but she was definitely flustered. I see potential, but there's one thing ...

Don:

What?

Nancy:

He's going to need to shave his beard. Kate told me she likes her men clean-shaven.

To Don's side, Harry and Walt both let out groans.

Don frowned. That could be a problem.

Don:

I've tried to get him to shave. He won't do it. Says he likes it.

Nancy:

**Well, it has got to go, or we can kiss the idea of Kate
goodbye.**

Polly:

**It's just a beard. Seriously, how hard could it be to get
him to shave?**

Don glanced at Harry and Walt, who were both stroking
their mustaches. He shook his head.

Don:

I think that's a better question for Harry and Walt.

Polly:

Well? What do you say, Walt? Harry?

Walt:

Nuclear holocaust.

Harry:

What he said.

Polly:

...

Nancy:

...

Winnie:

...

Don scrubbed a hand down his face. This was a disaster. They maybe had a week to make this happen. Axel wouldn't be hanging around for long. He never did.

Don:

Any ideas?

Rosa:

Polly, remember His Billionaire Kiss by Heather James?

They gave Libby that makeover.

Polly:

Yes! The sweet romance we read last month. Libby's roommates hid her clothes and pretended someone had broken in and stolen them.

Don glanced at Walt and Harry. Walt rubbed the back of his head, and Harry frowned. So, they were just as lost as he was.

Polly:

I can work with this.

Don:

I hope you're not suggesting you can steal Axel's beard

...

Polly:

Don, credit me with more common sense than that. We just need to set up a situation where he has to shave. Has no choice but to shave.

Don could hear the chastisement in her voice.

Rosa:

Just give us time to think of something.

Polly:

We'll let you know as soon as we have a plan.

Don:

No one I'd trust to figure this out more.

Nancy:

Until then, Don, set up an appointment to get your haircut with Ryker for yourself. We can switch you out for Axel once we get this figured out.

Don:

On it.

Don shoved his phone back in his pocket, grabbed his golf club and ball, and headed to the tee box.

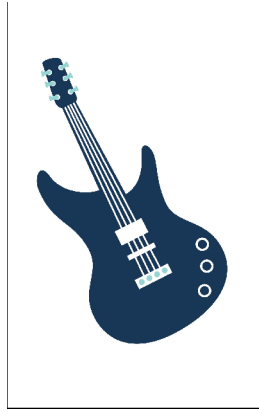
“Don, you can’t really think this is gonna work?” Harry asked.

“A man can get really attached to facial hair,” Walt added.

Don set up his swing. “With this group of women working on it, Axel doesn’t stand a chance.” He swung with all his force, sending the ball flying, flying, flying past both Walt and Harry’s balls, and onto the green.

Not a hole-in-one but close enough. He grinned.

Chapter 8



AXEL

Grabbing a handful of books off the little trolley Kate had provided him, Axel headed back up the ladder to the top shelf, humming the tune to one of his favorite songs: *Proud Mary* by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

It was nearing six pm now, and Axel had already removed books from the eight major bookshelves along a fourth of the upstairs, cleaned the shelves, and replaced the books. It was a grueling process, but as the day had gone on, he'd found he liked the work. Plus, Bear had kept him company most of the day, which had been fun on more than one level. He was the sweetest dog, and Bear's attention made Kate jealous.

The physical labor had kept the stress out of his body, and talking with Kate periodically had kept his mind off why he

was stressed to begin with. And the more he talked with her, the more he wanted to hear her talk, see what sassy thing would come out of her mouth next.

He'd never been so happy as when he'd taken her hand that morning and found her ring finger empty. When he'd tried to find her ten years ago, he hadn't known what he'd do if he came face to face with his mystery woman. Ten years on, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to be in her life. Wanted to hug her. Kiss her. Date her. Maybe it was crazy, but there it was.

He barely knew her. His life was in shambles. And he hadn't written in months. But his mind was clear and focused on one essential truth. Kate had left a mark on him all those years ago, a mark in pink lipstick on his cheek that had sunk soul-deep, and he desperately wanted to return the favor. Sink himself deep into her soul until she was as crazy as him.

His humming turned to singing as he jumped into the chorus of Proud Mary. "Big wheel keeps on turnin', Proud Mary keep on burnin', rollin', rollin', rollin' on the river."

His favorite part of the day had been when she'd ordered them subs from the local bakery. The shop had only been around a little less than two years, so he'd never tried it before, and it had absolutely been one of the best sandwiches he'd ever had. Again, not strictly on his diet, but he figured all the hauling of books up and down ladders was enough to offset the calories. Plus, watching Kate eat had been the cherry on top. Her big bites bracketed in nibbles, and the way she'd

slurped a big slice of cheese into her mouth when it'd nearly fallen out of her sandwich had entranced him. She was so uninhibited, which he found incredibly refreshing.

Women were never carefree like that around him. Always showing him exactly what they thought he wanted to see, and never their real selves. That was a big part of the reason he hadn't dated in a few years. That and because Lillie Anne had left a foul taste in his mouth.

Even though he hadn't been able to spend the entire day with Kate because she'd been responsible for taking care of The Palms residents when they came in to get books, he'd felt every minute of the day had been worth it.

She'd spent the bulk of the afternoon helping him clear, dust, and re-stack some bookshelves. She disappeared about forty-five minutes ago to go through her "closing down the library routine," and had asked him if he wanted to be done for the day. But he had no intention of leaving here until she did.

He finished stacking the last of the books, grabbed the can of Pledge and the rag he'd been using to wipe down the shelf, and turned to walk down the ladder. He lifted the Pledge to his lips, closed his eyes, and belted, "Left a good job in the city, working for the man every night and day, and I never lost one minute of sleepin', worryin' about the way things might have been. Big wheel keeps on turnin', Proud Mary keep on burnin', rollin', rollin', rollin' on the river."

When he opened his eyes again, his gaze landed on Kate. She stood around the corner, leaning on the banister, staring at

him with a smile on her angelic face. He loved everything about it, from her high cheekbones to her button nose to her perfectly kissable lips to her lovely jawline and long slender neck.

He pointed at her and continued slowly down the ladder like he was descending stairs while rewriting the words to the next verse of the song on the fly. “Cleaned a lot of shelves in Diamond Cove, pumped a lot of pain liftin’ books, and I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight, on a bed no bigger than a size double. Big library, I’m gonna keep on cleanin’, Proud Kate, keep on dreamin’.” He reached the bottom and with one foot pushed so the ladder slid down to the end of the shelves. “Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’ on the ladder.”

Kate burst into laughter, letting out a snort as she did, and clapped and cheered as she walked over to him. “Bravo!”

A long howl from Bear reverberated up from downstairs, echoing through the building. Axel took it as a compliment.

He hopped off the ladder and went into a deep bow. “Thank you. I’ll be here all week.”

“Man, if I’d known there was going to be a show, I’d have brought popcorn.”

Tapping Kate’s arm lightly with his hand, he said, “Next time.” He took in her outfit again and smiled. She wore a sweater. It was seventy-nine degrees outside. Felt like a hundred in here, but she had the fireplace on downstairs—Bear was curled up in front of it—and Axel’d been doing

heavy lifting, so he said nothing. If she was really that cold, he'd suffer.

"I'll hold you to it." Kate crossed her arms over her chest and shivered like it was the arctic tundra in here. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and warm her up. "Have you always been able to make up lyrics like that?"

He sat their rag and Pledge down. "Pretty much," he said. "My grandparents used to sing all the time when I was a kid, make up their own lyrics to famous songs. So I guess you could say it's in my blood."

"You have a beautiful voice," Kate said, then arched a brow. "I mean, you're no John Fogerty, but you're not bad."

Axel loved her wit and little zingers. She'd been lobbing them at him all day. First out of irritation that he was there *and* stealing her dog's attention, (she'd called Axel a heart thief and Bear a traitor,) and then as the day progressed and she relaxed some, just to play around and mess with him, (like when she'd climbed the ladder and meticulously checked out a shelf he'd just cleaned, swiped at it with a finger and then held said finger up to the light. After that, she climbed down, gave him a cheeky grin, and said, "Call me when the next shelf's done," before sashaying off.)

He had, just to get a reaction out of her—and to see the swagger of those hourglass hips again, of course. She could walk away from him any time she wanted.

"All joking aside," Kate continued, "you obviously love singing, you've been humming and belting out songs all day,

and Bear only covered his ears once.”

Axel had been told he had a great voice all his life, but hearing it from Kate felt more satisfying. Like he'd needed to know that she liked how he sounded. Had wanted to know since he'd first met her. There was something freeing in hearing those words from someone who had no idea who he was. Axel Clayton, lead singer of The Venturists. He could trust she'd be honest with him. “You didn't cover your ears?”

She shook her head. “I have better taste than Bear does. Have you ever thought about writing songs for a living?” She arched a perfectly sculpted brow. “I hear lyricists can make really good money. In fact, they're doing a concert downtown the week after Halloween. There's supposed to be a talent scout there. You should sign up.”

Axel grinned and had the sudden urge to bury his nose in her hair and see if she smelled as sweet as she was. “Good to know.”

She went quiet, almost as if she had run out of things to say. The next moment, she turned and glanced down the row of bookshelves. “Wow, you finished that last bookshelf. I can't believe how quickly, speedily, fast,” she cleared her throat, “you're getting through them.”

He turned in the same direction as her and folded his arms over his chest. “I was feeling pretty motivated.”

She faced him again, her brows pinching inward. “Motivated to lug a bunch of books around?”

Taking her cue, he faced her as well and stepped closer, bringing them within a foot of each other. Then he leaned down just a teeny bit closer. “Motivated to keep seeing those cute smiles of yours every time I finish one.”

Her jaw dropped, her mouth forming a perfect “o” shape. She frowned, then opened her mouth to say something and Axel had a feeling he wasn’t going to like it, so before she could, he turned back to the rolling ladder and pushed it back to the shelf he’d been cleaning.

“I’ve spent a lot of my life traveling,” he said, “and at almost every port of call, I always made it a point to drop in at the local libraries.”

“You did?” she sounded surprised.

He faced her again. “Yeah. Libraries are ... comfortable. Safe. They’ve always been a place that I can go to escape.” And he meant that in the most literal way. World tours were amazing, fun, and invigorating, but they were so far removed from the real world, even if that was the real world for Axel, that he’d always sought solitude. He’d learned early in his career that people would never look for him among the leather spines and fussy librarians. Because why would a rock star spend his time reading?

He’d first started venturing to libraries when Midnight Panther hazed him on their world tour. He’d even fallen asleep in some because the idea of going back to the hotel and finding prostitutes hanging out at his door had been less appealing than sleeping in a wooden or metal chair. After that,

he made going to libraries a habit. One he still lived by to this day. He frowned. Another reason it was weird he'd never come to this one when he'd been here. Why hadn't he come here?

He reached out and placed a hand on one of the bookshelves. "Libraries almost feel like home."

A small smile crossed her cherry-colored lips and his gaze homed in on her perfect Cupid's bow. "That's exactly how I feel about the library."

"Did you always want to be a librarian?" he asked, leaning back against the shelf.

Kate nodded. "As a kid, I used the library as an escape too. I come from a really big family, with seven kids, and I'm in the exact middle of all of them. My siblings are all incredibly talented, brilliant people who thrive on attention. That was never me. I was content to sit in my room and read a book. Becoming a librarian just made sense." She shrugged. "So, are you still a security guard?"

Axel chuckled. "No, I guess you could say that was a one-time gig." Maybe he should tell her who he was, but it just felt so conceited. *Do you know who I am?* And he was just finding her, this, all of it, so refreshing. He wanted to live in the bubble of obscurity for a while longer. Plus, the last thing he wanted was her learning about his carefully crafted and in-your-face love life or either of the reasons he'd run from California. If he could keep those secrets to himself forever, he absolutely would.

“So, what have you been doing since then?” Kate asked, gathering up the cleaning supplies.

Axel let out a deep breath. “That’s a long story, and not a very interesting one, if I’m being honest.”

She simply nodded. “Okay.” She held out the “a” in okay for a few seconds.

“How about you?” He smiled. “Last time I saw you, you’d just broken up with a cheating boyfriend. Any improvement in that department?”

She let out a humorless laugh and shook her head, then whispered under her breath. “I wish.”

Clearly, that wasn’t meant for Axel's ears, but he’d heard it and it sent his heart racing. Filled his chest with an emotion he had no business feeling for an almost perfect stranger. Hope.

She glanced up at him and waved for him to follow her toward the elevator. “That’s a long story, and not a very interesting one, if I’m being honest.” She parroted him.

He laughed at her temerity as they boarded the elevator. “Fair enough.”

They got quiet again as the elevator descended. Axel couldn’t stop staring at her. He remembered thinking she was beautiful, albeit somewhat disheveled when he’d met her all those years ago, but now she was absolutely stunning. Her hair looked so silky in the light, he wanted to run his fingers through it, and the curve between where her neck met her

shoulder, and the silky skin there, seemed like the perfect place to drop a kiss or two.

The elevator dinged open.

“Stop staring at me,” Kate said, glancing over her shoulder before exiting.

He followed close behind. “Right, it must be annoying to have people staring at your beauty all the time.”

She scoffed and shook her head, sending her luscious locks swinging in her ponytail around her shoulders.

“Seriously, how did a woman like you stay single all this time?” It made no sense. All this time, he’d thought she’d gotten married and had kids already. “The guys you’ve dated must all be idiots for not snatching you up.”

At her desk, she turned on her heel and faced him, searching his gaze. “That sounds like a cheesy pickup line, and normally I’d think it was, but you sounded serious,” she said. “Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious,” he said and meant it. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “You’re very smart to work *here* and get that nomination. You’re sweet and witty. And *gorgeous*. How are you single?”

She placed her hands on her hips. “That’s none of your business.”

He stepped closer, into her personal space, only a couple inches from her face, desperate to see her reaction. And it was priceless. Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a gasp.

“How do I make it my business?” he asked.

Squaring her shoulders, she placed a hand on his chest and shoved. It only made him go back a foot. “You don’t and just so there’s no confusion,” she said. “I’m off the market.”

He smirked. Couldn’t help it. “Off the market?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. So you might as well keep your flirty innuendos to yourself. Because they’re not going to work on me.”

Axel's phone beeped in his pocket, alerting him to a text. He ignored it. “You know, most guys would take that as a challenge, not a law.”

She placed her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. “Are you most guys?”

Yeah, he kinda was. Not that he would tell her that. She just flat out laid down a challenge, and challenges were irresistible to guys like him—guys who thrived on them, but truth be known, he’d already found her irresistible. She’d been the fantasy in his mind since the day he’d met her—spending time with her today had confirmed that for him. He hadn’t been able to find her ten years ago, but he’d found her now, and he wasn’t letting this opportunity slip him by. “Nah, I’ll respect your boundaries.”

She let out a breath like she’d been holding it. Maybe she had been. “Thank you, I really appreciate that.”

He stepped in again quickly and lowered his voice. “Right after I tell you this. I like you. I’d like to get to know you

better. And I have a feeling there could be something special between us.”

She blinked those impossibly long, dark lashes that shaded the aqua color of her eyes from the overhead light, and her pulse throbbed in her neck. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. The perfect percussion. “Are you finished?” she asked in an airy whisper as she tugged on a little four-leaf clover pendant she wore around her neck.

“Almost. Come on, Hart,” he said. “You’re single, I’m single. I think this is a problem we can solve together.”

She snorted, and he felt ten feet tall.

“That’s the laugh I was looking for.”

“That should be a song,” she said, sending his mind wheeling. Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea. He’d mess around with it some later.

He stepped back and grinned. “All right, now I’m done. You know where I stand on the subject. So, if you change your mind, all you have to do is let me know.”

She rolled her eyes, and his phone beeped another text message, followed almost immediately by a third. “You better get that.” She turned to her desk and started straightening it. “Have a good night.”

She was going to be a challenge, and the prospect excited him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had to work hard, or at all, to get a date with a woman. “You too, Kate, you too.”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced down. One text message from Dad, and two from Sean. He scowled. This couldn't be good. He turned for the door as he opened the texts.

Dad:

I'll be at Grandpa's in 10 minutes.

He let out a deep breath and scrubbed a hand down his face. Then he picked up the pace, heading for the door as he checked Sean's messages.

Sean:

Heads up, Dad's on his way to you. Gonna try to head him off.

Sean:

**I'm out front of Grandpa and Grandma's bungalow.
Where are you?**

He was just about to push out the front door and make a run for the bungalow when the clacking of heels across wood floors caught his attention. He whirled around to see Kate rushing his way, face flushed. His heart stuttered in his chest, and he took a step toward her. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She nodded. “Yes, sorry, I just wanted to see if you were coming back tomorrow?”

A grin split his face. “Miss me already?”

She arched a brow and spoke with all the snark of a girl trying *not* to steal his heart and failing miserably. “Desperately. So?”

He laughed, had laughed a lot today, actually. It was an almost foreign sensation. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this good, and he was loving every second of it. “I’ll be here.”

She quirked a grin, then schooled her expression and lifted her chin. “Good.” Then she was off, sashaying those hips of hers.

Axel grinned, and another text came through.

Sean:

Dad just pulled in the driveway. Grandpa’s here and looks like he’s about to spit nails. Hurry.

Axel took off in a sprint.

Chapter 9



DON

A knock sounded at the door at the same time that Don's egg timer went off. "Hold on," he yelled in the door's direction as he rushed to the oven and pulled out the coconut angel food cake he'd just spent the last hour and a half carefully fashioning. He still needed to frost it, but it looked good. He hadn't made an angel food cake in a while.

Another knock sounded.

He carefully set his cake down on the stove, and stomped out of the kitchen, through the open living room to the door. "I'm coming," he barked as he flung it open.

There stood Sean, the youngest of Wayne's three sons, leaning against the screen with his hands in the pockets of his gym shorts. "Hey, gramps. Doing some baking?"

Don smiled and stepped onto the porch, still wearing Amelia's old flowered-covered apron, and gave Sean a big hug. Out of all his grandkids, he saw Sean the most. Man, he loved this kid. Such a good sensible boy with his own underwater salvage company and a career in the Navy. It wasn't the Army, but you couldn't win them all. "Come in, come in," Don said, making a sweeping gesture toward the door. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Sean hesitated on the threshold, then a small honk sounded from the end of the driveway as a Rolls Royce pulled in.

Don stepped forward on the porch, frowning as he went.

Wayne parked behind Don's BMW sedan, got out of his car, and leaned on the hood. "Dad."

"Wayne," Don replied.

Sean laughed from his spot next to Don. "It's like a standoff in an old western. All we need is the tumbleweed."

Wayne smirked.

"What are you doing here?" Don folded his arms over his chest. "It's not Sunday."

"Heard my boy was in town." Wayne ran a hand through his wavy, chin-length brown locks, and came around the car in those fancy designer clothes he liked so much. A dark blue button-up with a black tweed jacket that stopped just above his knees, jeans (that at least weren't full of holes), brown dress shoes, and an arrogant lift of his chin that Don had gotten to

know well over the last forty years since it'd first appeared on his handsome face.

Axel came tearing down the road from the library, a sheen of sweat over his brow, and a look of panic on his face that was so much like Wayne's when Wayne had been his age. He slowed when he reached the driveway.

Wayne glanced over his shoulder. "Axel, there you are."

The ache that'd been in Don's chest since Axel disappeared this morning eased. "You're still here. I thought you'd left."

Axel winced and ran a hand through his own wavy locks. Both Wayne and Axel needed haircuts. Not that either would get one. "Sorry, gramps. I got roped into helping at the library this morning. I should've called."

Wayne lifted a staying hand. "No, Axel. You don't need to apologize. You're your own man. You can go where you want without having to tell everyone." He looked at Don. "Dad, you can't micromanage people all the time. You have to learn to let go."

"Dad!" Axel snapped.

Don clenched and unclenched his fists, then took a deep breath. Obstinate. Always looking for a fight.

Sean rested his hands on his hips. "Is that why you showed up here unannounced the moment you heard Axel was in town, Dad?"

Wayne clenched his jaw. "That's different. I just wanted to say hi."

“No point arguing about it,” Don said. “Everyone come in. But you’ll have to eat leftovers because I didn’t know you were coming, and I wasn’t prepared.”

“Whatever you’ve got is great, Dad,” Wayne said as Axel came around the car. He hugged Axel the moment he was close enough to grab onto. Don didn’t blame him for that. He wanted to grab on and not let go too. Did that really make him a micromanager? “Axel, how are you? Everything all right?”

“I’m fine, Dad.” Axel stepped back. “Where’s mom?”

“Out with friends tonight.” Wayne placed a hand on Axel’s shoulder and the two headed for the bungalow. “How’s your writer’s block? Still persisting?”

Axel came to a stop and faced Wayne. “Who told you I had writer’s block?”

“I’ll give you one guess,” Sean called from the door before stepping inside.

“Johnny,” Axel huffed. “Next time I see him, I’m going to knock his block off.”

Wayne gave him a concerned look; the practiced one Don was sure he used on his clients. “He just wants to help. Listen, I’ve got some great exercises for you to try that I think can help.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small notebook.

Axel folded his arms.

“Would you leave him be?” Don yelled down the stairs. “Look at him. You’re making him uncomfortable. And would

you get in here already? We're starting to draw attention."

They went inside, and Sean was already in the open-concept kitchen, pulling Tupperware containers out of the fridge. He popped the corner of a lid and took a whiff. "Mmm, smells good. Is this pot roast?"

Don nodded. "And potatoes. I made it a couple of days ago." He went to the cupboards and pulled out four plates.

Sean put the roast in the microwave and sat at the table, and Axel called out. "Should I bring Grandma to the table?" Amelia sat at the black, baby grand piano, staring out her favorite window at the birdfeeder that hung from the side of their bungalow.

Don shook his head. "No, leave her there for now. She already had dinner, and she likes looking out that window." He set the plates on the counter and pulled his homemade coconut frosting out of the fridge, setting it on the stove next to his angel food cake.

"I better call Johnny and get him in on this." Sean pulled his cell from his back pocket. "You know he hates missing out on family drama."

"Good," Axel said. "I have a few things I'd like to say to him."

"Don't give him too hard a time," Wayne sat on the piano bench and took Amelia's hand. "He just wanted to help."

"I bet," Axel said.

The phone rang.

Don shook his head. More likely, Wayne was on Johnny's case about something, and Johnny threw his brother under the bus to get out of his "therapy" session. All three of Wayne's boys did that to one another all the time. Had been doing it since high school. He was well-versed in their shenanigans and recognized them immediately.

"Mom's looking good," Wayne said. "She has good color in her cheeks."

"Tell her that," Don said under his breath.

"What was that, Dad?" Wayne called from the living room.

The microwave beeped, and Don pulled the pot roast and potatoes out and started dishing up servings. He handed Sean his plate, then looked at Wayne and nodded toward Amelia. "Tell her that. She's still here. She has ears, doesn't she?"

Wayne sighed. "I know that. I wasn't saying she wasn't."

Don began dishing up another plate where it sat on the stove. The plate wobbled, and Don jerked back with his spoonful of pot roast, sending it down the front of his Under Armor t-shirt and Amelia's flowery apron.

He swore just as Johnny picked up the phone.

"Whoa, what's going on there?" Johnny's chipper voice called through the phone.

"Dad and Grandpa are having words about whether they should talk directly to Grandma when talking *about* Grandma," Sean said. "I assume they're on the same side, but

they just got in a tiff about micromanaging outside, so tempers are hot.”

Sean had video-called him, and Johnny’s smug grin shone from the phone. Out of all of Don’s grandkids, Johnny looked the most like Don at that age. Instead of black hair like the rest of them, he had dark brownish-gold hair, a dimple in his chin, a broad nose, and dark as night eyes. Though Axel’s eyes were the same too.

“Tell me more,” Johnny said, sounding bored.

“Tempers aren’t hot,” Don barked, pulling off the apron, and taking it to the sink to rinse it. He turned on the cold water and ran the stained spot under it. Cool, salty air drifted inside from the open window over the sink, and Don glanced out. It wouldn’t be long before the sunset, and Diamond Cove residents sauntered down the boardwalk, enjoying the perfect evening. Don felt a pinch in his gut. Amelia had loved walking on the beach. Now it was too much for her. There were so many things she’d loved that she couldn’t do anymore. Like baking. That’d never been Don’s thing but it was now. An easy way to stay connected to her.

“Tempers are a little hot,” Wayne said. “Hey, Johnny. How are you? Where are you?”

Axel leaned forward and peered into the phone. “Is that my house?”

“Yes, yes it is,” Johnny said. “Thanks for the spare key.”

“What are you doing there?” Axel asked, sounding none too pleased.

“Finishing up an article,” Johnny said. He was a high-paid investigative journalist for the Washington D.C. Times and loved puzzles. Probably why he was so good at his job. “I’ve almost got all the pieces I need to get the whole picture, but something is missing. You know I like to get away where no one can find me when I’m stuck. Plus, you weren’t home, so it was a win-win.”

Axel growled. “If you leave my kitchen a mess again, I’m going to pummel you.”

“I thought you were going to pummel him for telling dad you have writer’s block?” Sean came and stood next to Don, staring down at his cake while Don continued to rinse the apron. It was Amelia’s favorite. “Is that angel food cake?”

Don glanced over his shoulder in time to see Axel perk up, and come stand next to Sean. He held Sean’s phone and angled the screen so Johnny could see the cake. Probably the only thing keeping Johnny from getting a tongue-lashing. “Coconut angel food cake.” He squeezed the water out of the apron and set it to the side. He’d put some stain remover on it in a minute.

Axel glanced over at him. “That’s my favorite.”

“Who do you think I made it for?” Don asked.

“Aww,” Johnny and Sean said at the same time.

Sean squared his shoulders. “Grandpa, I’m over here all the time. How come you never make me cream puffs?”

Don let out a huff. “Because you are one!”

The boys all barked out laughter, and Don couldn’t help but let a little smile slip. He liked hearing them laugh together. It’d been a while. He whipped off his t-shirt and stuck the spill spot under the cold water.

On the other side of Sean, Axel stage-whispered. “Why does Grandpa have bigger muscles than me?”

“I ask myself that all the time,” Sean said. “How is Axel so wimpy compared to his eighty-four-year-old grandpa?”

Axel elbowed him, and he flinched away with a laugh.

Don tossed his shirt on the counter and faced the boys, big arms folded over his barrel chest. “Because you treat your body like an amusement park.”

“Here we go,” came Johnny’s voice.

Sean took a seat at the table.

“You go to bed late.” Don pointed toward the guest room.

“I went to bed at eleven last night, Gramps,” Axel said.

“You get up late.”

Axel squared off with him. “I was up at a quarter to seven this morning.”

Don pointed to the empty gallon container of soda sitting on the top of the garbage can at the end of the counter. “You eat crap, do drugs.”

“Well, that was unexpected,” Johnny said from where Sean had propped up his phone on the counter.

“Dad!” came Wayne’s shocked voice. “Axel, you don’t ... you’re not ...”

“Caffeine is not a drug,” Axel said with a smirk.

There’d been a point where Don had been able to get a rise out of these boys, but it seemed those days were long gone. Now all he managed to do was irritate himself when he tried to talk to them and they just laughed at him.

“Isn’t it?” Don pointed at Axel. “Why don’t you look it up on that Google device of yours and see what it says, huh?”

By this point, both Sean and Johnny were busting up.

“He’s got you there,” Johnny said, lifting his phone into the screen of Sean’s phone for everyone to see. “According to the Alcohol and Drug Foundation—”

Axel pointed at Johnny. “Shut it.” He faced Grandpa again. “It’s not that kind of drug, and you know it. You make it sound like I’m doing cocaine or heroin in my room.”

“See, this is exactly what I was talking about, Dad,” Wayne said, standing from the piano bench and releasing Amelia’s hand. “You overreact all the time.” He pushed his long tweed jacket back on either side of his hips and rested his hands on them.

Sean cut in before Wayne could say more, and Don had the feeling it was intentional. “Yeah, Grandpa. If Axel was going

to do cocaine, it wouldn't be here. He knows you'd kick his ___”

Wayne entered the kitchen and smacked Sean over the head. “Don't swear in front of your Grandma.”

“Listen to your father,” Don said.

“You know what,” Wayne jumped back in, heading around the table toward Don. “Axel didn't come home to have you stomping all over his feelings.”

Axel put himself between them. Like he always did, and Don's guilt sucker-punched him in the gut. “I'm fine.”

Don threw his head back and sighed. “For crying out loud, Wayne. You make him sound like a cream puff.”

“And we all know that's me,” Sean said, stuffing pot roast into his mouth.

Don ignored him. “Axel's a strong boy. Stronger than you give him credit for.”

“He's a strong man,” Wayne said. “But he still left town for two years because of you—”

A tinkle of chords sounded from the piano, and silence fell over the room as all heads whipped in that direction. Amelia still stared out the window, but her fingers slid off the keys, and she placed her hand in her lap.

Don sucked in a breath. “Amelia?”

She didn't look his way. Didn't acknowledge she'd even heard him.

“What’s going on?” Johnny asked. “What happened?”

Wayne faced Don again. “I’m sorry, Dad. Are you okay?”

Normally Don would grumble about not needing Wayne’s therapy aimed at him, but right now he just couldn’t. That was the second time in two days Amelia had touched the keys on her piano. The second time since Axel came home. He slanted a look at the boy, whose expression appeared just as pained as Don felt. Don rested a hand on Axel’s shoulder, offering a little comfort.

Axel gave him a sad smile.

Wayne stepped closer to Don. “I didn’t come here to fight. Mom wouldn’t want that. She always hated it when we fought.”

Don nodded. “She did.”

“Should we just eat?” Wayne signaled to the pot roast. “Maybe this time without spilling it on your clothes?”

“Grandpa just likes to show off his hairy chest,” Sean said. “And remind us all who the real man is around here.”

They all nodded in agreement.

Wayne pulled up a chair. “Then let’s eat.”

Don forced a smile, even though his heart still raced in his chest. “Sounds good.”

Axel went to Amelia and wheeled her to the table as Sean propped Johnny up between the butter and napkin holder.

Don dished up the rest of the plates, and they sat silently for a moment, eating. “So, Axel. How was the library?”

Axel gave a shy smile, the kind that always made the dimple in his left cheek appear. “It was really good.”

Because of his time with Kate? The ache in Don’s chest eased. Maybe Nancy and Rosa were right after all. “After you disappeared with Samantha this morning, I wasn’t sure what happened to you.”

Johnny sat forward on Sean’s screen. “Samantha? The strawberry blond that works here?”

Don pointed to Johnny’s face. “You see, Axel, your brother knows what a strawberry blond looks like.”

Axel threw up his arms. “I know what a strawberry blond looks like. I just wasn’t sure if you meant Samantha or the gal with the pink streaks.”

“You left with Samantha?” Johnny sneered.

“Yep,” Axel nodded, then shot a smirk in Johnny’s direction. “She didn’t seem to have a very good opinion of you.”

“Well, likewise,” Johnny snapped, then muttered something about Samantha being a busybody.

“I don’t know,” Sean said. “I like Samantha. She’s a sweetheart. And I love the fifties vibe she’s got going on. She’s kind of hot.”

“She’s a pain in the butt,” Johnny said, slouching back with a dramatic flair that reminded Don of Wayne.

“I’d have thought you’d like her style,” Axel said and pointed to the back of his own hand before nodding at Johnny. “Given your new penchant for looking like a mobster.”

Johnny lifted his hand, showing a new tattoo of a cross wrapped in barbed wire on the back of it. Don shook his head. It wasn’t the only tattoo he had. He also had a couple on his fingers. The knucklehead. Pretty soon he’d have some girl’s name tattooed over his heart, a Psalm on his shoulder, and a quill on his wrist.

“When did you get that?” Wayne asked. “It’s so cool.”

“It’s just for work.” Johnny ran a hand through his hair as Axel and Sean exchanged amused looks and chuckled. “It’s nothing.”

A text beeped on Don’s phone, and desperate to stay out of this conversation, pulled his phone from his pocket. He stood, walked into the living room, and stared out the front bay window. The sky was slowly darkening, and yellow and pink clouds hung in the sky behind the rows of palm trees. He opened his messages as Johnny tried to downplay his “body art.” Oh, boy.

Polly:

Plan’s coming together.

Rosa:

You'll love it.

Don:

Perfect. What do we need?

Nancy:

When did you get your appointment with Ryker?

Don:

Friday at 1400 hours.

Winnie:

Is that 2 pm?

Walt:

Yes.

Nancy:

Don, I thought we agreed to speak civilian. Everyone else, let's plan to be at the library at one pm on Friday then. That should give us plenty of time to get Axel to Ryker for his shave.

Polly:

We'll need a distraction; we have Reading buddies that day, which will help, but everyone should be at the library for backup.

Winnie:

I can't wait!

Harry:

What's the plan?

Rosa:

Does anyone know the Heimlich Maneuver?

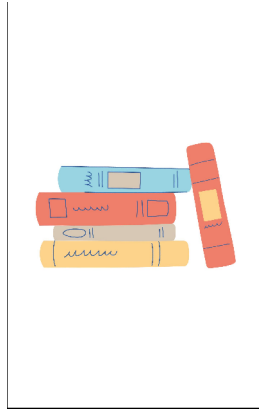
Don scrubbed a hand down his face. The Heimlich Maneuver? Great. Setting his grandson up was going to take a near-death experience. He nodded and glanced over his shoulder at his family. Axel and Sean were busting up as they busted Johnny's chops about his tattoos as Wayne continued to persist in telling him how great they were. Don nodded. Yep, near-death experience sounded about right.

He tapped out a text.

Don:

Harry, Walt, and I all do. Let's do this.

Chapter 10



KATE

Mist covered the bridge and the pathway leading up to the library, giving the island and the building an almost ethereal appearance. Kate loved Diamond Cove in the fall more than any other season, scenes like this were often prevalent. But this morning, it felt like a spell had fallen over the place.

The strumming of an acoustic guitar found her ears as she made her way across the path, mist swirling around her legs and Bear's entire body as they walked, the music drawing her ever closer. Soon, Jack-o'-lanterns carved by Palms' residents would line this path, and Kate couldn't wait. It was one of her favorite things they did every year.

The song was sad, slow, and full of longing. It reached into the depths of her soul, making it ache with emotions she hadn't felt in a long time, or maybe ever.

She pushed the slipping strap of her purse up her shoulder and tightened her grip on her forty-two-ounce Ginger Ale, the biggest cup she'd been able to get her hands on at the gas station this morning.

Coming around a palm that created a bend in the path, she spotted Axel sitting on the front steps of the library with a dark blue, almost teal, acoustic guitar in his arms. It was a beautiful instrument, and he held it with reverence as he stroked and plucked at the strings, experimenting with different chords. She stopped in place, watching him from the bend by the palm, and partially obscured by dangling moss that hung from the oak across the way.

Bear spotted Axel right away and went into his jumping Jack's, bouncing up and down on his front legs.

"Stay," Kate whispered.

He did, but hung his head and let out a pathetic whimper. Sheesh. Had Axel put a spell on him or what?

She glanced his way again, noticing the tight line of his strong brow as he focused on his finger work, and Kate suddenly wondered how many more times she'd come upon Axel in his element. Humming, singing a song, playing an instrument? Not much longer. Guys like Axel, talented, smart, witty, handsome flirts, didn't stick around. At least she didn't think they did. She'd never dated a guy who had hit every

single one of those checkmarks before, but the ones that had come close either left her or did something to tick her off and make her leave them. Not that she and Axel were dating, or that she had any intention of dating him. She learned her lesson and meant to keep her promise to herself.

It had been three days since Axel had popped back into her life, creating a whirlwind of emotions inside her. Two of those days he'd spent helping her clean the library. And man, was he proficient at his job. On day two, they'd completed the Third floor, and today they were starting on the second. At this rate, the library would be spotless by the end of next week. Well before the judges were supposed to come. They'd probably even be done before Halloween, which landed on Saturday. Would he be here for it?

She hoped so because that was the other thing. Even if she had no intention of dating him, she was already used to him being around. She couldn't imagine what it would be like coming to the library and finding him gone. It would be void of music, of the happiness and contentment he brought with his songs and golden voice. She'd always thought her favorite part about the library was the silence, but if she had to go back to that ...

She swallowed hard, and he glanced up at the same moment, almost as if he'd heard her even though she hadn't been moving. A grin spread over his face, his dark gaze honing in on her and sending tingles up her spine as he continued to pluck at his guitar.

“Heal, Bear.” Moving slowly, afraid she’d break the magic spell they seemed to be under, she approached him with Bear at her side, his tail whipping back and forth like crazy.

Without stopping his strumming of the guitar, he glanced up. “Morning.”

Pulling her jacket tight about her, Kate moved to sit next to him on the steps.

He quirked a grin and yanked his black ball cap a little further down over his eyes.

Kate tried not to think what that was about and called Bear to her side. He let out another whimper, but did as he was told. The cement was cool under her and she’d suddenly wished that she’d worn sweatpants today instead of skinny jeans. But one didn’t wear sweatpants on reading buddies’ day.

A few minutes later, he turned his guitar in his lap and rested his arms on her, then glanced in Kate’s direction. He let out a long breath as he held her eye contact. “That’s weird.”

She furrowed her brow. “What?”

“Either you give me butterflies, or I ate something weird for breakfast,” he said.

Kate tossed her head back and laughed.

“I love it when you laugh.” He smiled.

She ignored the compliment, had to because he lobbed them around like they grew on trees. “For your sake, I hope it’s the butterflies. Less painful and inconvenient.”

He shrugged his shoulder. “Maybe. Unless you decide to break my heart. Are you a heartbreaker, Kate Hart?”

She scoffed and pushed to her feet, but before she could stand, he grabbed her hand and pulled her back down to the step beside him. “Stay?”

Bear let out a loud sigh, drawing Axel’s attention.

“Hey, Buddy.”

Bear inched forward, looking up at Kate to make sure he was allowed, then plopped down on Axel’s feet, immediately rolling to his belly. Axel gave him a good belly rub as the two sat in companionable silence for a moment.

At almost the same moment, she lifted her Ginger Ale to take a sip, he lifted a soda cup the same size as hers. It must have been behind him on the steps because she didn’t know how else she would have missed it.

Her eyes went wide, and she pointed at his cup. “What’s yours?”

“Dr. Pepper,” he said. “But don’t tell my nutritionist. What’s your poison?”

She chuckled. Nutritionist? Too funny. “Ginger Ale for me. Though I prefer Bundaberg Ginger Beer to what the gas station has in their fountain drinks.”

“Because it’s got liquor in it?” He held back a smile like his grandpa Don liked to do. Kate saw a lot of Don in Axel. Both sweet, silly, manly men. “Help take the edge off a day of hauling books around?”

She shook her head, shoved his shoulder, and took a big swig of her drink. “Ha, ha. Common misconception. Ginger beer is not alcoholic. What it is, is super strong. My nose is always stuffy in the fall, and it clears it right up. Plus, it comes in all sorts of flavors. Not a lot of people know that. I’m a big fan of lemon and also hibiscus ginger beer, but there are a lot of good flavors. My brothers love the tropical stuff.”

“Hey,” he held up his hands. “You don’t have to sell me on special flavors. Have you tried the Black Berry Dr. Pepper? So good.”

Suddenly, she didn’t really want to talk about drinks. She wanted to talk about Axel’s amazing talent. “You really do have a beautiful voice,” she said. “Have you given any thought to entering that contest I mentioned?”

He shrugged. “I probably won’t be around for it.”

She scrunched her nose as an ache spread through her. Of course he wouldn’t be here. He had a life, and it wasn’t in Diamond Cove. She had to change the subject. “I like your guitar.”

He lifted the instrument by the neck and showed it to her. “Odette.”

Kate arched a brow. “You named your guitar?”

“It was the cool thing to do at the time.” He leaned closer to her. “I was fourteen when I got her. She was my first guitar.”

“Wow, that makes it how old?” Kate asked. “It’s in fantastic condition.”

Axel chuckled. “*She*. She’s in really good condition. And she’s twenty-one. I baby her.” He shrugged. “I have a lot of sentimental attachment to her. My grandpa gave her to me.”

Kate rolled her soda cup between her hands and cocked her head to the side. “Okay, I’ll bite. You named her after an old girlfriend?” She tried to sound light and teasing, but the slight edge of irritation didn’t escape her notice or Axel’s for that matter. What was wrong with her?

His smile got bigger. “Why? Does that make you jealous?”

She pulled the keys to the library from her purse and popped to her feet. “I’m not jealous of your guitar. And if I was jealous of anything, it would have nothing to do with you. I don’t even know you.” She glanced at Bear. “Come.”

He hopped up and trotted to her side.

As she unlocked the library, Axel carefully loaded his guitar into its case, grabbed his drink, and came up behind her. Close enough that she could smell him. Thank you, Ginger Ale! He smelled like he was fresh out of the shower, with a hint of something citrusy about him.

“I don’t know,” he said with an air of nonchalance that made her want to smack him. “You seem kind of jealous.”

She shook her head and pushed the door open, then stood back and let him pass through. “Someone has an awfully big opinion of himself.”

He laughed all the way inside, then turned and watched her as she entered. “Not of myself, of Odette.”

Kate bristled. He'd so named her after an old girlfriend, and Kate hated herself a little for wanting to scratch the woman's eyes out. The good news was, this conversation was solidifying in her mind that she'd made the right decision to stay away from men. She hated feeling like this. Like a crazy person.

She marched to her reception desk, sat her bag on the stool behind the counter, and started organizing.

Bear went to his spot in front of the fireplace and curled up.

"We have reading buddies today from one to two," Kate explained. "And clean-up after that, which usually takes a half hour or so. Unfortunately, that means we'll lose a chunk of time out of our cleaning schedule today, but I'm hoping we can get a bunch done before the kids arrive."

He sat his guitar down in front of the counter and leaned across it toward her. "I didn't name Odette after a girlfriend."

She moved her stapler from the right side of her desk to the left. "Not my business if you did."

"As I said, I was fourteen years old. It's pretty common for musicians to name their guitars, often after beautiful women," he said.

Kate folded her arms over her chest. Well, this was just getting better and better. She forced a smile. "Oh?"

"Odette was the sexiest name I could think of." He laughed.

Kate suddenly got an image in her head of a fourteen-year-old Axel holding his brand-new guitar and trying to come up

with a sexy woman's name. She couldn't help it, she laughed. "Okay, that's a pretty cute story."

"If it makes you feel better," he said, adopting a serious look. "I don't think Odette is the sexiest name I've heard anymore."

With a smile, she shook her head and reached under her desk for our stack of children's books she'd gathered last night to set on tables around the main floor. "Oh? There's a runner-up?"

He came around the desk and took the stack of books from her, allowing her to grab the rest still under the desk. "Well, Kate's in the lead right now."

Kate almost dropped the rest of the books as she whirled around to look at him, her cheeks heating.

He had a smug grin on his face.

"Stop flirting with me." She marched around him into the main area, where she placed books on the cherry wood desks, coffee tables between sofas and chairs, and in the reading nook by the big stained-glass window where Betty always sat with Jenny.

"I am not flirting. I'm just being extra friendly to someone who is extra attractive," he said.

She turned her head from him and smiled. "You're incorrigible."

He shook his head. "Honest." He cleared his throat. "So tell me more about reading buddies. The elementary school brings

over second graders to read with volunteers?”

She had started to explain it to him last night, but they had gotten distracted by something else. Laughing probably. At something completely inconsequential, more than likely. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much. “Yes, but the volunteers are The Palms residents and we have first through third graders. It actually works out brilliantly. The students get to come here once a week to practice their reading skills in this super cool library.” She signaled around. “And it gives the residents, especially the ones who don't get visitors very often, something to look forward to. It's really good for the morale of single, widowed, or lonely senior citizens.”

She turned to look at him but found that he had stopped walking several feet back, frozen between desks. “What?”

“You came up with this program?”

Kate nodded and shrugged her shoulder at the same time. “Yes, well, sort of. Julia Peters, the second-grade teacher, brought her class a couple of years ago, and we got talking. By the time they left, the idea was fully formed. First, second, and third graders come every Friday during the summer, and the grades rotate every Friday during the year. Julia took it to the principal of the elementary, and I took it to Samantha. After we got permission, we started reading buddies three weeks later, and it's been going ever since. You know, your grandpa has played a huge part in making it work. He comes every week.”

“This is a brilliant idea,” Axel said, walking up to her. “When I was a kid, my brothers and I used to go to retirement homes and play piano and guitar and sing for an hour or two every couple of weeks. Thinking back, it was really more about us than them, but it still made an impact. Didn’t really give me a great opportunity to talk with the residents, but we always had a good audience. That’s popped into my head over the years, and I’ve often thought how great it would be if kids had more opportunities like that—like this. Making a difference in people’s lives. You’re amazing.”

Heat flooded through Kate from the top of her head all the way down to her toes. She wasn’t totally sure what had brought it on, the idea of a young Axel playing piano at retirement communities with his brothers or his sincere compliment. Possibly the best compliment she’d ever received. She pushed a lock of her wavy brown hair behind her ear and grinned. “Thank you. What a nice thing to say. I’ll have to pass it on to Julia.”

“You absolutely should.” Axel still hadn’t taken his gaze off her. “You both deserve it.”

She furrowed her brow as he stepped around her and continued to place books. He wanted her to pass the compliment on to Julia, and that made her like him all the more. So, she did what she did best, and shut those feelings down hard and fast.



They got everything set up for reading buddies in thirty minutes, then Kate put on the radio to a classic rock station and they got to work cleaning the library. Conversation always seemed to flow easily between the two of them, but something that Kate appreciated was the moments when they didn't need to talk at all. They were comfortable, making Kate feel like she didn't have to be anyone but herself around him.

And he didn't seem to have any problem being himself around her, as he belted out rock songs like they had been written for him. He didn't have one inhibited bone in his body. She loved it. Could listen to him sing all day—and had!

At about a quarter to one, the two of them headed downstairs.

“The students and residents should be showing up anytime now,” Kate told Axel.

He nodded. “Is it weird that I'm excited about it?”

She smiled at him as they reached her desk. “No, it's not weird. It's endearing.”

A song that had been popular when she'd been in high school came on the radio. A good one too. She went around her desk to pull out the large container of Red Vines she shared with the residents and kids as a social lubricant, and started humming along.

"... And I tried, tried so hard to make you proud, but it's never so easy as picking a path," the dulcet tones of a talented young tenor wafted through the big open space, up, up through the stained-glass window above.

Axel spun toward her so fast, his eyes wide, that she stepped back in shock. "You like this song?"

"Amelia?" Heck, yeah. It's beautiful," Kate said, a little taken aback by his eagerness. "You can really hear the pain in his voice. And the words are genius." She held up a hand. "Listen to the chorus."

The chorus started. "They say stop dreamin', you say dream on. My worlds in tatters, tryin' to make everyone happy and pleasin' no one. But you, you see me clearly and know the truth."

Kate sucked in a deep breath as the vulnerability and the singer's voice hit her along with the words. It really had been too long since she'd heard the song. A tear slipped down her cheek and she quickly whipped it away. "It's just ... exquisite." She glanced at Axel and found his jaw hanging open. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Do you know who sings this song?"

She thought about it but came up blank. She was pretty sure who'd ever written it had been a one-hit-wonder. A shame, really, because he had some real musical chops. "No, just that the song's called 'Amelia.'" Amelia Wait. "Your grandma's name is Amelia."

He nodded and his gaze narrowed in on her as though he was waiting for something.

"What a fun coincidence," Kate said, just as the kids started wandering into the library. No wonder he liked the song so much. "I bet this is a favorite of your family."

"Kate," Axel gave her a weary smile and sighed, "There's something I should probably—"

"Hi, Ms. Kate!" a kid called out. They were coming in in droves now, all wearing Halloween costumes. It was a week out from Halloween, but since the grades rotated weeks at the library, it was just understood that every Friday in October would be costume day for reading buddies. A couple pirates, or maybe they were Musketeers, went by, and she high-fived one of them.

Kate waved. "Hi, Millie."

Millie wore a princess costume. Belle. Kate loved Belle. "Is Betty coming to read today?"

"You bet," Kate said. "She wouldn't miss it."

Millie and one of her friends, dressed as a mermaid clapped their hands as they squealed and jumped around. That little old Betty sure had some spunk in her for a ninety-four-year-old.

“Any Chester sightings?” a little boy named Adam asked. He was in a WWF costume, and Kate was sure he'd end up reading with Polly today, who'd no doubt gotten him into it.

Kate grabbed a handful of licorice and came around front of her desk. “Nope, but I have it on good authority he likes Red Vines.” She handed one to each of the kids, making sure to comment on their costumes.

Julia, the second-grade teacher, came in with her sixteen-year-old brother who had Down Syndrome. They were soon followed by Don, Harry, Winnie, Polly, Walt, Nancy, and Rosa. Nancy was practically dragging Rosa into the library while Rosa played with her rosary beads.

“Look, our exorcist is back,” Axel said under his breath.

Kate couldn't help but chuckle at the horrified look on Rosa's face. After that candle went out on Wednesday morning, Kate had been willing to bet Rosa would never return.

Being pulled by three second-graders, Don slowed his pace as he passed her. “Is Axel doing a good job here, Kate?”

Axel threw his arms up. “Grandpa, what kind of question is that?”

“A good one.”

Kate gave him a thumbs up. “I don't know what I would do without him.”

Don gave a satisfied smirk. “Glad to hear it. If anything changes,” he called over his shoulder, “let me know and I'll

set him straight.” He scooped up one kid and set her on his shoulder, to the delight of them all.

Kate’s jaw dropped. He should not be that muscular at his age. It was crazy!

Axel leaned close to her ear and whispered, “He’s not kidding, either. He’d whoop me if he thought I was slacking.”

She shivered at his closeness and smiled up at him. “I believe that.”

Julia waved to her as she rushed after her students, and Kate did the sign for hello as Cameron approached in a Spider-Man costume—Last year he’d worn a costume every day leading up to Halloween, and it looked like this year was no different. Cameron wasn’t deaf, but speaking with his mouth wasn’t always easy for him. So he learned sign language and now had this awesome communication device that he’d gotten in the summer that allowed him to program in longer sentences, and had lots of single words. He’d spent a whole month pushing a button for “elephant” after Julia had started dating Logan, a vet who worked with elephants at the local animal park. Elephants were Cameron’s favorite.

When Don first met Cameron a couple years ago, he’d become determined to learn sign language himself. He’d come to Kate, and as he’d started learning from books in the library and online courses she’d found for him, Kate had decided she’d learn too. They’d had a study session in the library together every week for six months. She missed them now.

Cameron pushed a button on his talker, as they called it, and it said, “Hello, Ms. Kate,” in an animatronic voice.

Kate clasped her hands together, then signed what she could as she spoke. “Oh! You programmed my name into your communication device. That’s so cool!”

Cameron smiled from ear to ear. Man, she loved that kid. He was such a sweetheart, plus Bear loved him, which was enough for her. Bear’s judgment of people was beyond reproach. Cameron glanced from her to Axel, and then back to her. Then his eyes went wide, and his head whipped in Axel’s direction.

“You speak sign language?” Axel asked, eyes wide.

“A little and thanks to this guy,” she nudged Cameron’s shoulder, then looked back to him, “and your grandpa. If not for them, I never would’ve given it a try.”

Axel blinked. “Grandpa speaks sign language?”

“Yeah, you didn’t know?” Kate frowned.

He shook his head.

Okay, well ... “Cameron, this is Don’s grandson, Axel Clayton,” Kate introduced them, using what words she knew in sign language as she spoke.

Axel extended his hand. “It’s good to meet you.”

Cameron only stared dumbstruck, not saying anything, but he also didn’t shirk away from his hand like she’d seen him do with strangers before.

“Is it the beard?” Kate asked with a laugh. “He kind of looks like a mountain man, doesn’t he?”

Cameron’s gaze dropped to the floor by the counter where Axel’s guitar sat. He hit a button on his talker and it spoke for him, saying, “Don.” He hit another button. “Bear.” Then he rushed off without so much as a goodbye.

“I guess he’s done with us.” Kate smiled after him. “He loves your grandpa. They’re reading buddies.”

She watched as Cameron took a seat next to Don, still staring at Axel. Don lifted his hand to his mouth in a flat palm, then lowered it. The sign for thank you. She nodded. Then Don started signing with Cameron. “I think Cameron can’t believe Don has a wild man for a grandson.”

Bear popped up from his spot by the fireplace and ran over to Cameron, blankie in his mouth. Cameron immediately grabbed the other end, and the two started their weekly game of tug of war.

Axel grinned. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not.”

Before Kate could question Axel, his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and glowered at the screen.

“Everything okay?” Kate asked.

Axel nodded. “Yes, but I need to take it. I’ve been putting this off for long enough.”

“Sure, no worries,” Kate said, wondering what exactly he’d been putting off. “We have plenty of volunteers. Take your time.”

Without even looking at her, Axel answered his phone and headed off to the back of the library by the big stained-glass window. Kate wasn't the only one who watched him go. Don's gaze followed him all the way to where he stood, frowning at his grandson the whole time. Kate caught Don's attention, and signed, "He's fine. Don't worry."

Don smiled, but it seemed forced, then gave her a thumbs up and turned his attention back to Cameron. What was that about?

"Kate, dear," Winnie said, coming up beside her. "Any news on Sweetie?" The seventy-something old lady was a genius with sewing machines and needles. Not only did she make all of Bear's and Sweetie's costumes—knowledge Kate had been sworn to secrecy with—Winnie also made most of the outfits that Samantha wore to work. Kate glanced down at the woman's white khaki pants and her coral shirt, and guessed she'd probably made this outfit as well, along with the adorable earrings she had on.

Polly stood directly behind her, in a pair of Chino pants, a black shirt, and her signature turquoise jewelry and moccasin shoes.

"Well, I know Sean's looking after her until Aaron gets back, so she's in good hands." Kate pointed to Winnie's earrings. "Did you make these? They're adorable."

Winnie blushed. "Thank you, I did. Would you like a pair?"

Kate smiled. "I would love a pair, but only if you have time and the inclination. No need to put yourself out on my

account.”

Polly swatted a hand through the air. “Are you kidding? Winnie loves gifting things she’s made. Especially if she really likes the person.”

“Speaking of which,” Winnie shot a glance toward Bear. “I need to take some last-minute measurements of you-know-who’s girlfriend for Halloween.” Sweetie wasn’t exactly going through a growth spurt, thank goodness, but she’d grown a few inches since she’d come here. She was a little over three and a half feet now.

Kate had to admit she couldn’t wait to see what costumes Winnie would come up with for the pair this year for Halloween. She’d already made them multiple matching outfits throughout the year, but Halloween was a costume holiday and sure to have Winnie pulling out the big guns.

“Well, I was thinking of taking Bear to see Sweetie tomorrow,” Kate said. “You’re welcome to come with me if you’d like?”

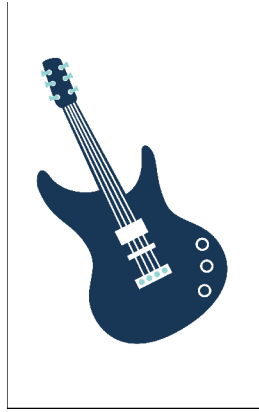
Winnie gave her an indulgent smile. “That would be lovely. Thank you.”

Without thinking about it, Kate shot her gaze toward Axel. He had his back to the room and was staring at one of the clear panels of the stained-glass window out to the lake beyond the island property. His shoulders looked tense, and his head was ducked. She hoped he was okay.

She glanced back at Winnie and Polly, who are looking at her with stars in their eyes. Kate fought the urge to shirk back. “Well, I guess I better get back to work.” She swung her arms, then reached up and tug on her four-leaf clover pendant. “Looks like someone needs help, assistance, aid ... a new book.”

She grabbed the first book she saw on her counter and took off. She just hoped that Polly and Winnie hadn’t seen that she’d grabbed the unabridged version of Moby Dick. She doubted even Walt, an avid reader, would be interested in the over nine-hundred-page novel.

Chapter 11



AXEL

In a matter of two minutes, Axel had gone from flirting with Kate to dreading the conversation he could no longer put off.

Glancing down at the caller ID on his phone, his stomach dropped like he had just bungee-jumped off a bridge when he saw Chaz's name.

He quickly made his excuses and marched off as he answered his phone.

"Chaz?" Axel wandered past second graders and senior citizens picking spots for reading buddies.

Chaz let out a low whistle. "You answered. I can't believe it."

Axel lowered his voice as he passed his grandpa who was speaking sign language with Cameron—so cool. Just like Grandpa to learn. He focused back on his call. “I almost didn’t. You crossed a line last week, a big one.”

Chuckling, Chaz said, “And what line would that be exactly?”

Axel reached the large arched stained-glass window at the back of the library and peered out one of the clear panes of glass. Something about being here, as mad as he was, calmed him. He took a deep breath and replied without inflection in his tone. “Don’t play cute with me. You sent a look-alike of me to a bar to get into a fight with Lillie Anne and act like a jerk. Everyone and their dog think I screamed at her and broke private property. I wouldn’t be surprised if the owner of that club tries to sue me.”

“He won’t, it was good publicity for him too,” Chaz said. “This is what it comes down to, Axel: you hired me to make sure that you keep making money, and we both know that your funds have been way down since your last album. And because you’re not working on new songs, I have to do what I have to do to make sure we *both* get paid. By the way, sales on your previous records increased by forty percent since last Friday. You’re welcome.”

Axel glanced down and pinched the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t wanted to say anything, but he was sick and tired of these stupid stunts.

Chaz continued before Alex could say anything. “And you know what sells better than a breakup? A reconciliation. I’ve instructed Lillie Anne to contact you. The two of you need to set up a time when you can make a public appearance together.”

Axel shook his head. “No, no way. I’m done playing these games with you and with Lillie Anne. I dated her two and a half years ago for seven months, and in that time, we broke up four times. Four. Do you know why? Because she’s crazy. And she makes me crazy. She doesn’t really want anything to do with me, she wants what I can do for her.”

“That’s a little harsh,” Chaz said, “don’t you think? I’ve talked with the girl. She sounds legitimately infatuated with you. She’s just frustrated because you keep putting her off. And let’s face it, she’s one fine-looking woman. I’d take the crazy for a piece of that.”

“Don’t be crude,” Axel said.

“Maybe if you just talk to her—”

“Preferably somewhere public? Where there’ll be lots of reporters?” Axel asked.

Chaz laughed again. “What’s good for the goose.”

“You know I can’t do that. I didn’t just leave to avoid you.”

“You mean your stalker?” Chaz asked.

Yep, that had been a big reason he’d high-tailed it. Whoever it was had started sending him creepy cut-out serial killer

notes to his home with lovey-dovey messages on them: You and me forever!

I can't live without you.

I'll make your house a home.

How do you feel about cats?

Yeah. No. To all that. Especially the cats. Ick.

“That’s exactly why I want to know where you are. So I can send bodyguards. And, yes, Lillie Anne. I’m all about killing two birds with one stone. Protect you, and make us some money.” Chaz moved his phone, making scratchy noises, then continued. “Listen, here’s the truth of the matter. Is Lillie Anne a little crazy? Yeah, maybe. But, fact is, she’s good for your career. People love the idea of Axel the rock god dating the up-and-coming, cute-as-a-button starlet. So, tell me where you are, and let’s get things fixed.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.” He hated being called a rock god.

“Right, sorry, oh, self-righteous one,” Chaz mocked. “I forgot you find the term sacrilegious even if it is widely accepted that’s what you *are*.”

Axel turned and faced the room, his gaze landing on Kate. She wore skinny jeans today with a white tee, a hunter green cardigan, and black booties with silver studs on the heel. She reached up and brushed a loose strand of her brown hair, which she’d pulled back into a messy bun, behind her ear. She wore silver rings on almost every one of her dainty fingers,

which were blurring as she spoke sign language with Don and Cameron. One look at her, and the breath left his body.

“Axel, are you still there?” Chaz asked.

“I’m not coming back,” Axel said.

“Whoa, whoa. What are you talking about?”

Axel folded his free arm over his chest. “At least not right now.” Maybe never. “You think the only way to revitalize my career is pretending to date Lillie Anne, which I’m not going to do *or* to write new songs.”

“Oh, ho! Are you writing new songs?” Axel could hear the excitement in Chaz’s voice.

“I’m trying,” Axel said.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Finally.” Chaz let out a deep breath. “And you’re trying to stick to the more poppy alternative beats, right? Because that’s what’s in right now.”

Axel dropped his forehead to his hand, and let out a deep breath. He hated the music Chaz was talking about, but after his last album failed so spectacularly, he’d promised he’d give Chaz’s way a try. “Yep,” was all he could say, but even that one word brought the chest pains back. He’d been three days without them. Three Kate-filled days of laughter, singing, and cleaning. The best two days of his career in the last few years. He was working, but it didn’t feel like work.

“Do you have anything you can send me?”

“Not yet,” Axel said.

The room fell into an almost white-noise chatter as the senior citizens paired off with second graders and began reading them their books.

Axel headed back through the crowd, intending to take his conversation outside. The last thing he needed was people listening in, especially his grandfather.

“Well, there is something I should tell you then,” Chaz said. “I was going to keep it to myself, but now that I know you’re writing again ...”

“Spit it out, Chaz,” Axel said.

“You’ve been formally invited to perform at the Grammys.”

Axel’s steps faltered, but he kept going when he noticed the kids staring at him. “What?” He hadn’t been asked to perform at the Grammys for five years.

“There’s a catch; they want you to perform a new song,” Chaz said. “Think you can manage that? This would be a huge step in moving your career back in the right direction.”

Excitement flooded Axel’s chest. He needed this. And not just that. He wanted it. Wanted the stage, the excitement of revealing new work to contemporaries. The thrill of a performance on a whole new level. If he could get a new song written in the next couple of months, he could perform it at the Grammys in January, and it would go a long way to fixing a lot of the problems he’d been having. But at the rate he was going, he wasn’t sure it was possible to get it done.

As he neared Kate's desk, a woman popped up out of an armchair, clutching her throat. Rosa, he thought her name was. Axel slowed, not sure what he was seeing, when another woman ran to her side. This woman was one of Grandpa's friends whom he'd met at breakfast the other day. The one with dark hair and turquoise jewelry. What was her name again? Molly? Holly? Polly? Polly! That was it.

"Are you choking?" Polly asked Rosa.

Rosa pointed to her throat and nodded vigorously.

"Axel? I keep losing you," Chaz said.

"I'll call you back." Axel shoved his phone in his back pocket and rushed toward the women, but a bunch of kids stood, blocking him.

Trying not to shove anyone over, Axel maneuvered his way as quickly as he could through the kids, but another man beat him to Rosa. That guy wrapped his arms around her midsection and started the Heimlich maneuver. Rosa's hands reached for Axel, and he grabbed them just as he heard a hacking sound at the back of her throat, and then ... then she spit. Something large, lime green, and sticky hit him right in the beard, and spit sprayed over his face.

Rosa gasped for breath, and in Spanish started speaking rapid fire at the man who saved her. Axel knew him too; he was pretty sure his name was Harry. He was the guy with the plaid pageboy hat who'd also had breakfast with Grandpa the other day. He was a fan of Axel's music.

“¡Gracias, muchismas gracias!” Rosa repeated over and over while shaking Harry’s hand.

“Rosa! Are you all right?” Kate rushed around Axel and grabbed Rosa’s shoulders.

“Si, estoy bien.” Rosa breathed deeply, and then her gaze fell on Axel.

He hadn’t moved since he’d been hit, sprayed, and stickied up. Had only stood frozen with his arms up. This was so much worse than the chicken feathers, flamingo poop, and shrimp!

People gathered around now. Grandpa came up behind him just as Kate turned to look at him. Her jaw dropped, then she snorted and clapped a hand to her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said through laughter. “You have gum in your beard.”

“My land, son,” Grandpa said. “What happened?”

Polly rushed to explain. “Rosa was choking on her gum. Harry gave her the Heimlich maneuver and saved her life.”

Harry glanced in Axel’s direction, a look of mortification spreading over his face. “I’m sorry, Axel.”

Rosa bowed her head. “Lo siento.”

Then Nancy moved in as kids gathered around Axel’s legs, staring up at him and giggling. “Yikes, it’s in there good and deep. I think you’re going to have to shave.”

Shave ...

Shave?!

No! Not his beard. His beautiful, manly beard he'd spent months of his life growing. That snapped him out of his daze. He reached up to the gum feeling its sticky moisture sinking in.

Kate lifted a hand in a stop motion. "Don't touch it! I've got some peanut butter in the kitchen. I think I can get it out if you don't touch it."

She turned and waded through the kids before disappearing around the corner.

Axel stood still, hands up, not daring to move lest the gum sink deeper.

Rosa exchanged looks with Polly and Nancy, glanced in the direction Kate had gone, then stepped forward and grabbed at her gum, squishing it deep down into the hair at his chin until he could feel it touching his skin, then she yanked it out, dragging the gum from root to tip.

"What are you doing?" Axel gasped.

"She doesn't speak English," Nancy hurriedly explained.

Walt and Harry's jaws dropped, and Harry turned beet red.

She smiled and held up what little she'd managed to remove. "¡Lo tengo!"

"She says she got it," Winnie added, helpfully.

Polly snorted. Then Nancy laughed. Soon, Winnie was laughing right along with them. Grandpa had the good sense not to laugh, but his face was turning purple from holding it in.

The kids broke into cheers at knee level, and for one split second, Axel thought he might cry. My beard!

Grandpa slapped him on the shoulder. “You can have my appointment at the barber today. I was getting a cut, but Ryker will switch us out.”

Axel clenched his teeth, nodded, then headed for the doors as hot, seething anger and frustration filled his gut. He could feel people watching him go, sensed them following, but that didn’t stop him. He stepped into the sweltering heat, lifted his arms to his sides, drew air into all four parts of his lungs, expanding his diaphragm, and then unleashed his anger in a primal yell that his voice teacher would have been proud of.

Birds shot out of trees, their wings creating a percussion in the air, somewhere in the distance a child cried, and Bear, appearing from nowhere, howled along beside him in an unearthly duet of pain and sympathy.

The words of a famous song came to mind: Candle in the wind.

Axel’s entire body shook, and if there wasn’t steam coming out of his ears, he’d be very surprised.

Don stepped around him on the path, shaking his head. “For crying out loud, you big baby. It’s just a beard. You can grow it back.” He waved at him to follow.

Slouching, Axel dutifully went along.



Axel sat in the olive-green barber's chair, with Ryker Rockefeller, the barber, staring him down through disbelieving eyes. That prompted Axel to stare blankly into the mirror mounted along the brick wall. Ryker was tall, tanner than Axel with pitch-black hair that spoke of European ancestry. He also had a bit of an Italian accent in his tone.

“So this is ...?” Ryker signaled to the mess in Axel's beard.

“Gum.”

Ryker nodded. “Okay, well I hate to tell you this, because I can see this was a beautiful beard, but the gum goes all the way to your skin. We're going to have to shave the whole thing off.” Ryker leaned in closer to get a better look at the damage. “Too bad, really. If you'd come straight here as soon as the gum got in there, I probably could have gotten it out with some peanut butter.”

Axel dug his fingers into the leather armrests of his chair. “So I've heard.”

As Ryker prepared the shaving cream and reclined Axel back in the chair, Axel let the elevator music playing overhead fill his brain. Soon, Ryker had trimmed Axel's beard down, the

trimmings falling on the granite floor, and applied the shaving cream. Halfway through the shave, Axel had almost blanked out the entire nightmare.

That was until Ryker spoke. “So, you’re Axel Clayton, world-famous rock star.”

Axel glanced heavenward.

“I’m a fan of your music.” Ryker stared at Axel’s frown and laughed. “I’m guessing the beard helped with your anonymity?”

“You have no idea,” Axel said.

Ryker chuckled. “I might have a better idea than you know.” He moved onto the other half of Axel’s face. His movements were sure and quick. His confidence with a razor was impressive. If Axel was going to take a blade to a man’s face, he’d be a nervous mess. But Ryker moved like this was what he was born to do. No wonder Grandpa trusted him to cut his hair—Grandpa didn’t trust anyone.

“You know what it’s like to have fans following you around?” Axel didn’t mean to sound snippy. The guy was actually really nice.

He just smiled. “Something like that.”

Axel arched a brow, waiting for more.

“Sean’s your brother, right?”

“Yes,” Axel said.

Ryker nodded as if that was all he needed to know. “Tell you what, I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine?”

Now he had to have it! “Deal.” Axel extended his hand, and they shook.

“My parents were politicians, something similar to your Kennedys, your American royalty.” Ryker laughed. Where I am from I was always expected to follow in their footsteps; growing up, everything I did was scrutinized.”

“Like the Kennedys?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t world-famous like you, but in my country, I was very popular.”

That caught Axel’s attention. “And now you’re a barber?”

He nodded. “I don’t think my family ever expected this from me, but in the end, it made me happy. That’s what’s important.”

“Liking what you do?” Axel asked, suddenly riveted by the unexpected turn in the conversation. Putting him on the edge of his seat for the answer.

Ryker shook his head. “No, to not hate it. I don’t always love my job, but I take pride in it. It is a good job. I bet you love your job though.”

Did he? Axel wasn’t so sure anymore. Now it just felt tedious and caused chest pains. Speaking of chest pains ... he rubbed his sternum.

Ryker finished up. First came a hot towel to open his pores and then two different creams to soften his skin and help with razor burn. Which he didn't have. Lastly, he used the towel he'd draped over Axel's chest to protect his shirt, to wipe his face, then pushed his chair out of its reclining position so he faced the mirror. "What do you think?"

Axel took in his face, the high cheekbones that seemed way higher without the hair filling in the hollows of his cheeks, his dimple, which was way more prominent now, and his angular jaw. "I look like me again."

Ryker chuckled. "Is that so bad?"

"We'll find out." Axel stood. "How much do I owe you?"

Ryker swatted a hand at him. "Don already paid for it. You know, you're lucky Don scheduled a haircut. He wasn't due for another three weeks."

Axel's frown deepened. "Three weeks?"

"Yep."

Hmmm. "Thanks for the shave."

Axel exited the salon.

Sitting on the chairs right out the door was Grandpa and his posse. Walt and Harry stood stroking their mustaches and still refusing to look him in the eye. Don looked smug and the women all smiled.

Someone spoke, but Axel threw up a hand in a stop-motion, cutting off whatever was about to be said. "Nope! I don't want

to hear it. I loved that beard, and you lot are as suspicious as the day is long.”

“Now, son,” Grandpa said, standing and stepping forward. “What are you implying?”

Axel stepped toward Grandpa, refusing to be cowed. “Did you and your little gang set this up?” He swirled his finger in front of his face. The air conditioner kicked on and he shivered as the cold air brushed his cheeks.

Don scowled and pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Set up Rosa choking?”

Okay, that did seem far-fetched, but something weird was going on here. Axel narrowed his eyes and marched to the elevator, jamming the down button with his thumb. The seniors followed.

“You do look nice,” Winnie said so quietly, he almost hadn’t heard her.

“Thank you,” he grouched. She was too cute to not answer.

“Kate’ll love it,” Nancy said with a surety that sent goosebumps up his arms. He hadn’t thought of that.

Suddenly, he was excited and nervous. She’d given him the rest of the night off, which meant he wouldn’t be seeing her until Monday. The thought of waiting that long for her reaction sent a drum roll through his stomach.

The elevator doors dinged open, and Samantha stepped out wearing a red shirt with a flipped-up collar and a black and white skirt with barbers’ tools on it: scissors, razors, shaving

cream containers, and a barber pole. Axel might have thought it was cute if it didn't send up big red flags.

Samantha froze, her gaze shooting to his face. She dropped her clipboard and it clattered against the granite floor. "It's you!"

Crap.

"You're ... You're *the* Axel Clay—"

"My grandson." Don stepped forward and dropped his arm over Axel's shoulders.

Walt grabbed her clipboard for her.

Samantha's gaze darted around the group, then landed back on Axel. "I'm sorry. I thought I recognized you the other day because of your brother, but ..." She frowned. "What happened to your beard? And why would you shave it off? Everyone will recognize you immediately ..." Her eyes went wide, and she glanced down at her swing skirt, then she scowled at the senior citizens behind him. Don even took a step back.

Well, that was proof enough in Axel's mind that they had sabotaged him ... somehow. He rubbed his chin. Soft as a baby's bottom.

Walt handed her her clipboard, and she snatched it from him, then pointed with it off to the side, while looking at Axel. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Axel nodded and followed her away from the group. "What's up?"

She furrowed her brow. “Why are you here?” She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and rephrased. “I mean working in the library?”

“Honestly?”

She gave a firm nod.

He let it all out. “I have writer’s block. And I met Kate twelve years ago for ten, fifteen minutes, and she practically inspired an entire album out of me. When you said Kate worked there and needed help, I figured she and I could *help* each other.”

Samantha placed a hand on her hip, “So, Kate’s like, what? Your muse or something?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Okay, but,” she signaled to him as a whole. “Is this going to be a problem?”

“Am *I* going to be?” He shook his head, but she stopped him from continuing.

“No, not you, Axel Clayton, Don’s grandson, and The Palms’ temporary employee,” she said. “I mean you, Axel Clayton, the rock star, the brand?”

Axel rubbed his jaw again—couldn’t help it. “I don’t expect or plan to be.”

She breathed out a sigh of relief. “Okay, then as long as Kate is all right with it, I have no problem with you staying

on,” she said. “Heaven knows Kate can use all the help she can get.”

Axel swallowed. “You’re going to tell her who I am?”

She shook her head. “No, you are. And as soon as possible. Kate has major issues with being lied to.” Samantha went to step around him, then froze in place. He turned to see her staring at the senior posse waiting quietly by the elevator. They seemed so harmless, but obviously, looks could be deceiving. “By the way. Go easy on them. They’re well-intentioned.”

He sighed as she marched off into a room labeled Computer/Genealogy. Easy? He lifted his newly bare chin. He might go easy on them tomorrow.

He marched past the group and climbed on the elevator they held for him, then they slowly filed in behind him, none of them daring to look him in the eye. Not even his big ol’ tough-guy Grandpa.

Good.

Chapter 12



DON

On Saturday afternoon, Don pulled up to Mitchell's alligator rescue and parked, giving a side eye to one of the two passengers who sat in his back seat. Kate brought her gallon-sized cup of soda to her mouth and took a big, long swig, and all Don could think is: she and Axel are a match made in heaven—even as he rolled his eyes.

Axel. Don's stomach rolled at the thought of his grandson. He hadn't caught all of his conversation in the library yesterday with whoever it was he'd been talking to on the phone, but Axel had been upset.

"You crossed the line last week, a big one." That sounded pretty serious to Don.

Not to mention, the boy had been seriously agitated throughout the entire conversation. Don had never loved Axel's career, but over the last couple of years, he'd started to hate it. And that was counting the first time Don had hated it nine years ago after Axel had his incident. It had taken Don that long to make peace with what Axel had chosen to do with his life. But the boy was clearly not happy anymore.

Polly was great at finding jobs for people, maybe she could make some suggestions that Axel might like, and Don could approach him with once they had a few good ones picked out.

Don got out, pushing back thoughts of his grandson for now. Winnie, Kate, and Bear followed him to the front door, where he rapped his knuckles against the metal frame.

"I'm coming!" Sean called from in the building. Less than thirty seconds later, his grandson was pushing the door open, and Don stood back to let the women and their hairy Romeo enter.

"How is Sweetie doing?" Winnie asked Sean. "Has she been homesick?"

Sean laughed. "I'm afraid I've never been very good at speaking amphibian. That's Aaron's purview."

"I think you mean reptile." Kate smiled.

"My point exactly." Sean led them to a room down the hall.

Bear's tail thumped the wall on the right side as he wagged it back and forth.

Sean opened a door, and the group immediately spotted their baby gator. Sweetie sat in the middle of an open outside space with a pool and sunbathing area. She had the leather strap around her muzzle that Sean had probably put on her in preparation for their visit.

Kid was always prepared, like a Boy Scout. Just as Don had taught him and his brothers and cousins.

Bear rushed to Sweetie's side, licking her all over her face, and Sweetie leaned into him, lifting one front foot as she did.

Winnie clasped her hands together. "Isn't that the sweetest thing you've ever seen?"

Kate giggled. "Pretty dang sweet."

Who was Kate kidding? Her eyes misted over with tears. She was falling in love with those animals all over again.

Sweetie had only been gone a week, and this was the reaction from the women. Don hated to think what would happen when Sweetie reached five feet long and had to leave The Palms permanently.

After saying their hellos to their alligator, where even Don had to clear his throat several times—much to Sean's amusement—Sean set up four metal chairs for them to sit in that they all promptly ignored for the floor except Sean.

Winnie removed the costume she'd made for Sweetie. It was a red gown, with poofy sleeves for her front arms, and what looked like a gold belt at the waist. The dress fastened with Velcro at Sweetie's chest, and Winnie had been

thoughtful to not put any fabric from the waist down on the bottom so that Sweetie would still be able to crawl.

Don knelt on the floor and helped Winnie dress Sweetie and take measurements on anything she felt needed fixing. He'd gotten good at this over the last year, as Winnie had come to him for help with dressing the baby Gator after she'd learned that he'd been certified as one of Sweetie's emergency handlers on the property. She had rightly guessed, out of all the others, that Don would get a hoot out of this. One of the best pranks played at The Palms, and he got to be part of it.

He always loved seeing Samantha's reaction every time the pair showed up in a new couple creation, and he loved no one had guessed that Winnie made the costumes, even though she was the obvious choice with her sewing acumen, or who and how they were getting the costumes on the pair.

Kate rubbed Sweetie's head as she slurped up the rest of her massive drink, then ran her fingers over the soft cotton fabric of Sweetie's dress. "What's her costume supposed to be?"

Winnie gave a coy smile and reached into her duffel bag. "Does this make it any clearer?" she pulled out a mask and a bandana and went over to Bear. After she'd gotten the item situated on his head, she stepped back.

Kate burst into laughter. "Oh, Winnie, you genius! Wesley and Buttercup. Please tell me you have a mustache for Bear?"

Winnie wrung her hands together. "I had one, but he ate it."

“He does that—has a fierce food drive,” Kate said. “No worries, we can always draw it on.”

“Yeah,” Sean said with a smug grin. “I’m sure Bear will love that.”

Bear dropped to the floor at that and rolled over on his back by Sweetie.

Kate scratched his belly. “I think he’ll survive.”

But would Axel? The thought hit Don like a fist to the temple. Would Axel survive whatever it was he was going through this time?

Kate stood. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go to the little ladies room.” She took her empty gallon soda cup with her. Don wouldn’t be surprised if the woman made ten trips to the restroom before they left, but was grateful for her timing.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Don glanced at Sean. “You have any idea what’s going on with Axel’s career?”

Sean shrugged. “Other than that he has writer's block, nope. You know he doesn’t like to talk about that stuff with us. Though I think he talks to Johnny sometimes.”

Don frowned and glanced down. “Since when has Axel ever had writer's block?”

“Probably since His band, manager, and agent started pushing him to write Crap,” Sean said.

Winnie's gaze shot up—she’d moved to one of the metal chairs after they’d taken Sweetie’s costume off and was

currently stitching one of Sweetie's sleeves. "They can do that? Make him write stuff he doesn't like?"

Sean picked a stick up off the floor, pulled a pocketknife from his cargo pants, and started whittling. "They can do whatever they want to do."

That's exactly what Don was worried about.

"How do you think Train Wreck happened?" Sean asked.

Winnie grimaced.

"What's Train Wreck?" Don asked.

"It's Axel's last album," Winnie said with a hint of astonishment in her tone. "Have you not listened to it?"

Don rolled his shoulders and looked down. He'd never made it a habit to listen to Axel's songs unless he was playing them in the living room.

Winnie shook her head. "That album was a bit of a mess, wasn't it? I did like Great Divide, though. That song reminded me of some of his older music."

"Between you and me, that was the one song on the album that was a hundred percent his." Sean snorted in disgust. "He still takes full responsibility for the failure of the album though, even though they took his songs and messed them up. He showed me some of his original drafts, and they were nothing like what ended up on that album."

Maybe it was about time Don started listening to Axel's music. Just so he would have some idea what Winnie and Sean

were talking about.

Sean quit playing with the stick for a moment and looked at Don. “Grandpa, I know you like to worry. It’s got to be like your favorite pastime, but you don’t need to worry so much about Axel. And you need to trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

Easier said than done.

“Not only is he smart, he’s also wise.” Sean went back to his stick.

The problem was, Axel didn’t seem like he knew what he was doing right now. To Don, Axel appeared to be walking around with a big old question mark above his head, and a boat without an anchor was never a good thing. Don couldn’t be the only one who saw the boy’s confusion and indecision.

Winnie placed a hand on his shoulder, and he glanced up at her where she sat on her chair. “I’m going to have to agree with Sean on this one. Considering the career Axel has, and all the directions he could have gone, he’s turned out to be a remarkable man. He may be at a crossroads right now, but he knows how to make good decisions. Everything’s gonna turn out all right for him. Just you watch.”

Warmth and gratitude spread through Don's chest.

She pulled her hand away and went back to her sewing.

Kate came back into the room then, signaling the end of this conversation. It was pretty clear to everyone that Kate had no

idea who Axel was, and none of them were going to be the ones to drop that bombshell.

As soon as Kate took a seat, Winnie pressed in with the pertinent questions. “So how are things going with ... Jeff?”

Kate rubbed the back of her neck. “You mean Greg?”

Winnie nodded and kept sewing as casually as could be.

“We broke up a little more than a month ago,” Kate said.

“Oh, no!” when she sat her sewing down on her lap and gave Kate her full attention. “What happened?”

As if on cue, Kate’s phone rang. She scoffed at whoever’s name was on the caller ID. “Call denied.” With a dramatic flair, she jammed a button on her phone, then shoved it back into her pocket. “Speak of the devil.”

Sean laughed. “That was him?”

Kate nodded. “He told me I was too clingy, but ever since I broke up with him, he won’t leave me alone.”

“Classic.” Sean shook his head. “Typical loser moves. He had no idea you would break up with him for that, and now his ego’s bruised.”

“Exactly,” Kate said. “But I’m the clingy one.”

Don straightened his spine. “Is he bothering you? Need us to talk to him?”

Kate laughed. “He’s bothering me so much, but no, I don’t need you to talk to him. That’s so sweet of you to offer, but I’ve got it handled.”

“I bet you do,” Sean laughed.

Winnie went back to her sewing. “Well, the sooner you put the wrong men behind you, the sooner you’ll find the right man.”

Kate slouched her shoulders and rested her elbows on her knees. “Nah, I’ve given up on men. Over a decade and a dozen horrendous boyfriends, and I’ve finally learned my lesson.”

“What do you mean?” Winnie asked.

“I’m giving up men,” Kate said and so nonchalantly, like it was no big deal. Like she was saying the sky was blue or that the Marines tried too hard.

“What?” Don barked, making Kate jump.

Kate brought a hand to her chest. “Holy Toledo, Don! Your voice is booming.”

“He’s just shocked, dear,” Winnie said. “We all are. You can’t give up on love because of a few bad experiences.”

Kate shook her head, sending the tail of her braid over her shoulder. “If it were just a few bad experiences, I wouldn’t be. I’ve been cheated on by three different guys, two of my exes stole from me, another sold pictures of my feet to some fetish sight, one constantly asked for my opinion on things and when I told him what it was, he’d tell me that wasn’t my opinion. Two guys left me for their careers, a third left me because his mom told him to, and don’t even get started on the guy I Tased who took me to court. Should I go on because I have more?”

Winnie let out a startled, “What?” and clutched at her collar like it was a strand of pearls.

Sean leaned forward on his knees, copying her posture. “A guy broke up with you because his mom told him to?”

She nodded and continued, glancing between Don and Winnie as she spoke like she hadn’t just told them her love life was a train wreck. Worst Don had ever heard of. “I mean, I look at my parents, my grandparents.” She stopped and pointed to Winnie and then Don. “You folks! I mean your relationships with Horace and Amelia, they’re ideal, and I’ve never even seen the far side of ideal. I just don’t have it in me to try anymore.”

The small outdoor enclosure went deadly silent for just a moment before Winnie burst out laughing. Then Don laughed too.

“What’s so funny?” Kate demanded.

Sean simply shrugged his shoulders.

Don wiped a tear from his eye.

“Our marriages may look ideal now, and to an extent, they might be, but that’s from years of hard work, of sticking it out even when we wanted to give up,” Winnie said.

Don nodded his agreement. “Amelia and I used to frustrate the living daylights out of one another. We’re both extremely hotheaded, you see—“

Sean laughed and winked at Kate. “That’s where my brother, Johnny, gets it from.”

“Amelia must have threatened to divorce me a dozen times during our first year of marriage,” Don said.

Kate pulled her chin back. “She did?”

“Easily, and it was frustrating for both of us. Whatever it was I did to offend her irritated her and her threatening to leave annoyed me,” Don said. “But I told her the only way she was getting rid of me was with a tactical team and a guided missile. You see, Amelia’s parents divorced and remarried multiple times. She’d never had a solid example of a functioning marriage. I knew that, and decided no matter what, I was sticking to her like glue, and once she realized I wasn’t going anywhere, she stopped the threats, but that didn’t mean we always saw eye to eye.”

Sean had stopped whittling and was intensely focused on Don’s story. “I didn’t know that.”

Don shrugged. “It’s not the ugly moments that get framed and set out on the mantle.”

Winnie nodded. “Same for me and Horace. Heck, we recently just got into it, *again*, over one of Horace’s old business partners turned bitter rivals, Smitty Bird. Smitty moved to The Palms, and I thought for sure I’d end up smothering Horace in his sleep, he became so insufferable. Good thing I didn’t, because Horace and Smitty mended bridges when our grandkids got together.”

Kate sat a little taller. “You mean Julia and Logan?”

Winnie nodded. "Life never goes exactly as you expect it to."

Don nodded. "I made so many mistakes, and so did Amelia. She hated how I was with our oldest boy, Wayne. Still does, and now that she's ... Well, we don't need to get into that. My biggest regret is that I didn't tell her I loved her more." Sean stared at Don. "Grandpa, Grandma knows you love her."

Don swatted a hand through the air and cleared his throat. "Point is, you don't give up on love just because it's hard."

Kate wiped at a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Often it's the hardest things in life that are the most worthwhile," Winnie added with a bright smile.

"Even now that I'm almost a hundred percent responsible for Amelia's care, her every need, and it's hard, really hard, I still wouldn't change a thing. I'm proud to take care of her," Don said. "That woman means the world to me, and I think of everything I would've missed out on if I'd thrown in the towel the first time she told me she wanted a divorce." Don lowered his voice just a little like he was sharing a secret. "And I'll tell you, I kind of wanted to give her one."

Everyone burst out laughing.

"I can't even recall what that fight was about," Don said, thinking back. "The trick is to never give up."

Kate bolted up out of her chair and threw her arms around Don's neck.

Don went stiff when she sniffled against his shoulder and he patted her back. “Now, now ... don’t start crying.” He caught sight of Sean over Kate’s shoulder. He was laughing. Don narrowed his eyes at him.

Kate unlatched herself, and Don breathed a sigh of relief, then Kate hugged Winnie.

“Thanks for sharing those stories with me,” Kate said, glancing between the two of them. Her eyes were red.

“What are us old folks good for, if not to impart the wisdom of our years?”

Kate chuckled and took her seat again. Bear immediately rolled over, went to her side, and plopped his massive head in her lap.

Winnie started sewing again. “But now I’m wondering,” she said, shooting a glance in Kate’s direction. “What’s your ideal man?”

Kate sniffed again. “What?”

“You said our marriages seemed ideal,” Winnie explained. “So the question begs: what’s your ideal man?”

Don held back a grin. Winnie was an investigative genius!

Kate thought about it for a moment, then laughed, and said, “A security guard.”

Winnie’s eyebrows shot up as Don’s took a stiff nose dive. They stared at each other. And Winnie shrugged.

Security guard? What exactly were they supposed to do with that information?



Don:

Kate's had a rough go with relationships. We're going to need to spread carefully.

Don:

***tread**

Walt:

Gonna be a tough cookie to crack?

Nancy:

Haven't they all been? I believe in our track record.

Polly:

We've got this.

Rosa:

They're perfect for each other. It's so obvious. ☐☐☐

Don:

Are they? I don't want Kate to get hurt.

Rosa:

**¡Si! I didn't go back into that haunted library and choke
for nothing!**

Polly:

**Rosa, that's the "sick with the sniffles" emoji, not a
"crying" emoji.**

Winnie:

**Remember what we talked about, Don. They're stronger
than you think.**

Rosa:

What's the "crying" emoji look like?

Harry:

Did you find out what her dream guy is like?

Winnie:

Yep, security guards.

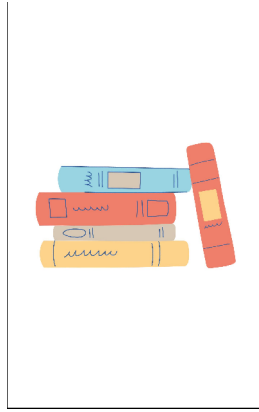
Polly:

What?!

Rosa:



Chapter 13



KATE

Kate latched on to the seat below her in death grip in the back of Don's BMW, and Winnie squealed with joy as Don screeched to a stop outside the Diamond Cove library, kicking up asphalt in the process. Bear, losing his grip, slid head over feet off the seat, and landed feet up in the footwell behind Don's seat. He looked like a turtle that had been flipped over, feet kicking helplessly in the air.

Winnie clapped. "That was fun."

Kate gulped—that was not fun—unbuckled herself, and reached across the car, throwing the door open on Bear's side. She hunched down in her own footwell, and with all her might, pushed on Bear until he flipped over, and out the door onto his feet.

Don peered over the headrest at her prone position behind the seat and arched a brow. Like she was crazy. “Want to come for dinner?”

“Good heavens,” Winnie said, clutching her collar like it was a pearl necklace. “What are you doing down there?”

On hands and knees, Kate scrambled out after Bear, trying not to be too obvious that she’d just spent the entire ten-minute drive praying they wouldn’t die. Bear wasn’t so subtle; he’d already left dust tracks in his path as he’d bolted away from the car and in the direction of the library.

“Kate?” Don said.

“What?” Had he asked her something? She couldn’t remember while trying to hold in the contents of her stomach.

“Dinner?” Don reminded her. “I’m making Pasta Pomodoro?”

Kate wanted to go, in the off chance she might see Axel. He hadn’t come back to the library after the gum incident yesterday, not that she was expecting him to, she had given him the rest of the day off. Not even twenty-four hours had passed and she missed him, but ... her stomach roiled, and she let out a burp. “Excuse me,” she blushed and grabbed her belly.

“Oh my,” Winnie said.

Kate shut the door and peered through Don’s open window. “That’s so nice of you to ask, but I have plans tonight, unfortunately.”

She planned to sit in front of her TV and watch baseball, wrap up in a blanket with some warm soup, and not think about Axel. She couldn't let herself keep going down this road. No guys, Kate. Stay strong and remember, no guys!

Even though she'd been touched by what Don and Amelia had said, the fact of the matter was, Axel would be leaving soon. He'd said as much. If she dated him, where would that leave her? If being lonely without him yesterday afternoon and today was any indicator after only officially knowing him for three days, it'd leave her in the dumps. That's where.

Don shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Maybe Axel would be leaving soon, but she'd like for him to leave in a better place than he was when he arrived. She made a snap decision. His voice was amazing, and any talent scout, or whoever was going to be at the concert the week after Halloween, would be a fool not to take him on.

She put the strap of her purse over her head and hurried to the boardwalk, shivering in the cool air coming off the bay. It would only take her twenty minutes to walk to the pier shops, and she could grab a hot cocoa and get soup from the bakery after signing Axel up. At least this way he'd have the choice of participating available to him if he were still here and wanted it. Plus Bear would love the walk.

Excited about the prospect of hearing Axel sing to a crowd of a couple of hundred residents of Diamond Cove, Kate practically flew down to the pier with Bear jogging at an easy pace at her side—then mocking her with a tilt of his head

when she had to stop to catch her breath. She reached the radio station halfway up the two rows of salmon-colored shops, where the sign-ups were, filled in his name, and was out of there in no time. Forty-five minutes later, she was back at The Palms, crossing the lot to her car with a hot cocoa in one hand and a quart of taco soup in the other.

At her car, Kate sat her goodies on her hood as she searched for her keys.

“Kate!”

Kate’s spine stiffened as she slowly spun on her heel to face the man she’d been avoiding.

Greg waved and went into a jog to catch up to her. He stopped a few feet away and rolled back on his heels. She looked him over. He’d parted and combed his brown hair at the side. He had on a nice outfit, jeans and a t-shirt, not so different from the types of clothes Axel wore, but he seemed so small—skinny. Had he always been this skinny?

“What are you doing here, Greg?” And was this the universe’s way of helping her stay on her “no men” path?

He smiled. “I saw you downtown and followed you.”

Great, he was stalking her now. Fantastic.

Bear growled, his hackles rising. He was such a good dog.

Greg’s gaze dropped to Bear, and he bent to pet him, but Bear backed up. “Okay.” He looked at her again. “How are you?”

“I was good until about thirty seconds ago.” She folded her arms over her chest and tapped a toe.

He pointed at his chest and laughed. “Because of me? Good one. You always had a great sense of humor.”

“Not joking, Greg,” she deadpanned.

He scowled and stuck his hands in his pockets, the picture of remorse. He’d always been good at playing repentant. “I’m sorry, Kate. I think I was going through something the last time we saw each other, and I said some stupid things. I just want to talk. I’ve missed you. A lot. And I want you back.”

“You’ve already said all this before. In multiple texts ... from multiple phones. You know, after I blocked yours.” Was he daft? Seriously, what had she been thinking dating him? She arched a brow. “Do you need me to clarify anything else for you?”

Greg pinched his brow together and tightened his jaw in determination. She didn’t have any warning before he lunged for her, his clammy hands brushing her arms for only a moment before they flew out to the side for balance and then back at her to hang on as Bear bit down on his pant leg, and yanked.

He glanced down at his foot. “Hey, let go!”

Bear continued to tug on Greg’s khakis. Her hero! He wasn’t making a ton of progress, but it was enough of a distraction for Kate. Kate placed her hands firmly on his chest, intent on shoving when ...

“Oh, sorry,” Axel said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Kate glanced toward his voice. He must have just come around some cars. Boy, did he look good in his typical jeans and t-shirt; his shirt was hunter green, and somehow offset the intensity of his gorgeous dark eyes that, like most days, weren’t shadowed by a ball cap.

But that wasn’t what really caught her attention. She’d thought the man had been mouthwatering with a beard. Now he was sinfully decadent with cheekbones that could cut through glass and a strong jawline that looked smooth as silk and lips that she was pretty sure were made for kissing. Axel bit one of the lips in question, making a dimple show on his left cheek, and sending her stomach a rollin’. He glanced down and took a step back.

That was when Kate snapped out of it like someone had dumped cold water over her head. She was standing close to Greg, too close. He had his hands on her shoulders and hers were on his chest. Oh, great.

“Who’s that guy?” Greg snapped. Bear gave a rough yank on his pant leg and he tightened his grip on her shoulders. “Can you ...?”

Kate glanced down at her hands on Greg’s chest, trying to remember how they’d gotten there, rewinding over the last thirty seconds. Right. Before she’d started drooling over Axel, she’d been ... about to shove Greg.

“Excuse me,” Axel said.

When she glanced up again, Axel was already far away. He'd gone into a jog, disappearing in the pale light of dusk.

Greg tried to yank his leg away from Bear. "That's right," he called after Axel, like some stupid tough guy. "Get lost."

Kate shoved Greg. Hard. He fell back on his bottom, skimming back against rough asphalt. Bear finally released his grip on Greg's pants, marched over to her head held high, and plopped down by her feet.

She looked after Axel again. Wanted to chase after him, but first, she had to take care of Greg. This couldn't happen again.

Stepping forward, Kate pointed a finger at Greg's face as she loomed over him. "This stops now. I don't want you back. I haven't missed you. And I can't for the life of me figure out what I ever saw in you."

Greg's face hardened, and he pointed after Axel. "Is this about that guy?"

Kate fisted her hands at her sides. "No, it's about you learning the meaning of no. I've had it. And so help me, if you come near me one more time, if you so much as contact me again from your phone or any of your sleazy friends' phones, I swear I'll sic Bear on you, Tase your sorry rear end, then call my attorney brothers and make sure they ruin your life."

Greg swallowed. "Katie, baby—"

"Bear!"

Bear jumped up and growled down at Greg, baring his teeth, and raising all the hackles on his entire body as she removed

the Taser from her purse and turned it on. She let electricity shoot across the wires at the ends. “You know, I never thought I’d get to use this again ... you know, like that one time with my other ex-boyfriend?”

Greg crab crawled away from her, turned, tried to get to his feet, fell, actually got to his feet, and ran off faster than she’d thought he could. She turned the Taser off and blew over the end like it was a pistol. “Good boy, Bear.”

Her gaze went in the direction Axel had taken, but he was long gone now. She took a step that way, then stopped herself. She couldn’t go after him. She was giving up on men. Then again, it might be good to explain the situation and apologize. He’d looked so ... tormented. Ugh! No. Her attraction to him was clearly making her insane. Axel wasn’t for her. She just needed to remember that. Maybe Don and Winnie had convinced her to not give up on men altogether, but there was no harm in taking a break from them, and it was just smart not to be throwing her heart at a guy who wasn’t sticking around. She’d just have to be extra nice to him at the library on Monday to make up for it.

Resolved to let him go, she turned back to her car, only to find Nancy standing there.

Kate shrieked and shirked back. “Nancy, you scared me.”

“Sorry, dear,” Nancy said and pointed over her shoulder. “I just ran into Axel, and he told me you were looking for me.”

Kate frowned. What? Then it hit her. He’d sent Nancy over to check on her for him. “No, I think he wanted you to make

sure I was all right. I just ran into my ex-boyfriend. He tried to kiss me and Axel saw it.”

Nancy frowned. “And he didn’t stick around?”

Kate cringed. She was explaining this all wrong. “I’m sure it looked like a lover’s embrace to him.

Nancy arched a brow. “So by sending me, he was protecting you?”

Her face heated. “In a roundabout sort of way, I guess.” She gripped her Taser. “But I can take care of myself.”

“So you weren’t trying to rekindle an old flame?” Nancy asked.

“Not in the way you think.” Kate dropped her handy Taser back in her purse. “Greg’s so not my type.” Anymore.

Nancy nodded her understanding. “How about Axel? Is he your type?”

Kate blushed. “No, no. We’re just friends ... buddies ... pals.”

“But he’s kind and handsome—”

Kate shrugged. “I guess. He’s a little too clean-cut for me.”

Nancy frowned. Again. “Clean-cut?”

She fumbled with her keys, trying to open her car door. “Yeah, you know, like a Tommy Hilfiger model. I like my guys a little edgier.” There, that should do the trick.

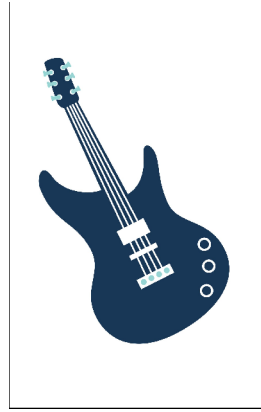
“Oh,” Nancy said. “Interesting.”

Kate got her door opened, let Bear in, then lifted her takeout bag with her soup in it. “Well, I better get going. Dinner’s getting cold.”

“Right, of course.” Nancy took a step back. “Have a good night.”

Kate thought “good night” was stretching it at this point. If she could get Axel off her mind, she might at least be able to relax.

Chapter 14



AXEL

Axel had always been a pretty level-headed person and prided himself on that. A lifetime of his dad always telling him to let his emotions out and talk about them coupled with Grandpa telling him to learn to control his emotions, had led Axel on a path somewhere down the middle. He let his emotions out in his music and against his punching bag, and locked them down in every other aspect of his life. The idea behind it was to show his dad that he was emotionally stable, and his grandpa that he'd learned control, that dad was the mercurial one not him.

Axel wasn't the guy to get into fistfights for no good reason, he certainly wasn't the guy who shattered crystal glasses against walls or screamed at women in public, or private for that matter, and he'd never once in his life gotten into a fight

because he was jealous. But Saturday night, when he'd seen that guy almost kiss Kate, he'd lost it.

Had literally seen red. It had filled the edges of his vision until he'd clinched his fists at his sides.

He hadn't been thinking clearly. His brain hadn't given him a moment to think, "She's not yours" as fury ran down his spine like thick streams of oil down a thread.

But then Kate had turned to him, saying his name like she was in shock, (why are you here?), He suddenly remembered her asking him on the first day he'd worked with her to respect her boundaries.

So, while he'd still wanted to punch the guy, he'd chosen to run for it. It wasn't until a little later, when he'd cooled down some, pummeling a punching bag in Grandpa's garage, that his brain had replayed everything he'd seen. Kate had her hands on the guy's chest and was leaning in. No wonder she'd asked Axel not to flirt with her. She was into someone else.

She'd told him she was giving up men, given a whole speech about how she was "off the market." But apparently just to him. He grit his teeth just thinking about it. Had any woman ever worked that hard to get rid of him? Not since middle school when he'd had to wear his retainer to school and had serious drooling problems with the juice boxes.

Saturday faded to Sunday, and his family came over to dinner like they did every Sunday night. So when his parents, and his uncles' Frank and Kirk, had shown up, and a few of his cousins, he'd been forced to push aside his irritated emotions,

lock them down, like he'd become so good at over the years, and be in the moment. And he was glad that he had, gave him a chance to really catch up with his family over a homemade lasagna, compliments of dad, fun stories about what had been happening in people's lives, and laughs. He loved his family.

But then night fell, his family left, and thoughts of Kate came back to him. Her love of strangely flavored Ginger Beer, her jealousy over Odette, how she'd set up reading buddies to be an under-the-radar community outreach program that benefited both sides of the playing field, and the way she'd snorted and hidden her cute smile behind her hands when she'd seen the gum in his beard. Man, he loved it when she snorted.

But along with all that, came the resounding knowledge that she could never be his. She was with someone else. Told him she was off limits. Seeing her in that guy's arms had brought all that into stark, and humbling, relief. So, now what should he do? Did he keep working in close proximity to her? Go back as if nothing had happened? Could he survive that kind of torture?

As night faded into morning, he'd barely slept a wink for thoughts of what he should do. He didn't get up for his morning run. Didn't get up to give himself enough time to get his Dr. Pepper. Didn't get up in time to go to breakfast with Grandpa. Thirty minutes to when he was supposed to be at the library, he got up, showered, and got dressed.

It didn't matter if he could have her or not. Only two things mattered. First, Kate needed help in the library, and he promised he'd give it to her. If there was one thing he prided himself on above almost everything else, it was that he was a man of his word. And second, his music. He needed songs, and he was sure being around Kate would give them to him.

Sure, he'd been with her two days already, and the lyrics weren't exactly flowing, but if this didn't work, he didn't know what he would do.

He'd already started playing around with a few lines here and there after she suggested he turn one of his pickup lines into a song. And that was more than he'd done in months.

He was just grabbing Odette from the corner of his room about to head to the library when the front door creaked open. He'd have to get some WD40 and fix that for Grandpa.

"I'm telling you," Grandpa said. "He won't go for it."

The door to Axel's room was open a crack, and he paused at the threshold to listen.

"She said edgy," a voice that sounded like Winnie replied. "You don't get much edgier than Elvis."

Axel smirked. Okay ...

"I agree," came another male voice, Harry if Axel wasn't mistaken. "And not just because I went to every thrift store in town, and the town overlooking for this."

A silence filled the space for just a moment, before Grandpa said, "I don't know."

“This is what she likes,” Harry said. “Nancy talked to her. She said edgy.”

“Will this even fit him?” Don asked.

Winnie sighed. “I know you have mixed feelings about Elvis, but this is for the greater good.”

Axel scoffed. Saying Grandpa had mixed feelings about Elvis was an understatement. He respected the man for serving his country, and that when fans had tried to get him out of the draft, he’d have none of it. But Grandpa also hated rock stars, present company excluded, though the same couldn’t be said for the career itself.

“Well, you’re about the same size. But I made some adjustments to the shirt last night,” Winnie said. “Why don’t you try it on and we’ll see.”

“Oh, all right,” Grandpa said. “Give it here.”

Axel leaned forward, trying to peer through the crack, and accidentally rammed Odette’s case into the door with a large clacking sound.

“Axel?” Grandpa asked from the living room.

He stepped out of his room and made his way down the hall.

Grandpa, Winnie, and Harry stood in a semicircle, staring at him, eyes wide as he approached. Harry stroked his mustache and quickly looked up at the ceiling, Winnie held a shirt in her hands, and Grandpa was midway through trying on a jean jacket. He still had one arm in the air.

“What’s going on?” Axel asked.

Don quickly pulled the jacket off and threw it on the couch behind him. Winnie elbowed Harry and handed him the shirt.

Harry stopped fondling his mustache and grab the shirt from her, then took a step toward Axel, and held it out. “I found this for you at a thrift shop the other day. Thought you’d like it.” He still wouldn’t look Axel in the eye.

Axel took the shirt and held it in front of him to get a look at it. Now he knew why they were talking about Elvis. It looked like the shirt he wore in “Jailhouse Rock.” White and blue striped button-up, only uglier. And with silver buttons. He glanced over the top of the shirt and caught Winnie’s gaze.

She clasped her hands in front of her and gave him a big smile. “It was a little too small for you, so I had to let it out. I also switched out the buttons. It had these ugly, old blue ones.”

Axel nodded. “That ... was so thoughtful. Thank you.”

Her whole body seemed to tremble with joy. Crap, he’d have to wear this at some point when she’d see him in it so he wouldn’t hurt her feelings.

“Try it on, try it on!” Winnie bounced on her toes.

Axel shot a glance at Harry, who was once again feigning interest in anything other than him. This time it was the wall. His last hope was Grandpa, but Grandpa had no mercy. He narrowed his eyes, glanced at the shirt, then at Axel, then Winnie. Winnie, his grandparents’ friend who spoke to

Grandma like they were at a quilting bee trading gossip. The look said it all. Try it on ... or *else*.

Okay, fine. He would try it on really quick so she could see how it looked, and then he could put his own shirt back on and get out of there. Not a big deal. “Okay, but I have to hurry. I’m late to the library, and this might be my last day.”

Winnie sucked in a surprised breath.

“You’re quitting?” Grandpa accused.

He wasn’t. Axel wasn’t sure why he’d said that.

Axel ignored the way the three of them shot one another worried gazes as he set Odette down, and pulled his shirt off over his head. He tried not to blush when he heard a very feminine exhalation of “ooh” as he quickly shoved his head into the Elvis shirt. But even that wasn’t easy, because he hadn’t undone any of the buttons, and his head was bigger than the neck hole, still he managed to squeeze through.

He held his arms out to his sides. “So what do you think?”

Winnie took him in with a seamstress’s eye—the same he’d seen on many a costume designer. “Well, it’s maybe a tidge too tight in the chest, but seeing as most of your shirts are like that anyway, we’ll let it slide.” She grabbed the jacket from the couch where Grandpa had tossed it. “Here put this on.”

On a deep breath, Axel slid into the black jean jacket.

Winnie clasped her hands together in front of her again, and he swore she had heart-eyes happening. “Aw, don’t you look handsome?”

Harry finally glanced his way, appraising him. “Not bad, not bad at all.” He stroked his chin. “If we brushed his hair back with a little gel, he could almost pass as the king himself with all that black hair.”

Axel took a quick step back. It was all he could do to not throw his arms over his head to protect his hair. “No! No. My hair is fine.”

Harry gave him a sheepish look and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Axel was saved from this weird makeover session by the grandfather clock chiming eight-thirty from the corner. “Shoot, I’ve got to go or I’m going to be late to the library.” He started to slip out of the jean jacket when Winnie frowned.

“Don’t you want to wear this today?” Winnie asked. “You look so handsome and they go with the pants.” She twisted her hands together. “I hate to see a good piece like this sit in the closet.” She stepped forward and fumbled with one of the buttons. “Matching the fabric was not easy.”

“Oh,” Axel said. “They’re so nice, I don’t want to get them dirty in the library. I’m cleaning all day. Lots of dust.”

Winnie swatted a hand through the air. “That’s what washing machines are for.”

The clock chimed again.

Grandpa picked up Odette and handed her to Axel. “You don’t have much choice. You’re going to be late. You better run.” Grandpa shoved Axel toward the door.

Axel glanced over his shoulder, at the happy look on Winnie's face, and knew he couldn't Gracefully come back in and grab his shirt in front of her. It'd hurt her feelings. He squared his shoulders and marched out the door, Odette in hand, determined to make the best of it.

Axel didn't know what was in the water here at Diamond Cove, but the retirees seemed to have a lot of time and energy on their hands if they were going shopping for him and adjusting clothing

Not wanting to be late or seen by too many people, Axel went into a jog until he reached the library. Kate's sweet voice reverberated through the open space, sending tingles up his spine. He took a deep breath. He could do this. He could work here ... with her ... and not go crazy. Axel took a deep breath and headed in.

He didn't see her right away, could only hear her.

"I don't care which of you get this done first, just as long as it gets done ASAP," she said. "Hang on I'm putting you on speaker."

"You never put us on speaker," a deep male voice said.

"I'm changing out a lightbulb," she said. "And no one's here."

A second male voice spoke up. "That explains it."

"And don't forget it." There was a smile in her tone.

Axel came around the corner in the main room, feeling a spike of jealousy hit, and glanced around. Two more guys?

Man, she had them coming out of the woodwork. Not that he could blame them.

Kate stood on one of the rolling staircases, leaning out in a full stretch to a bulb in the ceiling of the first-floor balcony. She got the bulb out of the socket, shoved it in the front pocket of her oversized black hoodie, and removed another. Before Axel could panic, she'd screwed the new bulb in and was safely on the ladder again.

She picked up her phone as she made her way down, and it was only then that Axel saw the stilettos she wore. Black, strappy things with a spiked heel, at least three or maybe even four inches—incredibly sexy and shouldn't be allowed within a mile of a ladder. Woman loved her heels. And it was something he loved about her. Kate was tall. At least five feet eight, he'd guess, but she didn't let her height determine her shoes. That confidence was so attractive.

Axel stayed back and examined the rest of her outfit. Black weathered skinny jeans, rings on almost every finger as per usual, and a little four-leaf clover pendant, that Axel was starting to think she never took off, hung over the top of her black Princeton hoodie that was at least three sizes too big for her. The fireplace was going already. She must be freezing. It was only sixty-eight degrees out right now. It was a miracle she hadn't frozen to death already. He quirked a grin at her. Could she be any more adorable?

Male number one spoke again. "Is there anything you need to tell us?"

“Nope, I got it handled,” she said.

“Right,” Male Number Two said. “That’s why you called us both?”

Kate laughed. “You know I like to pit you against one another.”

It was wrong. Axel shouldn’t be spying on her conversation, but who the heck were these guys? Pit them against each other? What kind of games did she play? Had she been playing him, drawing him into her web full of enamored men?

Besides, she’d known he was coming. Must know he might hear her conversation, yet she’d still put them on speaker.

“Anywhere we want?” Male One asked. “Even Là-Haut au Château?”

Kate groaned. “Anywhere within reason. Remember, I don’t make the same kind of money you guys make. I’m just a poor librarian.”

Both men burst into laughter.

“Right,” one of them snorted, catching Axel off guard. “Like that job doesn’t pay a pretty penny.”

“It pays enough for me to live in a comfortable apartment in a nice part of town, for me to eat three meals a day, and make payments on my degrees,” Kate said. “And yet, is still a fraction of what you make, Declan.”

“Should we take pity on her?” the other guy asked.

“Nice try, baby doll,” Declan said, making the other guy chuckle. “It’s Là-Haut au Château or nothing.”

Axel’s stomach flipped. Who the heck was calling her baby doll? And was it hot in here? He fanned out his coat.

Kate groaned, then caught sight of him and waved. “I’ve got to go. I just got an email from the lady at Library Times this morning. The judges are coming Saturday to look at the library.”

“Do you want us to come help?”

“No thanks, Ryan. Samantha hired someone to help me,” she gave Axel a thumbs up, “and we’re getting so much done.”

“Tell you what,” the one Axel thought was called Declan said. “If you win that contest, *I’m* taking *you* to Là-Haut au Château.”

“And if I lose?” Kate asked.

“Then I’ll take you to Là-Haut au Château,” Ryan said.

“Woohoo!” Kate laughed. “Either way, I can’t lose.”

Axel’s stomach churned at the comfortable camaraderie between the three. Just how many men was she dating? And what was so wrong with him that she wouldn’t give him a chance?

He set Odette down and moved further into the room until he was standing only a few feet from Kate. He leaned against a table and folded his arms over his chest, staring her down. Willing her to deny the chemistry between them. Because she

may not want to date him, but he wasn't crazy. There was definitely something between them.

"Ooo, one-upping me, huh?" Declan said.

"Kate does like to pit us against one another," Ryan reminded him. Kate didn't seem like the kind of girl who pit people against one another.

"I do," she said. "Too bad Danny's not a lawyer too, or I could've gotten all three of you involved."

Danny?!

"If you're getting Danny involved, then I call dibs on getting Kate that telescope for Christmas she's had her eye on for the last three years," Declan said.

"No!" Ryan said. "That's what I was going to get her."

Kate shook her head and rolled her eyes, all for Axel's benefit. "Danny already called dibs."

The phone went deadly silent for a moment, then Ryan said, "We'll see about that."

"All right, doll face," Declan said. "We'll let you go."

Doll face The world started to rim with red again, so Axel took a deep, deep breath.

Kate turned slightly away from Axel, then lowered her voice a little. "And Greg?" Axel didn't care for that. He didn't care for it at all.

"As good as taken care of," Ryan said.

"We'll let you know how it went later tonight," Declan said.

“Thank you,” she said. “I love you!”

“Love you too,” the men chorused and hung up.

They were exchanging I-love-yous!? Who were these guys? Axel clutched the table he was sitting on to keep himself from doing something stupid. Like jumping up and kissing her to lay his claim. He shook his head, trying to clear it of these thoughts. They weren't helpful.

“Sorry about that.” Kate pointed at her phone, then reached up and brushed back a lock of her long brown hair. She'd curled it in waves today. She pointed at him. “Nice jacket.”

He glanced down, then quickly shed the thing. “Winnie and Harry gave it to me this morning. Along with this shirt.”

“I like it.” She scrunched up her nose. “Are those silver buttons?”

He pouted. “Winnie added them especially for me.”

“Okay,” Kate smiled. “I guess.”

“I know, it's ridiculous.”

“Well, you could always take your shirt off and just wear the jacket.” Kate laughed. “Give the old ladies something to talk about?”

Axel glanced up, pretending to think about it. “Hmm, I'm going to give that a hard pass.”

Kate came over and leaned against the table he was leaning against right next to him; they were almost touching. And he

could smell her. She smelled like a Piña Colada. His fingers itched to run through her hair.

He sat on his hands.

“They did? That’s kind of adorable.” She leaned away a little to look at him. “You, it kind of reminds me of the outfit Elvis wore in ‘Jail House Rock.’”

He nodded. “I’m pretty sure that’s what they were going for.”

Kate lowered her head and stared at her hands in her lap as she played with her rings. “Listen, I wanted to talk to you about Saturday ...”

Man, he so wanted to hear this. But he didn’t want her to feel like she owed him anything. That wasn’t Axel. He didn’t play games of checks and minuses. So, he changed the subject. “Telescopes?” He pointed to where she’d been talking on the phone. “You into stargazing?”

She swallowed, then smiled. “Yeah, I love it. It all kind of started with this library. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but this building was an observatory long before it was a library.” She pointed to the domed ceiling with the stained glass. “The glass is all new in the last ten years. This room is where they kept their telescope.

He grinned. “Yeah?”

Kate nodded. “It was one of the biggest in the world when the building opened. Man, I would’ve loved to look through it.”

“Why’d they close the observatory?”

“Well, Diamond Cove has pretty minimal light pollution, but there are reasons astronomers like Dark Sky Places for the telescopes,” Kate sighed. “They needed somewhere darker than even here.”

“Dark Sky Places?” Axel asked, enthralled.

“Darkest places on earth,” she said. “Too bad the library can’t be in a Dark Sky Place on Saturday when the judges come.”

Axel faced her. “What do you mean?”

Kate swallowed. Hard. And her eyes went glassy. “Nothing.” She forced a smile.

He took her shoulders in his hands. “You’re nervous?”

She shook her head.

Axel arched a brow at her.

Kate laughed. “Yeah, I guess I am. Remember how I told you I was never the kid in my family looking for attention? That I was content to sit in my room and read?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’m starting to wonder why I wanted to do this.” She glanced down again.

Axel thought he knew why. Kate was the kind of person who liked to shine a light on others. When he’d complimented her on reading buddies, she’d immediately reminded him that the second-grade teacher had been involved, same when he’d

tried to compliment her on her sign language—it was all Gramps’s idea. And every other time he’d complimented her when she’d had no one to turn a spotlight on, she’d blushed and changed the subject.

Every time.

Compliments made her uncomfortable. The spotlight made her uncomfortable. It was part of the reason Axel *enjoyed* complimenting her so much. Not only was it easy to do, but also because he wanted her to know. He wanted her to know she was amazing. And that was a legitimate function he could perform in her life, even if it was only for another week.

With a gentle touch, Axel nudged her chin up and looked into those gorgeous, aqua eyes of hers. “You deserve it, Kate. You’ve worked hard to make and keep this place not only beautiful and functional, but a fun place to be. If anyone deserves acknowledgment for that, it’s you.”

She bit her lip, and Axel’s stomach did a steep nosedive. He released her and faced the main room. “Well, if we only have a week left, we better get started.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw her nod.



The day passed quickly. Faster than Axel would've liked. They'd gone into a cleaning frenzy, cleaning one-third of the second floor before four pm, stopping only for a quick lunch they'd ordered in.

Axel's favorite moment had come when Kiss's "I was Made for Loving You" came on the radio. He'd started belting it out, and to his absolute joy, when he'd turned his mic of Pledge on Kate, she'd happily taken it and sang right along with him.

The song ended with laughter, and with Kate red in the face.

"Don't be embarrassed. That was good," Axel told her. "You've got some impressive lungs there."

She groaned and hid her face behind her hands. "Stop. I know I'm terrible. And my voice cracked on that one note."

Axel smiled. Kate's voice wasn't bad, but ... "All right, you might have been a little pitchy, but I maintain that you have a beautiful voice. You just need to work on it."

She laughed. "Some honesty, thank you. I'm definitely not in your league."

"Hard to be," he said, and she shoved his shoulder. "I just mean, I sing every day. Sometimes all day long. Have been doing it since I was a kid. A little practice and you could sound amazing."

Axel's conversation with Samantha after he'd gotten his beard shaved suddenly jumped forefront of his mind. She'd told him he needed to tell Kate who he was, and the sooner the better.

She blushed. "I'm taking that compliment."

He grinned. Finally. "Good." He cleared his throat as the commercials ended, planning to tell her everything, who he was and why he was really here when another song started. One of Axel's songs from his Train Wreck Album, "Cold Love." Perfect. If the radio weren't on the main floor and they on the second, he'd turn it off.

Kate sprayed some Pledge on one of the shelves, and wiped it off, doing a little dance as she did.

"You like this song?" Axel asked.

She did a little twist and nodded, then shrugged. "It's okay. It has a really poppy beat."

Axel cringed. A poppy beat? She might as well have stabbed him in the heart.

"The lyrics aren't great," she said as she continued to wipe the shelf. "Too cookie cutter. Kind of soulless, but a lot of songs are like that nowadays."

Soulless. Cookie cutter. A lot of songs. Poppy ...

Axel hung his head.

"Hello?" a *male* voice called from downstairs.

Kate rushed to the wooden rail and peered down. "Hey, Paxton."

"Hey, Kate," Paxton said. "Good to see you."

Axel frowned and walked to the rail. Paxton stood near Kate's desk. He was tall with dark hair, and even from the

second floor, Axel could see his eyes were a piercing blue. He had a sort of Clark Kent vibe about him that made Axel feel feral.

“You too,” Kate smiled.

Axel hated the guy on sight.

“What are you doing here?” Kate asked.

“Looking for my grandma?”

“Wait, this is silly.” Kate waved a hand through the air.
“Yelling. I’m coming down there. Hang on.”

Paxton gave her a thumbs up.

She set her rag down and dashed off. Axel gritted his teeth as another wave of jealousy washed over him. Would the hits ever stop coming? All right, so he didn’t want to be nosey, but seriously, four, maybe five guys? Three today alone? He had to know what was going on. He straightened his spine and jogged after her.

Chapter 15



DON

As Don's friends sat in his living room discussing their mission, Don poured seven glasses of lemonade and passed them around. Amelia was already at PT, which gave their group plenty of time to go over their mission before he needed to pick her up.

"He said today might be his last day?" Nancy asked.

Harry nodded. "Yep."

"Are we even sure Axel likes the girl?" Walt asked.

Polly sat up straight and whacked him on the shoulder. "Of course he likes her. It's Kate. What's not to like?"

Walt held up his hands as if in surrender. "Hey, I didn't say she wasn't likable. I just asked if we knew if Axel liked her?"

Don handed off the last lemonade, then took a big swig from his before setting the tray down on the coffee table. “He likes her all right.”

He’d seen the way Axel had been staring at the girl in the library when he’d been taking his phone call. The boy had a look of pure adulation on his face. It made no sense to Don that Axel would want to quit. His grandson may be a lot of things, but he wasn’t a quitter, especially when he committed to doing something.

Without taking a sip, Nancy grabbed the stack of coasters that sat in the middle of the coffee table and laid them out for everyone. Once she’d done that, she set her Lemonade on hers. “I agree. He was visibly irritated Saturday night when he ran into Kate with her ex-boyfriend. He didn’t like seeing her with her ex one, little bit..”

Rosa rubbed her hands together. “You don’t think that’s why he wants to quit, do you? Because he thinks she’s with another man?”

Don had no idea. Two years was a long time to not see a person, and Axel had always been a private person.

“With Kate, it’s a whole other issue. She’s bruised her heart really good, and is afraid to jump into something new is all.”

Harry tugged on the hem of his yellow golf shirt and nodded. “The shave and new clothes should help, don’t you think?”

Don folded his arms across his chest and huffed. “Of all the crazy schemes we’ve gone through, everything we’ve done to get our grandkids together, and so far all we’ve done is give Axel a makeover in stages. There has to be more?”

Silence fell over the room.

Don glanced around, and everyone dodged his gaze.

Great, just great.

Polly raised her hand. “Wait, I have an idea, maybe ...” The sleeve of her nice new, red pantsuit sliding down her arm. Apparently, that producer that Paxton had landscaped for was finally having them, and Nora, Paxton’s girlfriend, over for dinner tonight, and Polly had dressed to the nines. Had to look nice when visiting a cliff side home. “I don’t know how well it’ll work, but it’s better than nothing.”

“What is it?” Don would take any suggestion at this point.

Polly glanced at Nancy. “You think he was jealous when he saw Kate with her ex-boyfriend on Saturday night?”

Nancy nodded. “He showed all the classic signs. The gritted teeth. The need to distance himself from the situation—”

“He beat the crap out of my punching bag,” Don added to her list.

“Exactly.” Nancy pointed at him as if he’d made her point. “He has a lot of feelings churning inside of him. Butterflies and kisses don’t make men punch things.”

“Do we know if Axel knows that was Kate’s ex and not her current beau?” Polly glanced around the room.

Everyone shook their head.

Nancy sat a little taller in her seat. “If he didn’t know, that would explain why he sent me over to check on her instead of punching the guy himself..”

Don nearly spit his lemonade. “I’m not sure he’d punch him anyway—his dad.” He threw a hand up as if that explained everything. Winnie gave him a side look but Walt nodded in understanding.

“Then Rosa might be right, he might want to leave the library because he doesn’t think Kate’s available,” Polly said.

“Aye caramba,” Rosa said, grabbing her cross pendant. “When I am right, I am right. But sometimes, I don’t want to be right, you know?”

“So, what’s your idea?” Don asked.

Polly folded her arms over her chest. “We make him jealous,” Polly said. “Let Axel see her with a different guy. Preferably somebody she’s comfortable with. Watch his reaction.”

Don scrubbed a hand down his face. “What other guy?”

Before Polly could answer, a light knock sounded at his door.

Everyone’s heads turned in that direction.

Don marched over and yanked the door open.

Standing on his doorstep were Julia Peters and Cameron. Cameron wore a dark shaggy wig, steel-toed boots, a green Henley, and a leather jacket. It was clearly a costume. Julia still wore her dress suit from school and was holding Cameron's hand. Cameron tugged at Julia's hand, wanting to get away. He held up his speaking device, or his talker as they called it, trying to get Julia's attention, but she appeared to be a woman on a mission.

Don smiled from ear to ear and went into sign language as he spoke out loud. "Julia, Cameron, how are you? I like your costume."

Cameron smiled brighter than the sun.

"He's a rock star," Julia grinned, then her smile fell, and she got all flustered. "I'm so sorry to intrude, but Cameron hasn't been able to stop talking about it since Friday. I called Samantha and asked her but she told me I should come and talk to you directly."

Unable to work his talker with one hand, Cameron looked at Julia. "Joos, Joos." He pointed at Don. "Don."

Cameron pulled at Julia's hand preventing her from entering. Julia finally released his hand, giving him her full attention. He pushed a button. "Axel." He pushed another button. "Music."

Don's eyes went wide.

Julia turned her gaze back on Don. "This will probably sound silly, but Cameron has it in his head that your grandson

is Axel Clayton. Lead singer of The Venturists? I told him that Clayton lived in California, but he's so sure." She tugged on the bottom of her blazer. "If you could just tell him, I think we could clear this all up."

"Uh ..." Don said so eloquently.

A hand rested on Don's shoulder as Polly came up behind him on one side, and Nancy on the other. He looked over his shoulder as the rest of the group crowded in.

Polly grinned. "This is actually perfect."

Don narrowed his gaze at her. "How?"

"Paxton's on his way to pick me up," Polly said with a beaming, red-lipped smile. "I'll just tell him to meet me at the library and we can kill two birds with one stone."

Don felt a little stunned, as he walked hand in hand with Cameron, Julia, and The Secret Seven in tow, up to the library. The entire way there, Cameron bounced in his shoes, and pressed the buttons he'd put on his talker for music and Axel.

It was no secret Cameron loved music, and love to dance to it. Don had seen him give in to the dance impulse on a number of occasions and seeing how happy it had made him, but never would he have guessed that Cameron would be a fan of Axel's music. Not that he thought Axel was a bad musician, it just never occurred to him.

Behind him, Winnie clapped her hands. "I'm so excited. I was hoping we'd get to hear him sing while he was here."

“I love musica!” Rosa chimed in.

“Do you think he’d play ‘Battleborn?’” Harry asked.

Walt twitched his mustache. “I like ‘Let Her Through.’”

As they approached the front steps of the library, Don release Cameron’s hand and turn to face the group. “I don’t want anyone to get their hopes up. He may not even be willing to play for us. Remember, he’s trying to keep a low profile.”

Nancy and Polly both burst out laughing, and with the two of them standing side-by-side, Polly and her red pantsuit with her red lipstick, and Nancy and her perfectly ironed khaki pants and blouse, looking like the fierce businesswomen they once had been, Don had to admit he found them a little intimidating.

“That’s hilarious,” Polly said.

“Of course he’ll play,” Nancy said. “Doesn’t he take that guitar of his to work every day? And aren’t you the one that told me he is constantly singing and playing music?” She signaled to Cameron, who now stood in front of Julia. “And he’s not going to say no to a fan.”

Winnie came up beside them and smiled. “Or me.”

The three women shook their heads and walked around him. Then the rest of the group followed.

Rosa stopped by his side and patted him on the shoulder. “I’m going to watch from out here in case Chester is in there. Want to keep me company?”

Rosa had a way with words, twisting them around to make you think she meant one thing when she really meant another. But Don had been around her long enough to know that what she was really doing right now was giving him an out. She didn't mind being left out here by herself.

Don shook his head, feeling a little embarrassed that his friends knew more about Axel's songs than he did. The least Don could do is go in as a show of support.

"No, I think it's about time I showed up," Don said.

Rosa gave him a knowing smile and winked.

Squaring his shoulders, Don marched on in.

Axel And Kate stood at the reception desk with Paxton. Cameron approached Axel, and pointed down to Axel's guitar, his entire body vibrating with excitement.

Julia squeezed through the crowd and came up beside him. "I'm so sorry to bother you, but ... my goodness, it really is you, isn't it? I wish Logan was here."

Kate furrowed her brow. "For what?"

Everyone ignored her question.

Cameron grabbed his talker and pushed a button. "Play," the animatronic voice said. "Play."

Kate grinned. "He must have seen your guitar when you were in here on Friday."

Axel picked up Odette from the floor. "Guess so."

Cameron nodded and hit his button again. "Play."

“We’d love to hear you,” Winnie said.

“It’ll be such a treat,” Nancy said.

Axel shrugged. “Sure, I’d be happy too.”

Placing his guitar case on the reception desk, Axel opened it and pulled out the dark blue guitar Don had purchased for him when he’d been fourteen years old. Despite Don’s feelings about Axel’s career, he was proud that his grandson had taken such good care of his first guitar.

Axel headed into the library, pulled out a wooden chair from one of the desks by a sitting area, and started tuning his guitar while everyone took their seats.

Axel played a familiar tune. “Bye, bye love. Bye, bye happiness. Hello, emptiness. I feel like I could die. Goodbye my love, goodbye.”

Don frowned. “Bye, Bye Love,” by The Everly Brothers. Good song, but kind of depressing. Don furrowed his brow as Axel cut his gaze to Kate who was sitting on the end of a couch, Bear at her feet with his tongue hanging out, tapping her toe on the beige carpet.

Kate nudged Paxton with her shoulder, then pointed across him to Polly, whispering something under her breath while thumbing over her shoulder. Axel quickly looked away. But Nora came up behind Paxton, resting her hands on his shoulders. He glanced up at her, and she bent down to kiss him.

Axel brightened considerably after that.

Well, darn it all if Polly and Rosa weren't right. Axel was jealous. And that explained his song of choice. Don should have guessed. Since Axel had been a boy, he'd always poured his feelings out through his music. An ingenious way of dealing with too many feelings he didn't know how to handle otherwise.

And he'd have no way of knowing that Kate had spent a summer working for Paxton's landscape company when she'd first moved to Diamond Cove as a way to supplement her income when she had only been a part-time employee at the library, or that that was why Kate and Paxton were comfortable with each other, or that their Ease was more like a brother and sister. Axel couldn't have known Paxton was dating Nora until now.

"What's going on?" Samantha whispered from beside Don.

Don almost jumped out of his skin but managed to stay calm. Couldn't let the little lady think she'd scared him. Her ability to sneak around, especially in heels, qualified her for special infantry in Don's book. He let out a huff, which made her smile. "Cameron wanted to hear Axel sing."

After getting the small group clapping and swaying along to "Bye, Bye Love" Axel finally brought it to a close. Don glanced at Cameron, who was bouncing in his seat, making the leather of the couch squeak with every jump. His smile was the biggest Don had ever seen it.

Cameron lifted his talker and pushed a button. "Cheated and Cheated On."

Kate looked in his direction. “What’s that?”

Axel cut his gaze to Kate, and away, then waved a hand through the air. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

“It’s one of your most famous songs!” Harry said.

Bear barked as if agreeing with Harry. Great, even the dog knew his grandson’s songs better than Don did.

Kate blinked. “Famous songs? *His* famous songs?”

Axel moved to stand. “Maybe we can talk about this later.”

Samantha spoke up and narrowed her eyes at Axel. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

Axel winced and sat back down.

Kate stood up and swiveled to look at Samantha. “Tell who what? Me?” she looked at Axel. “What didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s a long story,” Axel said.

Don could hear the strain in his voice, and his heart clenched for the boy.

Samantha sucked in a gasp and clasped her hand over her mouth. “It’s about Kate, isn’t it?”

“What’s about me?” Kate folded her arms over her chest.

Cameron pushed the button on his talker again. “Cheated and cheated on.” He was bouncing again, or maybe he’d never stopped.

“Please,” Winnie said, batting her lashes. “I’d love to hear it.”

“Yeah, *Axel*,” Samantha said with not a small amount of snark in her voice. “We’d *love* to hear it.”

Polly reached out and grabbed the hem of Kate’s sweater pulling her back down to the couch. “Just listen.”

“Cheated and Cheated On,” Cameron’s device said.

“And when you’re done with that one,” Harry said. “I’d love to hear ‘23 lions’ or ‘Battleborn.’”

“If you’re taking requests,” Winnie said. “I’d love to hear ‘Amelia.’”

Kate’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head as it hit her.

“Kate?” Axel said, in a weary tone, his heart in his eyes, on his sleeve, and in his music.

Kate made a sweeping gesture with her hand, palm up—her expression was unreadable. It made Don wince for his grandson. Maybe he should induct her into the special forces too. “Please, I’d love to hear your songs. They are yours, aren’t they?”

Axel let out a long breath and nodded.

Kate clenched her jaw.

Oh, boy. Don had seen that look before. Axel was in for it.

But not yet.

“Cheated and Cheated On.” Came Cameron’s talker once again.

Axel smiled at him and dove right in.

Looked like he'd be playing for a few minutes at least, to get his requests in, but as soon as he was done, Don would clear the library and give Axel and Kate a moment alone. They had a lot to talk about.

Axel went into his first request, the one Cameron had so desperately wanted, and within a verse, everyone was clapping and cheering. It was a darn good song. Funny, sweet, and bittersweet, with a catchy tune.

Don glanced at Cameron again and felt his chest puff out at the joy on the boy's face. This was Axel's doing. In a matter of a few minutes, he made everyone in the room happy, even his grumpy old granddad.

All this time, Don thought he was helping him by not giving in to the "rock star" craziness that everyone else did, he'd thought not listening to his music or going to his concerts, or talking about his career would help keep Axel grounded, but maybe it hadn't helped at all. Maybe it had created space between them that didn't need to be there.

Amelia had seen the truth—she was so much smarter than him. She'd taught Axel to play music, and encouraged him to go after his dreams. Cheered him on and written her own fan letter to her grandson—it was in the nightstand back at the bungalow.

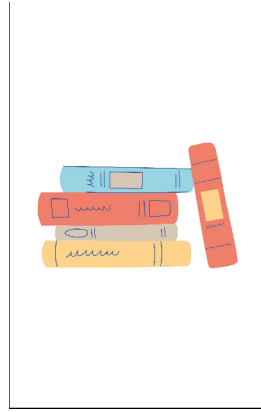
As Axel finished that song and went into his next request, a lovely ballad about the pride and trials of serving in the military that Don was sure Axel had written for his brother, Don knew exactly what he needed to do.

He was resolved.

It'd taken his family here at The Palms, and Cameron and Julia, all of whom now sat cheering on his grandson, to help Don see clearly for the first time in his life the value in what Axel did. The smiles, the laughter, and the tears, (Amelia's song has always had that effect,) to see what he'd been missing. To understand Axel's grand purpose, the reason he needed to do what he did. It didn't just make him happy; it made everyone he came in contact with happy. And that was something to be proud of.

Locking down his shame, Don decided. Tonight he would download every song Axel had ever written and listen to them all with Amelia. He should have done it a long time ago.

Chapter 16



KATE

Axel Clayton, the man Kate had believed was a security guard, a temporary cleaning crew, and a homeless bum was actually a famous rock star. A drop-dead gorgeous one, with fan clubs, world tours, celebrity girlfriends, multiple platinum records, number-one hits, and little to no privacy. Of course, she hadn't figured out he was a rock star while he'd been playing his music this afternoon for Don and his friends. Even when he'd played two, count them, *two* songs she was absolutely positive he'd written about her, when they'd met, all those years ago.

At first, she'd just thought he must sell his songs, how else could Winnie, Harry, Julia, and Cameron be singing along? She hadn't figured out the whole "famous rock star" of it all until after everyone had left. Way after.

Axel approached her the moment the front doors clicked shut. “Kate, you probably have some questions ...”

Remembering the way he had dismissed her earlier when she’d tried to explain what happened with Greg, she changed the subject too while looking at her watch. It was a little after five, the time they usually left for the day. “Well, that was fun. You have a lovely, beautiful, you know, swell voice, but I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight, so ...”

Axel had shoved his hands in his pocket. “You’re not heading out?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I have a feeling I’m going to be pulling a lot of late nights this week.”

“Well, we better get started,” Axel said.

She faced him. “Oh, no. You don’t have to stay.”

He gave her a nervous smile. “Can’t leave until the boss does.”

Man, that line had rankled, him calling her the boss. For all she knew about him, he could be the boss. But, she needed the help, and he was willing. “Okay, thank you.”

“Kate,” Axel said in nearly a whisper. “I didn’t mean to—”

“How about I get going on the second floor, and you work on this bookshelf here.” She pointed to the bookshelf along the wall.

He scuffed a toe on the carpet. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

That had been two and a half hours ago. In that time, she'd given it a lot of thought, after Googling him, and decided to let it go. She didn't like that he'd lied to her. Didn't like that he'd lied to her multiple times including when he first met her all those years ago.

But she kind of got it. If she were famous, she'd be concerned about her anonymity as well. She definitely wouldn't be the kind of person who would walk around saying things like "Do you know who I am?" And Axel just didn't give off that vibe either. After going through several videos, the worst reports she'd found on him were a shaky video of him licking some girl's arm at a concert, some insider reports about him going on a drunken one-month bender ten years ago while on a world tour, and more recently, an argument with some girl in a bar.

None of those things were particularly flattering, but by comparison to how most rock stars behaved, she was surprised, frankly, that Axel wasn't a drug addict with children scattered all over the world and mercurial mood swings. She cocked her head to the side. He was Don's grandson, though, so that explained a lot.

To the contrary. Since she'd met him, he'd gone out of his way to be kind to her, the old folks who worked at The Palms, and a bunch of kids, including Cameron who desperately wanted to hear him sing.

About thirty minutes ago, Axel gave Bear some loves, then walked out the front door, waving at her from downstairs

before he left. So much for not leaving until after the boss, huh? A part of her had wanted to stop him and tell him she wasn't mad at him. But another part of her remembered what he'd said about leaving. And he would leave. Nice guy or not, his life was in California. His job was in California. And she wasn't. So she let him walk.

Now she was back to scrubbing shelves, cleaning around the life-size skeleton prop she'd hung up in one of the archways earlier today, and second-guessing whether she'd made the right decision to not talk to him. Kate was really good at that. Overthinking. If it were a sport in the Olympics, she'd be a gold medalist.

The squeaking of what sounded like a door opening came from downstairs making Kate freeze to listen carefully. Bear hadn't stirred from his spot in front of the fireplace, which eased her nerves some. The sun had gone down some time ago, leaving the place lit only in soft light. She waited a good minute, listening for more noise, and when she heard nothing, she continued cleaning.

But then came the sounds of footsteps, from the third floor she thought. "Hello?" she asked, but her voice came out barely a whisper.

This was ridiculous. Just Chester playing a joke on her. This wasn't the first time the ghost had done something like this, and probably wouldn't be the last.

She cleared her throat and spoke as loud as she could. "Knock it off, Chester!"

A door slammed shut down the hall, and she spun on her heel toward the noise, her heart beating a thousand miles per minute.

Bear let out a whine that floated up to her, but that was it.

“Chester?” Her voice was nowhere near as loud this time. “We’ve talked about this before. If you really need attention,” she swallowed hard, “talk to me and I’ll try not to freak out, but I swear, if I see one apparition, if I even see a hand, I’m getting Rosa back in here and you are out.”

Footsteps headed her way until she could barely breathe. Down the hall where the door had slammed, the footsteps stopped on the other side of the shadows. Okay, maybe it wasn’t Chester. He’d never been this creepy before.

“Bear?” Who was she kidding, Bear had four feet, not two, and he didn’t wear rubber-soled shoes. If it were Bear, she’d have heard his toenails clacking on the hardwood floors. “Chester, is that you?”

The life-size skeleton swayed on its hook and from the dark, came a deep breath.

Oh, heck no. Kate spun on her heel intending to run for the stairs but slammed into a solid, rock-hard frame beneath denim and cotton. Arms came up around her, and she screamed.

“Kate, Kate it’s me,” Axel said.

She glanced up, looking into Axel’s dark eyes, and air immediately filled her lungs.

“Axel?” she glanced over her shoulder toward the hallway, then turned and buried her face in Axel's chest, gripping his shirt at his sides, and breathed deep. “Axel.”

His arms were out, and in one hand he held, a couple of plastic bags hung from his fingertips. “What happened? Are you okay?”

She shuddered against him. “I think I need a hug.”

He immediately wrapped one arm around her, then reaching out with the hand holding the plastic bags, he set them on the shelf she'd been cleaning, before wrapping that arm around her too. He rested his cheek against the top of her head, completely enveloping her in his arms, in his delicious soapy citrusy scent, and a security she'd never felt before. Being in his arms felt right.

As her breathing began to even, and her heart settle, he rocked her side to side and rubbed her back.

Her fear abated. Her heartbeat returned to normal and then took off again because she stood so close to him.

“I'm sorry,” she finally said.

He ran a hand over her hair, and when he spoke there was no judgment in his tone. “Wanna tell me what happened?”

Leaning back just far enough that she could look up at him, but not step out of his arms, she said, “Chester was being mean.”

Her face heated the moment the words left her mouth. She knew how it sounded, ridiculous.

His mouth quirked up on one side, proving her point. “Chester, the ghost Rosa tried to exorcise?” His tone was tinged with humor.

She placed her hand on his chest and pushed out of his embrace, and he followed her for just a second until she took a step back. “Fine, make fun of me, but I’m telling you, weird things happen around here that can’t be explained.”

“I thought you were joking when you were talking about the haunting earlier, you seemed so blasé about it,” Axel said.

She let out a breath and turned toward the shelf, eyeing the plastic bags he’d brought. “It’s easy to think it’s funny during the day when there are people here, and there’s sunshine coming through the windows. But when you’re the only person here at night and it’s dark, it’s scary, okay?” Great, now her humiliation was complete.

He didn't say anything right away, so she risked glancing in his direction. The humor in his expression was gone, replaced by a look of concern. “You were really afraid?” he waved a hand through the air. “don’t answer that. You were afraid. Your entire body was shuddering. I’ll tell you what, from here on out, if you need to work late, I’ll be here.”

Kate shook her head. “Until the week’s over,” she said, and then, before he could say something else, she pointed at the bags. “What’s that?”

“Can’t you smell it?” he asked.

She sniffed. “Garlic? Maybe? My nose is so stuffy.”

Axel chuckled. “Man, you weren’t joking about that, were you?”

She shook her head and smiled. “It’s a miracle I can even taste food during the fall. Stupid allergies.”

Axel grabbed the bags. “I ordered us Italian from La Bella Bella.” He reached for her hand and pulled her over to a window seat that overlooked the lake. A waxing moon hung low in the sky, shining off the water. As soon as they were seated, he started pulling food out of the bags, followed by a bottle of Ginger Ale and a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

She sat a little taller. “You brought me Ginger Ale?”

He smiled. “Of course.” He opened both takeout containers and set them between them. “How do you feel about sharing? I couldn’t decide between the pasta carbonara or the chicken cacciatore—though they called them ‘Worm Food’ and ‘Brain Stew.’ Gotta love small towns around the holidays.” He rubbed his hands together. “I’m starving.”

He brought her dinner? “I don’t mind sharing.” It had been a while since Kate had had hot Italian food, even longer since she’d eaten at La Bella Bella, and she’d forgotten how delicious their food was. She took a large bite of the pasta carbonara and groaned as the delicious flavors of cheese and bruschetta met her tongue.

Axel glanced from his own bite, his gaze narrowing in on her lips. “Feeling better now?” He smirked.

Kate quickly grabbed a napkin and wiped her mouth as she nodded, and spoke over her bite. “This is w-eally good.” She mumbled, swallowed, then blushed. Real classy, Kate. “Sorry, I was raised in a barn.”

“I don’t mind,” Axel said. “It’s refreshing to be around someone who isn’t constantly ...”

“Trying to impress you?” She forced a grin. “Kate, I never meant to lie to you,” he said in a rush of words, “but yes, it is refreshing to be around somebody who just treats me like I’m a normal person. I’m not used to that. It was nice just being me.” She shook her head. “Is that why you didn’t tell me?”

He nodded. “Yeah, mostly that, and I also didn’t want to sound conceited.”

She chuckled. “I can see that, I guess.” It made sense, but it still kind of stung. Kate had dated way too many guys who’d lied to her to be totally comfortable lying for any reason. But she could concede this was different. He wasn’t lying about cheating, he wasn’t lying about stealing money from her, and he wasn’t lying because he could. He was just trying to protect himself. But that kind of hurt too, because in a way he’d been protecting himself from her finding out. Didn’t really say a lot about what he thought of her.

“But I can promise I won’t lie to you again,” he said.

She swatted a hand through the air. “Let’s just move past that, shall we?”

He smiled. “I’d like that.”

She twirled some pasta on her fork. “If you like being around somebody who isn’t trying to impress you, give me a couple minutes and I’ll probably dump a bunch of pasta in my lap. Then you’ll really be impressed.” He laughed, then spoke in a deep, rumbly voice. “I already am.”

Her face heated, so she quickly changed the subject. “I googled you.”

He just put a piece of chicken in his mouth, and almost spit it out, choked a little, then coughed.

“Whoa; you okay there?”

He held up a finger, indicating just a second, then kept coughing. Kate reached over and patted him on the back. After a moment, he grabbed his Dr. Pepper and took a drink.

Finally, he glanced up at her with a wary expression on his face. “What did you find?” He said in a rough voice, then coughed one more time. She laughed. “Not anything worth choking over.” She pulled her phone from her pocket and opened it. “Oh! There’s video of you licking some girl’s arm; what was that about?”

He almost had another bite in his mouth, but quickly set his fork down. “Maybe I should wait until you’re done with your questions?” He cleared his throat. “The arm lick. Not my finest moment, definitely a favorite of the media. Considering she asked me to lick her chest, I don’t feel too bad about it.”

Kate screwed up her face in disgust. “Yuck.”

Axel chuckled. “It was also during a real low point in my life. My rock bottom. It was the first time I’d done a world tour with The Venturists headlining. I’d just found out that my grandma had Alzheimer’s.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kate said, feeling an ache deep down in her gut for him. “That must have been really hard.”

“It was. Grandma’s always been my hero, my rock. When family life was crazy, you turned to Grandpa to fix things and Grandma for comfort,” Axel said. “I could tell her anything, and she wouldn’t judge or think less of me, she’d just listen. Anyway, I shouldn’t have done that tour. They found out about her Alzheimer’s on a Wednesday, and I left the following Friday. By the time I got back six months later, Grandma had wandered off and gotten lost a couple of times, broken a hip, and Grandpa and Grandma had moved into The Palms. And I wasn’t there for any of it.”

Kate’s appetite fled as the emotion set in his voice. She set her fork down and reached over to place her hand atop his. He turned his until his palm was up and gripped her hand.

“Instead,” he continued as if he hadn’t just gripped her hand, “I spent six months getting to know my band members, all of whom were brand new, and accustomed to rough living. They all drank, did drugs, and partied hard. And then there was me, hanging out in my room, feeling sorry for myself, and wishing I was anywhere but there. About a month from the end of the tour, after Grandma got lost and broke her hip, I went to a party and got drunk. Don’t really remember much of

the end of the tour after that because I spent the bulk of it in a stupor.”

Well, that answered the question about whether he'd actually gone on a Bender.

He glanced over at her, a vulnerability in his gaze, and squeezed her hand. “You ready to run for the hills?”

She shook her head. “Are you kidding? And miss the end of this story? No way. I'm on tenterhooks of anticipation.”

He smiled and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Good, because you're going to love the ending.”

“Is it a good one?”

Axel nodded. “It is. Chaz, my manager, somehow kept any photos or video anyone might have had of me during that time out of the media. All except for one photo that someone took of me sleeping it off in a corner in a pile of my own vomit. Fortunately, I had a baseball cap over my head, so the photo could never be validated to the general public. Unfortunately, I was wearing a shirt Grandpa had given me.”

Kate made an eek face. “Don?”

Axel nodded.

“Oh, boy,” Kate sighed.

“The day after I got home from my tour, I woke up in my bedroom with a killer migraine, not totally sure how I'd gotten there, with all the curtains open as wide as they could go, the

sun streaming right into my face, and my grandpa clomping around my room.”

“Yikes,” Kate said. Talk about tough love. She could picture the whole thing in her head.

“He marched over to my bed, every one of his footsteps felt like a hammer to my brain, and slammed down a cup of water and two aspirin. Then he plopped down on my bed, making it bounce and my stomach roll. In the cheeriest, the loudest voice he could muster, he boomed, ‘Morning, Axel. Have fun on your tour?’”

Kate giggled.

Axel squeezed her hand again. “You think that’s funny?”

She nodded. “I did laugh. I’m assuming because you’re still alive, that he wasn’t there to kill you?” Kate asked. Seemed like a legitimate question.

Axel burst into laughter. “Nah, he just wanted to punish me a little. And to remind me that I’d promised Grandma that if I took this route, lived this life, I’d never forget who I was.” He let out a breath. “Kate, it’s hard. It’s really hard. Everything around me is a siren call to jump off the wagon. Free drugs, easy women, no or very few consequences. Until I’d gone on my first world tour, I never really understood the concept of ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’ If Grandpa hadn’t shown up to remind me of my promise, I’d be a very different person than the one you see. It’s so easy to fall down the rabbit hole, and the enticements seem rich, but what people

don't know is the toll it takes on a person." He tapped his chest above his heart. "Here."

"I don't think I'd ever felt so guilty in my life as I did in that moment, with Grandpa sitting over me. I felt like a lost cause, and I'd barely dipped my toe in the water; the worst thing I did on that tour was drink. Hard liquor. Lots and lots of it. It was enough to make me never want to look at a glass of alcohol again, let alone drink one. And I haven't.

"Grandpa stayed a few days, helped me get cleaned up and my act together, then came back here. He used to check on me periodically throughout the year—sort of like a sober companion. He worries. A lot." Axel ran his thumb over the back of her hand, sending goosebumps up her skin.

"You're right, that was a good story," she said. "I'm glad you realized you weren't a lost cause."

"You think I did?"

She gave him a stern look. "There are no such things as lost causes, Axel Clayton, so let's not play that game."

He tilted his head back, laughing silently.

She continued, "I am curious why you're here now? I know you said you're visiting your grandparents, but you've spent more time in this library with me than you have with them."

Axel ran his hand through his hair. "Honestly, trying to get a new perspective. I may have the worst case of writer's block ever in the history of writer's block. I haven't written a song in two years—I used to be prolific too."

“What caused the change?” Kate asked.

“My manager’s trying to get me to write new songs. A new type of song, really. We experimented on my last album, and it completely bombed. He thinks it’s because we didn’t lean enough into the new style, but I don’t know ...” He frowned. “Lately, I feel like I don’t have a voice.”

Kate blinked and pulled her hand from his.

That had him looking her in the eye. Good, she wanted to make sure he heard what she had to say. Every. Single. Word.

“You’re kidding, right?” she asked.

He furrowed his dark brow. “No, wait ... what do you mean?”

“Axel, you’re a rock star. I’m guessing a very successful one, considering you’ve won nine Grammys and have gotten multiple number-one hits. You have a voice. Pretty much anything you say is broadcast to millions and millions of people; you have more of a voice than most people in the world will ever even dream of having.”

Axel shook his head and glanced down. “Having a platform on which to speak is different than having a voice.”

Kate huffed, reached over the food, and grabbed Axel's arm until he looked at her. “And not having a voice is often different than thinking you don’t have one.” She pointed a thumb over her shoulder. “You know who doesn’t have a voice? Bear. He didn’t have a voice. He spent the first eighteen months of his life in a kennel he couldn’t stand up straight in.

It took me months to train him to walk. That's not having a voice. Cameron barely has a voice, but he's learned how to be heard, through sign language and his talker. You'll never have it that hard. And you know who else doesn't have a voice? Your grandma. That's not having a voice. You have a voice; you just need to figure out what it is you want to say."

Axel's mouth fell open. "Wow."

She let go of his arm. "Sorry, that was harsh, but you needed to hear it."

He nodded. "You're right, I needed to hear it." He let out a deep breath. "Rosa too."

Kate frowned. "What about Rosa?"

"Well, she's in a predominantly English-speaking community and she only speaks Spanish. That's got to be hard," he said.

Kate blinked. "Who told you Rosa only speaks Spanish?"

He furrowed his brow. "She did. Or Nancy or Polly, one of them."

Kate arched a brow. "There must have been some kind of miscommunication. I assure you Rosa speaks English fluently."

Axel ran a hand down his still freshly shaved cheek. "Why, I oughta ..."

"Axel, forget about Rosa," Kate said. "I'm not done making my point yet."

He glanced at her and chuckled. “Oh, there’s more? Go ahead then.”

“I wouldn’t even begin to presume to know about the music business, but you said something that stuck out. You said your manager’s trying to get you to write a new style of music, and that when you experimented on your last album and it bombed, that he blamed it on the fact that you hadn’t given yourself completely to the new style, is that right?”

He nodded. “Chaz has never steered me wrong. He’s a good manager, and he knows what he’s doing?”

“Are you happy?” Kate asked.

He stuttered. “I-I ... Yeah.” He looked her in the eyes. “I’m happy when I’m with you.”

Her stomach went a tumblin’ but she pushed her nerves back and continued. “Before you came here, then? You said when you had problems in your life, Grandpa fixed them and Grandma gave comfort. Is that why you’re here? Because you’re not happy?”

Axel blinked, then glanced to the side. “I don’t know, maybe?”

“Well, *maybe* that’s the problem. You don’t like the new style,” Kate said. “Maybe it’s that simple. You’re unhappy because you’re trying to force a square peg into a round hole. And considering you’ve had writer’s block for two years, that might be something to think about. ‘This above all: To thine own self be true.’”

Axel smiled. "Shakespeare, right? He was a smart guy."

Kate nodded. "You know what else he said? 'When words fail, music speaks.'" And it was as clear to Kate as the sky outside tonight. Axel needed music to speak.

A slow, easy smile spread over his face. "Kate Hart, you're a lot wiser than you give yourself credit for. You're amazing. A little brutal, but phenomenal," Axel said.

Kate blushed under his gaze and looked out the window. Wind blew through a palm tree nearby, making the fronds quiver. I feel you, fronds. I feel you.

"You're right," Axel continued. "I know you're right. I need to talk to Chaz. I've been putting it off for too long."

Kate faced him again. "Good, because what your grandpa said about you promising your grandma to live a life where you remember who you are, applies to your music as well. It doesn't surprise me you've had writer's block because you've been lying to yourself. And people are never at their best when they're living contrary to what they know is right." She looked up and thought about that for a minute. "Maybe that's what you should write about. Maybe finding your voice is all about letting go of the lie."

Axel's eyes lit up at that, and he lifted his hands in the air as he glanced down. "Kate, that's brilliant."

Her mind suddenly went blank. What had she said again?

"Do you have a pen or a marker?" he asked. "I need to write that down."

Kate pulled the marker out of her back pocket and handed it to him. “Will this work?”

“That’s great, thank you,” Axel said. He glanced around their boxes, the plastic carryout bags, and then at her again. “I don’t suppose you have something I can write on?”

She pointed over her shoulder toward the elevator. “I can run downstairs and grab some paper?”

Axel shook his head. “It’ll be gone before you can get back.” He reached for her then and took her arm before looking her in the eye. “Trust me?”

She gulped at the intensity of his stare and nodded.

He let loose a sultry grin, scooted in close to her, then slowly pushed the sleeve of her sweater up, running his callused fingers over her skin. He turned her arm and brought the tip of the marker to her skin and started writing, the cool ink sending shivers through her. But that was nothing compared to him holding her arm or the intensity of his focus on what he was writing. He was in his element. And deep inside, Kate was proud that even though she hadn’t known Axel was a famous rock star, she’d known he was a songwriter. She’d understood that about him.

She tried to read what he was writing, but it was upside down for her, and her brain didn’t seem to want to translate upside-down letters right now. She had a feeling her brain wouldn’t want to translate right-side-up letters right now either. Especially not with him sitting so close, not when it

would be so easy to reach out and run her fingers through the black silk of his wavy hair.

A couple minutes later, and with a huge grin on his face, he glanced up.

Her breath hitched, and his smile wavered.

In a whisper, he spoke. “Second time since I’ve been here that you’ve inspired lyrics out of me.”

“Oh,” was all she could muster as her gaze fell to his lips and her lids began to droop.

He smiled and leaned in, and for just a second, she thought he might kiss her, and oh! how she wanted that kiss.

But he suddenly pulled back, releasing her arm as he breathed out an irritated breath. “Kate, I need to talk to you.”

She blinked, surprised by his sudden change in mood. “We have talked.” Kate shook her head of the fog it’d been in and leaned back. “What more is there to say?”

Axel pushed their food back and scooted closer to her before taking her hands in his. “I respect our friendship and the boundaries you’ve placed, but I can’t keep doing this.”

Kate frowned, not sure where he was going with this. “Can’t keep doing what?”

“Pretending that it didn’t drive me crazy seeing you almost kiss that doofus in the parking lot on Saturday, hearing you flirt with those two guys this morning?”

“Two guys?”

“On the phone,” he said. “The ones who want to take you to that French restaurant?”

Kate cringed. Ew, Axel thought she’d been flirting with her brothers?

He kept talking. “And I can’t even tell you how relieved I was when Paxton’s girlfriend came in and kissed him.”

She shook her head again. What on earth?

He brought her hand to his cheek. “Kate, I know we haven’t known each other long, but seeing you with anyone else turns me into a jealous fool. I can’t stop thinking about you. Truth is, you make me comfortable being me, and considering I haven’t been in years, as you so eloquently pointed out—square peg, round hole—I can’t express what that means to me.”

Kate swallowed the lump in her throat and gave a watery chuckle. “I feel comfortable being me around you too.” She did. She’d felt it all those years ago, and again on the beach when she’d hugged him. She hadn’t lost her mind. Kate wasn’t a hugger. Not with people she didn’t know and certainly not with people she didn’t trust, but something in her had told her she could trust him, and she had. And she was glad she had because he was here now.

He gave a tentative smile. “I know you told me not to ask you out, but I’m afraid if I wait any longer to make my move, someone else will. You certainly have plenty of suitors.”

Kate cringed again and held up a hand. That was easily one of the sweetest things she'd ever heard, or at least it would be if he hadn't just referred to Greg and her brothers as suitors. "Wait, let me stop you there."

His face fell.

"Don't freak," she blurted. "First, the guys I was talking to on the phone this morning are my brothers. I wasn't flirting with them. They weren't flirting with me. And I'd appreciate it if you never referred to them as suitors for me or anyone ever, ever again." She shivered. "Gross."

He chuckled, and a weight seemed to come off his shoulders.

"Second," she continued. "That guy you think I almost kissed is my ex-boyfriend who's decided stalking and assault are okay."

Axel's face fell, and his jaw tightened. "The guy I left you with in the parking lot?"

She nodded.

He ran a hand over his face. "Kate, I'm so sorry ..."

"I'm not," she said. "I knocked him on his butt, and almost Tased him. You should've seen his eyes bulge out of his head. He won't be bothering me anymore. Also, Bear shredded his khakis, so that was great. Oh, and my brothers, the ones I was talking to, sent him a nasty Cease and Desist on their fancy lawyer stationary, so I'm more than good." She patted Axel's

shoulder. “So, relax there before you pop a blood vessel in your neck.”

He laughed and pulled her to him in a hug. “Kate, you’re one remarkable woman.”

Man, oh, man, she loved his hugs. But, no. She pulled back. “I’m not done.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding rightly cautious.

She breathed deeply. “I like you. I like you a lot.”

He grinned.

“Don’t smile,” she snapped.

He bit one back, making her laugh.

“Stop it,” she said. “I’m trying to be serious here.”

He forced a straight face. “Proceed.”

“You’re leaving in a week, Axel,” she said, the truth of the words hitting her like a sucker punch to the gut and wiping out all humor from seconds before. Now she just kind of wanted to cry. “How stupid would I have to be to jump into a relationship with a guy who isn’t going to stick around?”

He scooted close again and reached for her, but she moved back and put her hands up. “I’m staying,” he said, no preamble about it.

Kate dropped her hands. “What?”

“It’s time I turned over a new leaf,” Axel said.

“California’s your home. Your job’s there. Your friends are there.”

He shook his head. “California has never been my home. One of the first things I thought when I got off the plane in Orlando was that I was home. And even though I never lived in Diamond Cove, that feeling only increased when I got here. I love this town. I love the people in it,” he looked her in the eyes, “and I want to be close to my family. I don’t know if you know this, but I’m a rock star, Kate, which means I can work from where ever I want. I’ve felt better these last few days here, cleaning out this dusty library with you, even though I had my beard scalped by a bunch of senior citizens,” he rubbed his chin, “than I’ve felt in years. I want to stay. I’m going to stay. And I want to be with you, Kate. Tell me I stand a chance?”

Kate’s emotions leapt all over the place. Fear, excitement, worry, and hope. Lead ball in her gut to butterflies in her chest. She didn’t know what to think. So she looked Axel in the eye. They reflected all her emotions back at her and she knew she wasn’t in this alone.

She wanted him, and *he* wanted her.

A giggle slid up her throat, and the next thing she knew, she was flinging herself into his arms. Again.

“Oomph!” Axel let out a breath. “Is that a yes?”

She nodded against his shoulder.

He tightened his grip on her. “Finally.”

Kate rolled her eyes and pulled back to look at him. At his freaking handsome face, the curves of his jaw, the bottomless depths of his eyes, and his tempting lips. “Finally? It’s been five days.”

“It’s been a little longer for me,” he said.

She furrowed her brow, thinking it over. “Since the beach?”

He shook his head. “Since you kissed me on my cheek at your train stop in the middle of the night after a concert twelve years ago.”

Her heart thudded in her chest, and she playfully shoved his shoulder. “Don’t tease me. It’s not nice.”

“I’m dead serious.” Axel grabbed her hand and placed it over his heart. It was thudding just as hard as hers. “Can you feel that?”

“Your heart?” She nodded.

His gaze fell to her lips, and in a panic, she yanked back.

“Don’t kiss me!” she yelped, and slapped a hand over her mouth and then one over his.

He kissed her palm and chuckled when she flinched, then grabbed her arm and pulled her closer again. “Why not?”

“We just had garlic!” she said, nodding to the containers. “Lots of garlic.”

He dropped his head to her shoulder and let out a long, long sigh. “Okay, fine. But I want a date. And soon.”

She nodded, her heart beating so hard against her chest it was starting to hurt.

He glanced up again and smirked. “So, what’s your favorite place to eat and when are you taking me there?”

Kate laughed, a small tremor in her breathing escaping with it. “Wednesday night?”

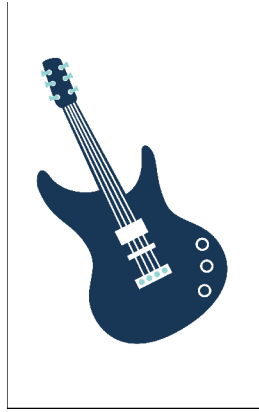
“Seven?”

“Sounds perfect.”

He gave her a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile, sending her pulse racing once again. “Oh, it will be.”

Kate had no doubt, simply because this was the first date in a long time that she was actually excited about. And she had no intention of delving into what that meant right now.

Chapter 17



AXEL

“What do you mean, you’re not coming home?” Chaz asked.

Axel crossed the parking lot from the main building at The Palms, tipping the bill of his baseball cap down as he headed toward the bungalows. He was a man on a mission, or he would be if he could ever get Chaz off the phone. “I mean exactly what it sounds like. I expect I’ll be putting my house up on the market within the next month, and moving here permanently.”

Chaz let out an annoyed sigh, and Axel could practically see his eyes rolling through the phone. “You clearly haven’t thought this through.”

“The only thing that’s clear to me now, is how far I let you step over the boundary between manager and client and friend.” Glancing both directions at the red-bricked street, Axel started over to the sidewalk in front of the bungalows and stopped.

“Right, sorry,” Chaz said. “I didn’t realize you were in one of your moods.”

Axel reached up and pinched his nose between his brows. How had he been so blind to Chaz’s behavior for so long? After Axel had his talk with Kate last night, he’d known what he needed to do. She’d been a hundred percent correct about his writer’s block, about why he’d come back to Diamond Cove, and why he’d been so unhappy for the last couple of years. He wasn’t doing what he loved anymore. Chaz had completely stymied him. And Axel had allowed it out of some misplaced loyalty to the man for sticking with him all these years. But no more.

“Standing up to you isn’t being in a mood, Chaz,” Axel said. “It’s facts. So when I say I’m moving. It means I’m moving. When I tell you I’m not writing your poppy, alternate music anymore, I’m not writing your poppy alternate music. Now, I’ll sing at the Grammys, if they want me, but I’m going to write what I want to write and sing what I wanna sing. Have I made myself clear?”

“All right, who are you, and where is Axel?” Chaz asked, snickering.

Axel placed his hand on his hip. “Can you do your job or not?”

“I’m here for you, man,” Chaz said. “But I still think you’re making a huge mistake. If only you could come back and we could talk about it ...”

Shaking his head, Axel said, “It wouldn’t change my mind. This is how it’s going to be from now on. If you don’t like it, quit.”

The phone went dead silent, which worked out great for Axel, because down the row of bungalows in the direction of Grandpa’s home, Rosa came out of her lime green cottage. He kept his gaze on her as she walked down the path and turned toward the main building.

“Are you firing me?” Chaz asked.

Axel shook his head. “No, but things are going to change. And you’re going to have to get used to that, or find another job.”

“Fine,” Chaz said, sounding beyond frustrated. Fine by Axel. Maybe he’d finally understood how Axel had been feeling for the last couple of years. “Oh, and just so you know, I know where you are, and by tomorrow, the whole world will too.”

Axel furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been seen,” Chaz said. “TMZ contacted me with video footage of you walking around Diamond Cove, Florida. That’s where your grandparents live, right?”

An icy chill ran down Axel's spine. He'd always been so careful when he visited. He never rented a car, used an alias to get a cab, paid for everything in cash, and kept a low profile to protect them. He thought of Mack, his cabbie, then shook his head. He couldn't believe he'd sold him out.

Chaz continued, "They wanted to know if I had a statement about why you'd be in such a little town. They said they had information that someone signed up to participate in some small-town concert."

Axel lowered his head and growled into the phone. "What did you tell them?" The last thing he needed was thousands of fans flooding into Diamond Cove and upsetting the peaceful and delicate balance his grandparents had here.

"I told them you were on vacation, and most likely driving through," Chaz said. "And I told them you had no intention of participating in a small-town concert. But I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. You're acting completely out of character. Are you doing a concert there?"

Axel shook his head. "Of course I'm not. I don't need to draw that kind of attention."

"Glad to see you haven't lost your mind completely," Chaz said. "And by the way, if TMZ knows where you are, there's a good chance your stalker does too. Do you really want some crazy fan near your family?"

Axel glanced in Rosa's direction, and she looked up at the same time. Her face went pale, and she made a direct cut off the sidewalk heading for the main building of The Palms.

“Thanks, Chaz,” Axel said. “I’ll be in touch.” He hung up his phone and called out. “Rosa!”

Rosa waved at him over her shoulder and picked up her pace.

He went into a jog behind her. “Rosa, stop, I just want to talk to you.”

Rosa shook her head. “No hablo ingles.” She made a run for it just as she passed the large blow-up of three ghosts they’d set up behind the main building.

Axel chuckled and caught up with her a moment later, circling in front of her, and blocking her path, he held up his hands in a staying motion. “Rosa, I know you speak English. So you can stop pretending.”

She tried to dart around him. Rosa was fast for an older lady, but he jumped in front of her again. Rosa gripped her bag hanging over her shoulder and stared at her feet. “Lo siento, I was just trying to help.”

He furrowed his brow. “Help with what?”

“Uh ...” Her face flushed. “Nada. Nada.” She pointed to the building behind him. “I am late for my class.” She went around him, but he came up beside her and draped his arm over her shoulder, and she immediately stiffened up.

“Now, hang on a minute.” Axel smiled. “I need a favor, and since I hold you and Harry largely responsible for the loss of my beard, you’re the first two people I thought of to help me.”

Rosa groaned and slowly faced him. “What’s the favor?”

“I asked Kate on a date last night,” he said. He still couldn’t believe it.

“You’re going out with Kate?” Rosa’s eyes bulged.

He nodded. “I want to do something really special for her, but I don’t know the area very well.” Axel pointed a finger at her. “That’s where you come in.”

A huge smile split over Rosa’s face. “Why didn’t you just say so, mijo?” She did an abrupt about-face and headed back for the bungalows, waving at him to follow her. “Come with me, come with me! I know just what you need.”



Forty-five minutes later, Axel left Walt’s bungalow with all the information he needed for his date tomorrow night. Rosa had been right; Walt was the perfect man for this job. This would be the best first date Kate had ever had.

As if just thinking of her made her text him, a chime came through on his phone, alerting him he had a message.

Kate:

Don’t suppose you want to bring subs when you come back later tonight?

Axel grinned. He wasn't much of a texter himself, but it was nice to get a text message from someone not his manager, agent, producer, or brothers. It was especially nice to get a text from Kate.

He dialed her up, and she answered after two rings.

"What's up?" she said with a fake nonchalance that made him laugh. Kate was a terrible liar.

"Anything else you want with the Subs besides Ginger Ale?" Axel shoved a hand in his pocket as he crossed down to the boardwalk and started toward the pier. He lifted his chin to the crisp breeze and took a deep breath.

"Actually," Kate said, adopting a sultry tone of voice. "I'd love a bag of Ranch Doritos."

Axel burst out laughing. "You're such a tease."

"You gonna bring me chips or what?" she asked, and Bear let out one chipper bark in the background.

Axel shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said.

Silence filled the line, and Axel could sense Kate about to make her excuses to hang up. But he wasn't quite ready to get off the phone with her yet.

"I can't wait for our date tomorrow," Axel said.

Kate lowered her voice to a whisper. "Me too." There must be people in the library with her.

“I just have a quick question,” Axel said.

“Hit me with it.” Kate went back to her normal volume.

“I’m looking at my outfits for tomorrow night, and I’m wondering—how much skin is too much skin to show on a first date?” he asked.

Kate laughed, then snorted, and laughed some more.

The desire to kiss her was strong.

A few seconds later, Kate finally got herself under control again. “Unless you’re planning on going topless, I really don’t see the point. I just watched a video of one of your live performances where you whipped your shirt off.”

Axel cringed. He knew exactly which performance she was talking about. Why? Because he wasn’t the guy who took his shirt off during concerts. Axel wasn’t running a peep show. He’d done it one time at Chaz’s suggestion—freaking Chaz—and only because he’d been sweaty, and accidentally poured a water bottle filled with vodka belonging to one of his band members over his head. He’d been sticky, reeked of alcohol, and had a splitting headache. Then Chaz’s suggestion popped into mind. So he’d done it.

The crowd had gone wild. More bras went on stage that night than his previous six concerts combined. After that, he vowed never again. It was so humiliating. Like he was selling his body with the songs in a twisted sort of way. But this was Kate talking, and he wanted to know.

He grinned. “Liked what you saw?”

“I’ve seen better,” Kate said immediately, her instantaneous wit at work as usual, and making him laugh again. “I’d give you a solid ... seven out of ten.”

Axel was smiling so hard his cheeks were starting to hurt. “You’re just saying that because you haven’t seen my abs in person.”

“Psh, sure I have,” Kate said. “Every time you reach above your head for a book on a shelf, I’ve gotten a sneak peek. I stand by my rating. Eh. Maybe a six-point seven-five. Plus, you’re no Don.”

“I know. I can’t compete with my grandpa ... Who can?”

“Quitter,” she said.

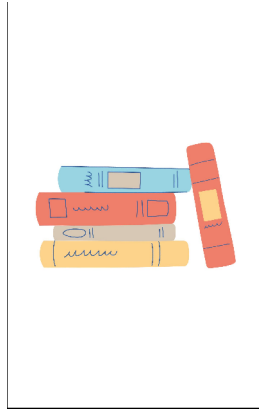
Axel could practically see her lifting her chin, and the very thought of it along with her teasing tone and words, sent the air whooshing out of his lungs, and his head over heels off his bachelor pedestal.

Well, crap.

“Axel?” Kate asked. “You still there?”

“I’m still here,” he said. And he wasn’t going anywhere ever again because, for the first time in his life, Axel was in love.

Chapter 18



KATE

At six-twenty pm, Kate stood outside her apartment, Bear by her side, in her best dress, a Maroon Bohemian creation, with an empire waist, three-quarter length sleeves, and a full circle skirt that ended just above her knees in the front, and below them in the back. She paired the outfit with black suede booties.

A light breeze brushed past her skin, making her shiver. Reluctantly, she slipped into her black leather jacket for some warmth. On Monday, Kate and Axel had agreed to go on their first official date at seven, and today, even after spending eight hours with her, Axel pulled her to him and said he couldn't wait until seven to see her. So they changed the time to six-thirty.

It'd been so easy for her to agree to it. Never in her life had it been so easy for her with any guy.

Clutching the gift she'd purchased for him in front of her chest, she took in a deep breath to calm herself. She was equal parts nervous and excited, which was ridiculous because she'd spent nearly every waking hour with Axel since Monday. He'd worked overtime with her last night as well.

And while their overtime had been work, it mostly just felt like really long dates, where they just happened to be dusting shelves.

They still hadn't kissed. Axel had brought it up a couple of times, mostly in joking/teasing kind of ways, but he had made no move to kiss her again. She'd ordered their food last night, Greek salads and gyros from Olive and Thyme Greek restaurant—hold the onions. No garlic in sight. The perfect meal for after dinner delight. But nothing. The hot jerk had left her hanging. You withhold a kiss one time!

Dropping one hand to her side, she fisted it and punched her thigh. What did a girl need to do to get kissed around here? Did she need to spell it out for him? Especially when he acted and talked about them like they were already a couple, and even made plans for their future?

He told her that there was a good chance he'd be performing at the Grammys in January and asked her to clear her schedule for the night. That had brought her up short and made her tipsy on her feet, as though she were on a small sailboat out in the middle of a hurricane. Later that night, when she was at home,

looking through her cheap telescope on the apartment terrace, she tried to pinpoint what it was about the idea of going to the Grammys that had made her so uncomfortable.

The answer had come surprisingly quickly as she located Saturn in her telescope, and neatly dissected every inch with her eyes, as she had done so many times before.

Kate may not have known that Axel was a rock star, but there was a whole heck of a lot of people in this world who knew he was one, and she had no desire to be measured up to him and found lacking. She really shouldn't care what people think, but the idea of being held up to public scrutiny was intimidating.

At six twenty-five, a Jeep pulled to a stop in front of her, and before the door even opened, Bear started doing his jumping jacks. Hopping up and down on his front feet, making his ears flop up and down.

Axel stepped out of the driver's side and narrowed his gaze over the roof of the car at her. "You're early."

She glanced at her watch, then pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. "You're early. I live here."

He rushed around her side of the car, opened her door, and practically lifted her onto the seat—he was so warm, she'd wanted to pull him in after her to snuggle. But he was gone too quick, closing her door, and opening the back for Bear, who immediately hopped in.

She used the time to glance around the vehicle and dropped Axel's present between her seat and the door to hide it until later. The Jeep had a drop-top, and even though the vehicle was an older one, it was in top condition and had a state-of-the-art stereo system.

Axel jogged back to his side of the Jeep and hopped in. "You look beautiful. That dress is something else."

She grinned. "Thanks." It was new. Well, at least to her. She'd bought it in the thrift shop here in town a few months ago, and decided to save it for a special occasion. Leaning back against her door, she looked him up and down. He wore jeans, a white t-shirt, and a leather jacket. "You look nice too."

No surprise there. He'd been a mess on the beach last week when they'd run into one another and she'd still wanted to jump him. In fact, she had. She'd hugged him. If that wasn't an indication of just how good-looking he was, she didn't know what was.

He waggled his brows and revved the engine, and Kate was thrown back twelve years ago to when he'd done the same thing in a little golf cart before driving her to her train. She laughed.

But then she also remembered the crazy way he'd driven said golf cart that night, and quickly gripped the grab handle above her door just as he shot off. Yeah, he was still a crazy driver. Like grandfather, like grandson ... apparently.

"Nice Jeep," she said as he raced down Diamond Cove Drive and made a left onto the highway. Fifteen minutes later,

they were leaving the city limits.

“Thanks, it’s Sean’s,” Axel said. “I’d tell him you said so, but the guy has an unhealthy relationship with this vehicle, and I don’t want to feed into that.”

“You’re kidding?” Kate asked.

Shaking his head, Axel grinned. “I’m not. I had to call in a favor.”

“Why didn’t you just borrow Don’s car?”

“I thought the Jeep would handle the roads better where we’re going.” He smirked and looked out the side window.

“Where *are* we going?”

He reached over and took her hand, then brought it up to his lips to brush a kiss over the back of her fingers. The tease. She shuddered, and he smiled.

Kate shook her head. “So cocky.”

He chuckled. “Maybe a little.”

“So?” she asked.

“It’s a secret.” He reached over to the glove box and pulled out a red bandana. “When we get on I-95, I want you to put this over your eyes.”

Kate narrowed her eyes instead. “No way!”

He took her hand again and stared her in the eyes, and she had this weird feeling he was playing a game of chicken with her, the stakes being they’d run off the road. “Trust me, Kate?”

“Fine,” she said and looked out her side window.

Forty-five minutes later she was pulling the bandana over her eyes, and another thirty minutes after that, the car went completely dark inside, with no street lights wherever they were, and they went onto a dirt road that had her grasping the sides of the car when they went over every dip and curve.

Kate shook her head. “If you’re taking me somewhere to kill me and dump the body, I’ll never talk to you again.” There was no worry. Axel was Don’s grandson. If she so much as came home with a hangnail, she was sure Axel would hear about it, but she enjoyed messing with him. “Also, Bear’s a trained attack dog.”

Bear barked a whiny bark, and Kate could picture his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth like some cartoon dog.

Axel laughed under his breath. “Good to know.”

She arched a brow. “I’ve also left a thumb drive with some of your most embarrassing videos on it with instructions for it to be shown at movie night at The Palms, should my contact not hear from me.”

Axel groaned. “You really like those videos, don’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“You’re kidding, right? Hours of video of you? What’s not to like? It’s fascinating.” She laughed, and he poked her in the side.

“Smart Alec,” he said.

Kate squealed and squirmed away. “Hey, watch it!”

“Oh, I’ll watch it all right,” he warned.

She dropped her hand on the door side of the car and ran her finger over the present she’d stashed there. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Another one?”

“And I’m the smart Alec?” She shook her head.

He laughed and Kate decided she couldn’t get enough of the deep rumble that always seemed to originate in his diaphragm. “Go ahead.”

“How’d you get started with the singing and writing?”

“My grandparents,” Axel said. “My grandma was a piano teacher. An amazing one. She couldn’t sing to save her life, but Gramps could. Looking back, I’m not sure he actually enjoyed singing, but he did it anyway and never said a word to my grandma about it.”

Warmth filled Kate’s chest. “He did it for her?”

Axel said nothing.

“Are you nodding?” Kate asked. “Cuz, I can’t see you.”

“Oh, yes, sorry. I was nodding,” he said. “He did it for her.”

Kate let out a breath as a memory hit her from their first meeting. “When we first met, and you took me to the train, I told you I’d never seen an all-encompassing one like I read in

my books, and didn't believe it existed. Do you remember what you said?"

"Honestly, no, but I can guess. Did I tell you I knew it existed because I'd seen it?"

Kate nodded. "You were talking about Don and Amelia, weren't you?"

"Yeah," he sounded a little sad. "Yeah, I was. Anyway, I still have a crystal-clear memory of the first time Grandpa sang with me. I was jamming out to Bob Dylan, and he jumped in and harmonized. I think I pestered him for months after that to harmonize with me."

"Did he?"

"Every time," Axel said.

Silence filled the cab for just a moment before the Jeep slowed and Axel pulled off the road. "We're here."

She reached for the bandana, but he grabbed her hand. "Hang on." He got out and a moment later, the roof came down, and Axel was opening her door. He pulled her bandana off.

As far as the eye could see were stars. Kate sucked in a gasp. She'd never seen the sky like this before. The Milky Way, a stretch of powdery white sky filled with stars, reached from one side of the sky to the other. The moon was a mere thumbnail in the sky, making it easier to see the stars, but still giving off enough light to illuminate silhouettes of palms and

other trees. Her gaze immediately went to where she knew Saturn would be in the night sky.

“Dark Sky Preserve, right?” Axel asked.

Bear came to her side and sat, staring.

“Are we in Kissimmee State Park?” She didn’t want to blink. Didn’t want to tear her gaze off the inky night sky filled with bright bursts of twinkling lights. She’d wanted to come here since forever, but she’d never been able to fit it in.

A breeze blew by, and Kate shivered.

“You like it?” Axel asked.

She faced him. “I love it. Really. This is ... the most thoughtful thing anyone has done for me.” She wished she’d brought her telescope.

He leaned close and lowered his voice. “Maybe I just wanted you to Kissimmee.”

Kate rolled her eyes and groaned. “A dad joke? You really are Don’s grandson.”

He tossed his head back and laughed. “I have something for you.”

Spreading her arms wide, Kate breathed in the crisp night air. “More than this?”

Axel reached into the back of the Jeep and pulled out a big hoodie. “First, a big, old ugly hoodie with your name on it.”

Kate reached for it with a laugh. “Ooo, you know me so well. Gimmie!”

He slid it over her head, making her feel a little manhandled from his “help” until her head popped out and she found him inches from her. He brushed her hair down, his gaze intently focused on fixing her hair, and her breath hitched.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“There’s more.” He grinned, pulled her to the back of the Jeep, and pulled out a picnic basket, then he pointed to a cooler under that. “Sandwiches, and in the cooler, three different flavors of Ginger Ale. It took some doing to find the Hibiscus flavor you like. I had to drive two cities over.”

A lump grew in Kate’s throat. “You ... you went to so much trouble.”

Axel pulled the cooler out of the back, and a huge grin spread over his face as he pulled a massive crate and set it on the ground. “Open it.” He scrubbed his hands together.

Kate reached down, undid the hinge latch, and opened the crate. Inside sat a large, super expensive telescope. She took a step back, her heart racing in her chest. That was at least a five-thousand-dollar piece of equipment. “Please tell me you didn’t buy that?”

Grabbing the hem of her sweatshirt, Axel reeled her in with a smirk on his abnormally handsome face. Since when did she start liking smirks? Probably last week, when he’d magically appeared. “Would you be mad at me if I did?”

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s a really expensive machine, there.”

“I thought you’d say that,” Axel said. “No, I didn’t buy it. I rented it for the night.”

She let out a breath. “Really?”

“I almost bought it for you. Then it occurred to me I was just doing it because the women I date always have that expectation of me.” Axel buried his head in the crook of her shoulder. “It made me pause and think. I was pretty sure you wouldn’t want me spending that kind of money on you so soon after we started dating.”

She wrapped her hands around his neck. “You thought right.”

He took a deep breath. “Maybe for our month anniversary?”

She jabbed him in the side. “No, this relationship can’t be transactional.”

“I love it when you talk ‘transactions’ to me,” he murmured, sending tingles up her spine. “Tell me more.”

Kate dug her fingers into his hair, and he pressed a kiss to her shoulder. She yanked him back by the collar of his shirt. “Axel, I’m serious. I’m not a groupie or an actress or an heiress or anything of the sort. I’m a simple woman with a simple life, and I like it like that. I’m a librarian for crying out loud.”

His eyes gleamed down at her. “One of my favorite things about you.”

“What is?”

“You’re real,” he said. “You’re not going to run away, are you?”

Butterflies filled her stomach. She massaged his head at the base of his skull. “Definitely not. Even if all you’d done was bring a picnic dinner. I can’t believe how thoughtful you are.”

He smiled, gracing her with his perfect dimple.

She swept out a hand. “I love this.” A lump in her throat choked her up. “No one’s ever done anything like this for me before.”

“Because you’ve had a bunch of idiot boyfriends.”

“True,” she cocked her head to the side, “but Axel, I’m here because of you. Not all this stuff, though the stuff is pretty exceptional.”

“So, is this your long-winded way of saying you like it?” he asked, squeezing her tighter to him.

She shook her head. “No. This is.” At that, Kate slowly pushed to her toes, giving Axel the chance to back up, and when he only smiled at her, she gently pressed her lips to his.

The moment their lips connected, he pressed her to his chest and took control of the kiss. The dichotomy that was Axel’s kisses, demanding yet gentle, eager while still softly brushing his lips over hers, left her breathless. She dug her fingers into his gloriously silky hair, and felt the strange sensation of sinking, and not caring, right before her knees buckled. He laughed against her mouth and held her up. The man could

create music in a kiss, and she was here for it. Every touch, every nip, every toe-curling moment.

Kate could've kissed him forever, but all too soon, he pulled away from her and trailed kisses down her jaw to her neck.

Axel buried his head in her hair behind her ear and breathed deeply. "Kate," he said in a strangled tone. "Kate, you're so perfect." He nuzzled in. "You smell so good. Like coconuts, dreams, and everything good in the world."

She laughed in his embrace. "Getting lyrical on me?"

"Hmmm," he said, pressing another kiss to the sensitive skin behind her ear. "Just speaking the truth."

"Well, the coconut is my shampoo, but the dreams and everything good in the world are a mystery," she said.

"They're just for me," Axel said. "No one else can smell them."

Kate pulled back. "I've got something else that's just for you—that's tangible and can be held in your hands." She pointed toward the car. "Let me grab it."

Reluctantly, Kate thought, he let her go. She grabbed his gift and placed it in his hands. She'd wrapped it in a Palms' newspaper.

"You got me a gift?" he asked with so much shock and awe in his tone that Kate wondered if his last girlfriend, or two, or three, had ever given him anything.

“Yeah,” she explained. “You said you were turning over a new leaf, so when I saw this, I knew I had to get it for you.”

Slowly, Axel removed the paper until he revealed the buttery soft, leather-bound journal inside. “A journal?” He arched a brow and looked at her.

Kate smiled and came around to his side, opening the book to the first page. “It’s a lyric journal. See, on the right are the bar lines for your music, and on the left is where the lyrics go. I copied down the lyrics you wrote on my arm on Monday to a piece of paper that I put in the back. I figured you’d want to add them yourself, so they match up with whatever brilliant music you compose to go along with them.”

“I can’t believe you did this,” Axel said as he almost reverently skimmed through the blank pages.

“Looks like we’re both bringing the surprises tonight.”

He closed the journal and glanced down at her. “Come here.”

On weak knees and newfound hopes, Kate stepped into his embrace and another impossibly soft kiss that left her trembling for more.

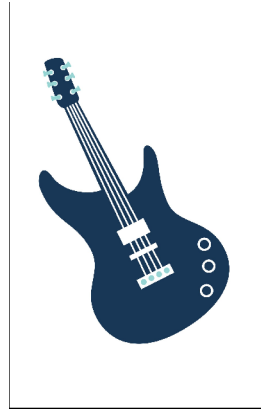
“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Now,” he pulled back and swatted her on the bum with the journal. “Get this telescope set up. I have no idea what I’m doing, and I want to see Mars.”

Kate laughed again, and in no time, the two of them had the telescope set up and gazed into a sky full of beautiful possibilities.

Chapter 19



AXEL

“I can’t believe how much you’ve managed to get done in such a short amount of time.” Axel stood back from the last shelf that needed to be cleaned on the main floor of the library and placed his hands on his hips.

There was still some organizing that needed to take place on the main floor, but they were almost finished with the last row of shelves and would be done before they left today. It’d been hard, labor-intensive work, and Axel loved every moment. And not just because of Kate, but because it had given him a new perspective. He’d enjoyed the physical labor, something that he wasn’t expected to do very often.

That hadn’t stopped him from teasing Kate. Earlier in the day, when she’d asked him to get down some particularly large

and heavy books from a top shelf, he prodded. “You only want me for my body.” Then as he climbed the ladder. “I feel so used.”

Without missing a beat, she replied, “Shoot, my secret’s out!” And snapped her fingers.

Now, Kate stood at the top of the sliding ladder, shoving a handful of books back onto the shelf, and carefully straightening them until they looked just right. She smiled down at him. “I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

She came down the ladder then, and before she reached the floor, Axel swooped her off the bottom rung and wrapped his arms around her. She squealed. “Axel!”

“Yes?” he nuzzled into her hair, not getting enough of the delicious scent of it or of holding her in his arms. “I’m absolutely certain you could have done it without me, would have done it without me if you’d had no other choice. You’re the kind of person who does what needs to be done.” It was one of the things Axel loved about her. The woman really didn’t believe in lost causes or no-win scenarios. Coming from a place where more value was placed on success than people, Axel found that incredibly endearing.

She buried her face in her hands against his chest. “You compliment me too much; I don’t know how to handle it.”

Axel grinned. “Grandma Amelia always said that compliments aren’t something that need to be handled, just accepted.” With a light touch of his fingers to her chin, he nudged her gaze up to his. “You make it easy to see the best

side of everything because you're a spotlight," he crooned softly, making up the words and melody on the spot. "No one pays attention to, a lightbulb like you. Flood my life with your light, baby. Fill the dark corners with your smile." He chuckled at how easily the music flowed through him today and pecked a kiss to her lips.

Kate pulled out of his arms, shaking her head as she went. She headed for the next bookshelf, grabbing her rag, and the Pledge. "I once had a boyfriend tell me I was funny for a pretty girl."

Axel cringed as he replaced the last of the books on the shelf they'd just finished cleaning. Kate's dating history was one horror show after another. She had been telling him some of her stories, and he just couldn't believe her bad luck. Also, there were like, seventeen fantastic love-gone-wrong songs in there that he'd have to mentally *shelve*—ahem—until he could sit down with his journal. "How did you respond to that?"

"I told him he was dumb for a pretty boy," Kate said. "He didn't get it. Needless to say, he didn't last long."

Dumb for a pretty boy? Another phrase that could be a number-one hit. "Well, I think you're pretty for a funny girl."

She placed a hand on her heart and spoke with all the snark Axel had come to expect. "Aw, *babe*. You get me."

He wound up his towel and whipped it at her. She ducked out of the way with a giggle.

Axel shook his head as he grinned. That was the other thing he loved about her. Her quick wit. Technically, they'd only known each other for a week and a half, but it didn't seem to matter. Axel was completely smitten. His heart was all in. And every day he became more and more sure of that fact.

Kate pulled a handful of books off of the next shelf, placing them on the trolley they'd been using, then glanced at him over her shoulder. "Should I compliment you more?"

He shrugged. "Just like I'd never turn down a Dr. Pepper, I'd never turn down a compliment."

Kate shot him a sassy grin. "Well, in that case, I don't mind telling you I love your dimple."

Axel pointed to the dimple in question. "This old thing?"

She nodded. "Every time I see it, I have the urge to kiss it."

"Who's stopping you?" He spread his arms wide.

"Not a who, but a what." Kate made a sweeping gesture with her arm to indicate the library as a whole.

Axel had thought the library was beautiful when he'd seen it last week, but Kate's assignation to clean everything had really put an extra sheen of brilliance on the place. She'd even had window cleaners come in to do the stained-glass windows, including the Dome this week, and the space seemed just a little bit lighter than before.

He leaned against one of the tables. "Speaking of which, isn't it about time for a break?"

Kate glanced at her watch. “Yeah, I guess we could take a break.”

“Great.” He dusted his hands together. “Wanna make out in the stacks?”

Before she could respond, Axel’s phone chimed, alerting him to a text. He lifted one finger in a wait gesture. “Hold that thought.”

He opened his text.

Winnie:

I’m just about finished with your Halloween costume. Going to drop by tomorrow night so you can try it on.

Axel groaned and dropped his head to his hand.

“What? What is it?” she asked.

He handed her his phone. She read it, and a snort escaped her mouth as she clapped a hand to it to smother her laugh. “Oh, Axel. She’s making you a Halloween costume?”

Axel shook his head. “It’s news to me.”

“Will you wear it?”

He nodded his head. Didn’t really matter if he liked the outfit or not, just like it hadn’t mattered that he hadn’t been into the Elvis Presley outfit. If Winnie spent time sewing it for him, there was no way he could tell her no. He defied anyone to say no to that cute little old lady.

Kate came over and kissed his dimple. “You’re a kind-hearted, softy.”

He grabbed her hand to keep her from walking off again. “Another compliment?”

She shrugged. “I guess your complementary habits are rubbing off on me.”

Axel chuckled. “Nice wordplay.”

“What can I say?”

He was about to reel her in for a kiss when the front door to the library swung open, and Samantha came waltzing in at a clip. Today she wore a black Lacy top, with an ombre skirt that faded from orange at her waist down to yellow more to the bottom. The very bottom was lined with a black silhouette of grass, pumpkins, and gravestones. A full silhouetted moon sat on her hip, with bats flying through it, and leafless trees that looked like mangled fingers shot up from the ground filling the body of the skirt. It was kind of brilliant. Whoever was making her outfits could easily get a high-paying job in Hollywood.

They both faced her, and Kate immediately stepped forward. “What’s wrong?”

Samantha straightened her Wayfarer glasses, then nibbled on her thumbnail. “You better come and look.” She waved at them to follow her out of the library, down the path, and to the end of the footbridge across Paradise Lake where they stayed hidden back in the shadows of the palms and oak trees.

Behind the main building of The Palms sat three news vans, and outside the vans, were reporters filming the building.

Axel took a step back. “Why are they here?”

Samantha faced him. “I was hoping you could tell me. They’re all asking about you.”

Shooting a wary glance in their direction, Axel nodded back toward the library. “Let’s take this conversation inside.”

Back inside the library, his temporary sanctuary, Axel could breathe again for just a moment.

“So?” Samantha asked, hands on her hips.

Axel ran a hand through his hair. There was only one plausible explanation. “Someone must have seen me in town. I talked to my manager the other day, and apparently, someone signed me up for the Diamond Cove Fall Concert downtown.”

Kate’s eyes about popped out of her head as she sucked in a gasp and covered her mouth with her hands. “Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no!”

Axel furrowed his brow. “What is it?”

She turned her back on him and slowly marched over to her reception desk, where she promptly dropped her head to the top with an audible thud that echoed in the room.

“Kate?” Axel was at her side in an instant, pulling her away from the desk and grasping her shoulders in his hands.

“It was me,” she squeaked.

“You told the reporters about me?” Axel asked, his chest tightening.

“Before I knew who you were.” Her body shook. “I figured you were still working temporary jobs, and your voice was so beautiful. I just wanted to help you. There are going to be talent scouts there, so I signed you up for it. I swear if I’d had any idea, I never would have presumed ...”

Relief filled his body. She hadn’t sold him out. She had been trying to help him. “You think I’m good enough to win the contest?” he asked hopefully.

She shoved his arm, fighting a smile and wanting to feel bad about this. But he would have none of it.

“I am so, so sorry,” Kate said, burying her head in her hands again. “I’m such an idiot.”

A chuckle escaped Axel’s mouth, and he pulled Kate into his arms. “You’re not an idiot. If anyone’s to blame, it’s me. I should have told you who I was from the start.”

“Now, I am,” she said. “I really am.”

Axel gripped her shoulders again and pushed her back just enough so that he could look her in the eye. “You were being sweet. I love that you did that for me.”

She swung an arm toward the door. “But now I’ve made a mess.”

Axel shook his head. “I should have known better than to come here after all the publicity I was getting in California

before I left. I'm more of a hot topic right now than I have been for years."

Samantha stepped forward again, reminding them of her presence. "I don't really care who's to blame, and if I was going to place it at someone's feet, frankly, it wouldn't be either of yours." She thumbed over her shoulder. "It would be those people who think your life should be their business. But unfortunately, that's not the issue here. The issue is that The Palms has a lot of very wealthy residents, who expect privacy. We can't have news crews crawling all over this place. So, what are we going to do?"

The last thing he wanted was some heart-wrenching story splattered across the internet about how Nonna had Alzheimer's. And he didn't even want to think about what would happen if those reporters saw Grandpa. They'd have a field day. He could already see the headline: Meet The Eighty-Four-Year-Old, Bodybuilding Grandfather of Rock Star Axel Clayton.

Oi! No. Grandpa would lose his ever-loving mind. And, it had never been confirmed, but he always suspected that Grandpa knew things like nuclear codes and had buddies who made people disappear. His fuse was short and his list of accomplices long. It could only end in tears.

"I'll take care of it," Axel said. "Fortunately for you, unfortunately for me, I've had to deal with this nonsense for many years. My team has gotten pretty good at cleanup."

Samantha let out a deep breath and nodded. “There's one more thing you should know.” She opened her phone and pulled something up, showing it to Axel and Kate.

On the front of People magazine online, was a photo that had been taken with a long-range camera, of Kate walking across the parking lot at The Palms. Above her picture, the headline read, “Is this Axel Clayton’s new girlfriend? All the juicy details of their romance inside.”

Kate grabbed the phone, her eyes bulging once again. “What is this?”

Samantha rushed to assure her. “I read the article; they have nothing. Everything is speculation, and it’s obvious that it is. Though they have a few pictures of you.”

Axel watched as the color drained from Kate’s face. “They’ve been following me around?” she faced Axel. “We only went on our first date two days ago?”

Yeah, that seemed suspicious to Axel as well. “I’m going to take care of it.” He leaned forward and kissed Kate on the forehead. “I’ll take care of it, but I’ve got to go call my manager.”



Axel pulled his hat down tight over his head, snuck down to the beach where the reporters wouldn't be able to see him, and headed toward Grandma and Grandpa's bungalow. He dialed Chaz.

"Axel, my man," Chaz said. "How goes it.?"

"Reporters are starting to swarm my grandparent's retirement community, so I'm going to say not good." A couple headed in his direction. Axel lowered his head and tipped his cap down as he passed them.

Chaz let out of breath. "How many?"

"As of right now?" Axel said. "Only three." But experience taught him that where there was one, multitudes would follow.

"I'll do what I can from here," Chaz said, muffled by loud noises around him, and so on, speaking over a microphone. "You know as well as I do that the best way to handle this would be to come home. If you're not there, there's no story."

"That's not going to happen, Chaz." Grandma and grandpa's Aqua bungalow was coming up in the distance. Only three more houses.

"Fine, BTW, your stalker sent a photo of some girl named Kate Hart from the cover of People magazine to my office this morning." He paused for dramatic effect. "With a red slash through it. She's never been threatening before, so it's likely an empty threat."

Axel came up short. “What?” He shouted the word, and to his left, a grouping of Seagulls took flight with annoyed choking cries, and the flamingos he’d seen Kate feeding his first day suddenly took an interest in him and headed his way. He knew it was them. They had the same beady little looks in their eyes. All Axel could think was how they’d walked all over him, and the words to a Beatles song. “You better run for your life, little girl.” Not that Axel was a little girl, but he might still be traumatized by his last encounter with them.

“It’s true, you are dating her,” Chaz said. “Is that why you won’t come home?”

“I want bodyguards here and I want them here within the hour,” Axel demanded, pointing at the boardwalk below his feet.

More loud noise came from Chaz’s end of the phone. “Consider it done.”

“And ...” This wasn’t Kate’s fault. None of it was. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her. Better to keep it a secret. “I don’t want Kate to know about them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a brilliant idea,” Chaz scoffed. “Listen, if you really want to protect this girl, the smartest thing to do would be to take an interview and stymie the rumors that you’re dating.”

Pressure built at the base of Axel’s skull with the persistent throbbing. “I can’t do that.”

He didn't even know how he would go about explaining something like that to Kate. *Kate, I really do care about you, but for your protection, we have to pretend we aren't a couple.* Ugh. No. He might as well throw in, *"I'll climb up your escape ladder to your apartment at night, so no one will see me."* It sounded too sordid. And too "convenient" for him.

He didn't want Kate to feel like a sidepiece. And that's exactly how she would feel. It could only end badly. Besides that—she deserved better. Every man she dated treated her like she was second-class. He vowed at that moment never to be that guy. He would be the better man.

Dang it all, if that wasn't going to be his next song. "I'll be the better man." Shoot! He needed his journal. And he needed this taken care of—pronto.

"Suit yourself," Chaz said. "But your fans already hate her. They think you're cheating on Lillie Anne with her, and they won't be kind to her if they see her."

Axel pinched the bridge of his nose. This was a disaster. Why had he ever agreed to a fake relationship with his crazy ex? The moment Chaz had suggested it, Axel had known, he'd known deep down it was a bad idea. But he hadn't written any songs in two years, and his last effort had been a complete failure. And Chaz had convinced him that the scheme would be beneficial. And it had for a time. But oh, what he would do to take it all back now.

"There's one more thing," Chaz said.

“Of course there is,” Axel said, hurrying up the back path of his grandparent’s house and to their porch.

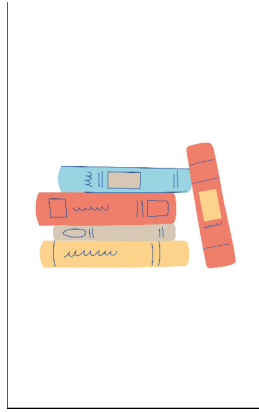
“The presenters of the Grammys want a demo of the song you’ll be performing by Saturday night.”

Axel swallowed hard. “This Saturday?”

“This Saturday.”

Okay, two days to write a song wasn’t ideal. He had tons of ideas swirling around inside of him. He just needed to focus it. All he had were snippets of lyrics and melodies—his life was a bleepin’ musical with Kate, yet, he hadn't finished anything, hadn’t put the words to paper. It was the last barrier to ending his writer’s block once and for all. And he was going to tear it down soon. “On it.”

Chapter 20



KATE

Kate hadn't seen Axel since he'd left the library yesterday afternoon. Of course, he called her to let her know what was going on, that the reporters were being handled and she had nothing to worry about, and to tell her he wouldn't be able to come in today to help her in the library because ... why? She assumed it was to do with the reporters, but he hadn't actually said.

Of course, it had disappointed her she wouldn't get to see him, but she understood. He had to do what he had to do to protect his grandparents, and she hoped her as well, from the potential of a media onslaught. She got that.

Determined not to be too disappointed by it, Kate had spent the rest of Friday scrubbing floors and vacuuming carpets,

wiping down tables, and filling small vases with fall flowers of pale pink lilies, white and orange roses, and sprigs of thyme, that she strategically placed throughout the library, and hanging up the Halloween decorations made by the residents. They'd made wreaths, and had spray-painted twigs, black and silver to add to the flower arrangements. A few of the more creative crafters had even taken old books from the bookshop downtown and cut out the pages so that when they were fanned open, they read, "Happy Halloween" and "Boo" and "Witching Hour." Rita's pumpkin carving class had lined the stairs on the way into the library with Jack-o'-lanterns, and Samantha had even brought in an authentic old cauldron to put candy in for the kiddos who'd be stopping by tomorrow.

It was a little after seven now, Bear slept soundly by the fireplace as was his habit of late, and Kate was finishing up for the day by putting the small stack of returned books she'd gotten today back on their shelves.

The library looked amazing, and Kate felt a sense of pride fall over her shoulders as she took it in.

She didn't know what libraries she was up against, but right now, at this moment, it didn't matter. Her library was special. And after a week and a half of really hard work, it was as perfect as it could ever be, especially with the addition of all the crafts lovingly made and bestowed upon the library for the contest. The library was filled with excitement and love from The Palms residents and the town.

On the second floor, Kate climbed one of the rolling ladders to put away the last book she had. The creaking of a door downstairs caught her attention, but she was in such a good mood today, she decided to ignore it.

Chester wouldn't scare her today!

She moved the rolling ladder back to where it belonged and dusted her hands.

The lights flickered as they often did despite the electricians' assurance that the wiring in the building was all brand new, and irritation it was happening at all.

Kate placed her hands on her hips. "It's not gonna work, Chester. You're not going to freak me out," she said out loud to the library.

A squeak in a floorboard sounded next. Kate simply shook her head and headed for the elevator. There was nothing else she could do here today, so she was heading home to a warm bath, her sweats, and a summertime movie to stave off the cold. Hopefully, she'd hear from Axel tonight as well.

Her purse sat on her reception desk, and everything was closed up for the night. All she had to do was turn off the fireplace and grab her bag on the way out the door.

She pressed the button to the elevator when the lights flickered again and then went out. A chill shot up Kate's spine, and she whipped around to glance around. The only available light now was the warm glow coming from the fireplace downstairs. The lights had never gone all the way out before.

From downstairs, Bear let out a bark, the kind he used when he was fully alert. She held her breath.

Another floorboard creaked, but this time closer.

Pulling her phone from her back pocket, Kate quickly turned on her flashlight and aimed it into the dark. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Kate,” came a disembodied voice.

The hair on Kate’s arms rose. Another floorboard creaked even closer.

Kate ran for it.

The moment she went into a sprint, the plodding thumps of someone chasing her found her ears.

Raw adrenaline coursed through her veins as she dashed into the dark stairwell, keeping her phone flashlight up to light her way. “Bear!”

He barked, his feet scrambling against the floor in a clatter as he ran for her.

On the main floor, she shoved out the escape door and made a dash for her purse and the Taser inside it. Right as she latched onto her bag, a heavy hand came down on her shoulder and gripped painfully tight. Turning as quickly as she could, she let her bag fly, knocking whoever it was in the temple and making him stumble back and drop to a knee with a groan. Looked like the Taser was good for more than just zapping people.

The sharp sting of her chain being ripped from her throat made her cry out in pain just before she scrambled out of his hold and bolted for the front door. “Bear, come!”

Bear appeared out of the dark, leaping over her attacker, knocking him down as Kate flew toward the front door. She shoved on the door, barely noticing a piece of paper stabbed into the wood frame with a butcher knife as she opened the door. Bear started out first, and Kate hurried behind him.

The lights along the path to the library were out as well, but the newly carved Jack-o'-lanterns flickered in the darkness and mist covering the winding path. She shoved her hand into her bag and fumbled around until she got a grip on her Taser.

Footsteps pounded toward her from the parking lot, as Kate yanked her Taser from her purse, aimed at the shadowed silhouette racing toward her, and fired.

The quick zap of light illuminated the face in front of her, just before a hand shot out to block his face. “Kate?”

Axel.

He cursed, yanked the wires from his hand, and buckled to his knees—knocking over a couple Jack-o'-lanterns as he went.

Kate was at his side in a flash, but not as fast as Bear, who was already licking his face. “I’m so sorry! Are you okay?” She looked him up and down and frowned. He was wearing some kind of mall cop uniform. “What are you wearing?”

“Kate,” he groaned. “Seriously?”

She cringed and yanked Bear back. “I’m really sorry, I thought you were—”

The doors to the library swung open, and a massive silhouette of a man stepped forward. Bear darted around her, placing himself between her and the giant. His hackles raised, and he started barking.

Kate raised her stun gun again and aimed.

The monster of a man threw his arms in front of his body to shield himself.

Axel reached out and grabbed her hand, preventing her. “That’s Mike,” Axel said. “He’s your bodyguard.”

Kate whipped her gaze back to Axel. “My what?”



They called the police, and now ten minutes later, the lights were finally back on, thanks to bodyguard number two. Because apparently, Kate had two bodyguards she didn’t know about. Two.

She paced outside the door, hands on her hips as Axel and the two guards stared at the knife in the door that she passed in

her mad dash to get out. When Axel had asked her to stay outside, she'd still been in shock over everything that had happened and she'd stupidly agreed. But now her mind was starting to clear, and she could feel something building in the center of her chest, a negative sensation she'd never considered possible to feel toward Axel. Anger.

Her two gargantuan bodyguards spoke animatedly with their hands as Axel stood back and listened with his arms folded over his chest and a grimace on his face. She wasn't the only one in a bad mood. Good.

She caught every few words, but one word seemed to repeat itself several times. Stalker.

A new resolve came over her, and she made a decision. This was about her. And she was not going to be left out of it.

Lifting her chin, she marched inside and went straight to the knife in the door.

“You're telling me neither of you saw a thing?” Axel's eyes widened as she walked past. “Kate—”

She put a hand in his face to stop him from talking as she looked at the message.

The image looked to be a screenshot taken from a video, probably a surveillance camera because it was from a little bit of a distance, of Axel, wearing the freaking ball cap he always wore, kissing some cute, petite woman. It was time-stamped the week before Axel arrived in Diamond Cove. Written over

the top of the message in what it looked like red lipstick were the words “He’s not yours, whore.”

Kate’s stomach churned. Two weeks ago, he’d been kissing someone else. “I’m going to be sick,” she whispered under her breath. Was she the other woman?!

He’s not yours, whore ... So, now some jealous woman was taking revenge? Against Kate’s beautiful door!

Axel let out a deep breath. “I can explain all this. You’re not in danger.”

Yanking her sweater sleeve down over her hand, Kate yanked the knife from the door frame, along with the image. Oh, she had a pretty good idea what this was about. She faced him. “You have a stalker who’s now turned her attention on me. And instead of telling me about this, you hired two bodyguards to watch me from the shadows. Is that about right?”

Bodyguard number one put a hand up in the air—the side of his face was still red where she’d nailed him with her purse. “You shouldn’t touch the evidence.”

Kate scowled at him. She hadn’t touched it; she’d pulled it out of her freaking door. “Shut it!”

He stepped back, and the other guard was feigning interest in anything but the couple in front of them, one staring at the ceiling, the other at the floor.

Axel faced them. “Guys, can you give us a minute?”

They scurried off—all of ten feet. Ugh.

“I didn’t want you to be afraid,” Axel said, signaling to the bodyguards hovering within hearing distance. So much for privacy.

Kate lifted the knife for Axel to see. “And a bang-up job they did of it, too. Your stalker put a hole in my antique door!” Bella, the designer of the library, had spent years looking for just the right doors, finally finding and buying these at auction in London and shipping them to Diamond Cove.

“Listen,” Axel rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve never had any one-on-one confrontation with this stalker before. She’s only ever sent love notes in the mail, the type you’d see on those candy hearts that people pass out during Valentine’s.”

Kate got a visual of a paper cut-out heart with the words “be mine” on it stabbed into Axel’s front door. She shook it off. “Don’t give me that. You clearly knew I was in danger. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have hired Dumb and Dumber here to look after me.” She pointed at them and barked, “Whichever one of you numbskulls broke my necklace, you owe me a new one!” She could still feel the sting on her neck from where the chain had been ripped off. She’d probably have a welt. And with the library being as big as it was, and her adrenaline pumping as much as it had been, there was no way she’d find that little pendant.

They both lowered their gazes.

“It was just a precaution,” Axel said. “When Chaz, my manager, mentioned he’d gotten a note from her with that picture of you from People Magazine Online, my first thought

was that I wanted you protected. Not because the stalker had ever done anything too crazy, but because she *is* a stalker.”

Kate placed her hands on her hips. “So your defense for not telling me is that you didn’t think she was dangerous, but that she could potentially be dangerous because she is a stalker; that about right?”

Axel cringed. “When you say it like that—”

“It sounds stupid?” she snapped. “I’m not sorry I Tased you anymore.”

He smirked.

She wanted to hit him. Instead, she yanked the paper off the knife and handed it to him. “Who’s this?”

Axel’s shoulders hunched. “My ex-girlfriend, Lillie Anne.”

“When did you break up with her?” Kate asked.

“Officially? Two weeks ago,” he said. “In real life, two years ago.”

“Right,” Kate said, venom dripping from every syllable, “that’s why you kissed her two weeks ago.” She shoved the paper at him.

He frowned and looked it over. “I can explain this ... I think.”

Kate scoffed as a text came through on her phone. She hurried to answer it to distract herself.

Library Times:

Ms. Hart,

We regret to inform you we have removed the Diamond Cove library from the competition. While The Library Times sees much potential in the DC library, it cannot be associated with tabloid drama, especially if its librarian insists on drumming up the drama for personal gain.

All the best, Janet Lyons

Kate sucked in a breath.

“What, what is it?” Axel asked, coming up beside her. She let him read her screen.

“Kate, I’m so sorry,” Axel said. “I can fix this. I’ll fix this.”

All this hard work for nothing. Years of applying and being denied for nothing. Nights of dreaming and planning and preparing, all out the window. And all because of a guy who had lied to her, and was rebounding with her or cheating on her. Served her right for dreaming. For trying to reach for a spotlight for her work one time in her life. She shouldn’t have gotten her hopes up. She was used to being overlooked, but this. It hurt. It hurt bad. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“I can call them,” he said. “Explain things.”

Oh, yeah. That wouldn’t make her look bad at all. “And if they don’t want to listen?”

“I’ll make them,” he said. “You’ll get your time in the spotlight, and it’ll all be like it never happened.”

He'd *make* them? She'd heard arrogant promises like that come out of the mouths of previous boyfriends. She did seem to have a knack for finding the conceited ones, but she never would've thought Axel would say such a thing. It sent chills down her spine, because unlike any of her exes, Axel had the power to do exactly what he said. Her stomach churned at the very idea of it.

What would he do? Throw money, promises, and threats at it until they bent to his will? No, she didn't want any part of that. It was bad enough the Lyons woman had accused her of trying to drum up attention to get in the spotlight. If she let this happen, how could she honestly defend herself against those claims?

"Get out," she croaked.

Axel just kept on talking. "I'll get the door fixed as good as new, the paparazzi will be out of here by morning and—"

Kate fisted her hands at her side. "Get out!"

Axel drew his chin back and frowned. "Kate?"

"And take your freaking bodyguards with you," Kate said. The police would be here any minute now, anyway. "I can take care of myself." Plus, she had Bear. Where was he? She glanced around and found him sitting by the door, head hung low.

"Kate." Axel stepped forward, taking her shoulders in his large hands that had held her tight and made her feel so safe.

The same hands that had made a dangerous situation a nightmare for her tonight. “Please, let’s talk about this.”

She shrugged out of his hold. “There’s nothing to say.”

“There’s everything to say.”

Kate looked him in the eye. “You once told me you’d respect my boundaries. Well, you bulldozed through them tonight. If you have any respect for me at all, then you’ll leave.”

She hadn’t noticed earlier, what with being chased, and the knife and all, that Axel looked drawn, tired, with dark circles under his eyes, as if he hadn’t slept last night, and had been running all day today. Maybe he had. It wasn’t her business anymore.

He spread his fingers wide, then quickly shoved them in the pockets of his mall cop pants. “Is that what you really want?”

Wasn’t it just like a man to assume that what a woman was saying wasn’t what she really meant when she was mad? She gave a curt nod. “We’re done. Don’t call me and don’t come back here.”

If Axel had looked drawn minutes ago, now he looked like death warmed over. She looked anywhere but at him; her gaze falling back on Bear. “Come here, buddy.” She patted her leg.

Bear didn’t budge.

“Come, pal!”

He still didn’t move.

As Axel and his bodyguards left, Bear nudged into Axel though, and Axel crouched down to scratch him behind his ears and kiss his head. “Watch out for her, big guy,” he said, then stepped outside, gently pulling the door closed behind him.

Bear dropped to the floor, jamming his nose between his front paws, and stared at the wood paneling of the door with big, sad eyes, like he was watching Axel walk away for the last time. He whined.

She tried to call for him again, but his name came out in a whispered croak. Fine, if he wanted to mope, she’d let him. She could take care of herself—she’d proven tonight she could from physical harm, at least. But as Axel disappeared around the bend in the path, Kate realized she stunk at protecting her heart.

Walking to the door, she set the deadbolt, and at the sound of metal scrapping over metal, setting the lock in place, Kate dropped to her knees by Bear and burst into tears.

Chapter 21



DON

Don went to the coffeemaker and made himself a cup, all the while keeping an eye on his grandson. Axel sat at the kitchen table with scraps of wadded-up paper scattered around him, his head resting in his palm.

He'd never seen him like this before.

Don got up every morning at five am to go for a run, and today Axel was already at the table scribbling away. By the time Don got back from his run, Axel still hadn't moved from his spot. Two hours later, after he'd gotten himself and Amelia ready for the day, and rolled her to her favorite window, Axel's pile of wadded paper had gotten bigger, but Axel was still unmoving.

When Axel had gotten back from the library last night, he'd quietly gone into his room and shut the door behind him. He had only opened up for a minute, to explain to Don why the police were at the library and assure him Kate was all right. Even then, he'd given the bare minimum and way of explanation.

Don couldn't take the moping anymore. "Did Kate break up with you?"

Axel startled out of this haze and stared at Don. "What?" he snapped.

Don took a sip of his black coffee. "I asked if Kate broke up with you."

Axel went back to scribbling on his paper. "Yep."

"What did you do?" Don asked.

"Tried to protect her." Axel chucked his pencil down on the table and buried his hands in his hair. "I lied to her."

"So what are you doing about it?" Don asked.

Axel chuckled. "Nothing. She doesn't want me to do anything."

Don shook his head. Rookie mistake.

"Not that it matters right now," Axel continued. "I've got to write a song by this afternoon or forfeit my spot performing at the Grammys. Not that you'd know what that is or why it's important."

The hurt in Axel's voice cut Don deep. "I know what the Grammys are. You've won a bunch of them." Keeping to his word, Don had been listening through all of Axel's music. He didn't like all of it, but he liked the larger portion of it. He could understand how Axel had become so popular and how his music could have touched so many people, including Cameron, For the better.

Axel let out a bitter laugh. "Yeah, Once Upon a time. When I had something to say."

A knock sounded at the door. Don set his mug down and went to answer.

Wayne, looking sharp in slacks, a pale blue button-up shirt, and a dark blue blazer waved as soon as Don opened up. "Hey, dad. You called, and I came. What's up?"

Don stepped back to let him in and pointed at Axel across the room at the table.

Wayne nodded his head, and whispered, "I see him. What's going on?"

Don replied in an equally low voice. "As far as I can tell, he's having a self-pity fest and trying to get a song written by this afternoon."

"Yikes." Wayne narrowed his gaze on Don. "Why did you call me?"

Don bristled. "You're his father. I think he could use all the help he could get right now."

Wayne grinned. "Rally the troops?"

“Something like that,” Don said.

They headed to the table, each taking a chair across from Axel.

Axel glanced up and blinked. “Dad? What are you doing here?”

“Grandpa called me; says you’ve been trying to write a song all morning?”

Axel eyed them both. “So?”

Wayne picked up one of the balls of paper and arched a brow. “I think it’s safe to say he’s worried about you. What’s going on? There’s something you need to talk about?”

Don rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

Axel folded his arms over his chest.

Wayne turned his gaze to Don. “Are you kidding me? I thought you wanted my help?”

“To motivate him,” Don said, pointing at Axel. “Not so you could come over and get him lying on the couch talking about his feelings. Boy’s got deadlines.”

This time Wayne signaled to Axel. “And those deadlines are going to go whooshing by unless we figure out what’s causing the writer's block in the first place. He doesn’t talk about what’s been bothering him, he’s going to keep having the same problem.”

“But his deadlines this afternoon,” Don said, feeling his ire rise. “We don’t have time to delve deep into his psyche and

wade through his childhood Traumas.”

Wayne stood, hovering over Don. “That’s just like you. Such a closed-minded thing to say. A lot of people, including myself, have benefited from therapy.”

Don stood. “Well, whopty doo, and ain’t that just perfect? You certainly badmouthed me enough in your therapy sessions and yet you’re still bitter Betty. But you know what, maybe therapy helps some people. Maybe Axel can start going after he gets his song written, if that’s what he wants. But right now, we need a quick fix.”

Wayne jabbed at the table with his finger. “There are no quick fixes in therapy. If I’m going to do the job, I’ve got to do it right.”

Don signaled to Axel again. “He doesn’t need to sit down and talk about his feelings; he needs to sit down and get his butt to work.” If he didn’t, according to Axel, he was going to miss out on a great opportunity. Don didn’t want that. He wanted Axel to have everything he wanted. Don still didn’t like his career, but he had a new respect for it. Even if it was on a very deep level.

“He’s my son, I think I know what’s best for him,” Wayne said. “Do you think he would have even become a singer if it weren’t for how I raised him? If I hadn’t given him the freedom to be creative, do the thing that he loved? If you had your way, he’d be a dentist.”

Don’s jaw dropped. “There’s nothing wrong with being a dentist. It’s a good respectable career.”

“I’m a singer because of Grandpa,” Axel said, his voice so low Don almost hadn’t heard it.

Don whipped his gaze to Axel, and so did Wayne.

Axel leaned back in his chair, his hands resting over his abdomen, with a cool expression on his face as he glanced between them.

“What did you say?” Wayne asked.

Don’s stomach churned.

“I became a rock star because of Grandpa,” Axel said. “He used to sing with me all the time when I was a kid. It was fun, and it fostered a love of music in me. And then he gave me Odette when I was fourteen, and that sealed my fate. I knew I was going to be a musician.”

Horror mixed with pride whirled around the forefront of Don’s mind at Axel’s admission. Horror when he thought about the rock culture, groupies whipping their bras off, drugs and alcohol, and Axel’s own personal crucible when he’d been twenty-five years old and had spent practically an entire month of his first world tour drunk.

Don remembered the sinking sensation in his stomach when he’d seen the picture of Axel passed out on the floor in his vomit, and known it was him because he was wearing a Fort Bragg sweatshirt that Don had given him. Don was still grateful to this day that his intervention had helped because Axel could have just as easily sent him on his way after telling him to mind his own business. But he hadn’t done that. And

that's where his pride in the boy started. He'd made a change. Had kept clean. And somehow had managed to stay the same sweet, kind boy Don had always known.

And now that Don knew what an amazing musician Axel really was, and the kind of music he'd written, the kind that made old folks to sixteen-year-old boys with Down Syndrome to young people of Axel's own age laugh, and dance, and feel happy, the pride swelled even more.

The dichotomy of emotions knocked the wind out of him.

"You never told me that," Wayne said.

Axel stood. "I love you, dad. I love the relationship that I have with you now, and the last thing I want to do is upset that, but how could I have ever told you when I was a kid? You were never around."

Wayne took a step back like Axel had just said had sucker punched him.

Don grasped his chest. Seemed like Axel was throwing blows right and left.

Axel glanced between them. "You two are both so much alike. You're both so controlling, And I get why now. Grandpa's always been controlling because he wants what's best for his family, he wants to protect us. And dad, you're controlling in the opposite extreme maybe, because you didn't want to be like your dad. But maybe if the two of you would actually sit down and talk to one another, you'd find you have a lot more in common than you think you do."

And the punches just kept coming. But this one was especially painful because Axel was right.

Axel stood and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Not that I’m one to judge. Listen, Grandpa, I think it’s time I go.”

Don stepped forward, bumping into the table, and knocking a bunch of the balls of paper off and onto the floor. “I’d like you to stay.”

“I wish I could,” Axel said, “but the paparazzo found out I’m here, and I don’t want to bring that kind of attention down on you. I’m leaving this afternoon.” At that, Axel left the kitchen and went down the hall to his room, softly closing the door behind him.

Wayne and he stood silently for a moment.

“He’s right, isn’t he?” Wayne asked. “We’ve been fighting each other all this time, over nothing. Axel left two years ago because of this stupid feud between us.”

All Don could do was nod.

Wayne faced him, staring down at the floor. He let out a deep breath. “Maybe we should talk?”

The urge to fight sprung up inside Don so quickly over Wayne's suggestion that they “talk.” More of his therapy. But Don wrangled it back. Wayne was trying, so that was the least Don could do. He extended a hand, and Wayne smiled and took it.

Wayne clapped him on the shoulder, then face the direction Axel had gone. “All this time, I thought Axel became a singer

because of me.”

“Me too,” Don said with an arch of a brow. “Guess I can’t blame you for his career choice anymore.”

Both men chuckled.

“Guess not. He certainly showed us.” Wayne turned his body in the direction Axel had gone. “So, dad, what are we going to do about my boy? I don’t think I’ve seen him this depressed since he found out about moms’ diagnosis.”

Don had to agree. “Part of it’s that he just had his heart broken.”

Wayne’s dark eyes went wide. “I didn’t even know he was dating anyone.”

Don nodded and pointed in the general direction of the library. “Kate, our librarian. I think he really likes her.”

Wayne let out a little chuckle. “A librarian? Why doesn’t that surprise me? Axel always loved libraries. Is there anything we can do to help?”

Don shook his head. “Kate may just need some space for now. I get the feeling this breakup has more to do with his celebrity status, than with them.” Though Don still wasn’t sure why the police had gone to the library last night. Made him worry about Kate more than a little. If Axel hadn’t been so adamant she was fine, he’d have marched over himself to talk to her.

But what was going on with Kate, was only the tip of the iceberg of a much bigger problem. Don hadn’t seen Axel in

two years and had only talked to him a few times during that time. Then all of a sudden, he breaks his radio silence, shows up on Don's doorstep, and moves into his guest room. It reminded Don a lot of when Axel was a teenager and had a problem. He always came to Grandpa with his problems, and Don couldn't brush aside the feeling that he'd done so again.

"I think you might be right about Axel needing to talk things out. I think there are things that are weighing on him he's holding in." Don ran a hand through his hair. "Music is Axel's outlet; if he hasn't been writing, that means there are a lot of emotions stuck inside of him, wreaking havoc."

Wayne let out a low whistle. "Did you just suggest that therapy might be a good thing? Wow. how'd that taste coming out of your mouth?"

Don grimaced. "Like mud." He stepped closer to Wayne and lowered his voice. "All I know is that Axel came home for a reason. He needs help, even if he doesn't realize it."

"Well, Axel's always been a tough nut to crack, he likes to keep his feelings to himself," Wayne said, nudging Don with his elbow. "He's a lot like his grandpa in that respect. If time really is of the essence, then it's too bad we have no recourse for getting information about what's been happening in his life."

Don's brow shot to his hairline. "Did you just suggest that there might be another way of helping him other than talking about his feelings?"

Wayne shrugged. "Don't go telling people I said that."

Don smiled at his boy, feeling like a weight was being lifted. “I know someone who can help us.”

“Okay, I’m listening?”

Don skirted the table and went into the living room, Wayne following close behind. He took a seat on the couch next to where Amelia sat in her wheelchair, staring out her favorite window. Keeping his voice low, he pulled his phone from his pocket as he explained. “When I was at Fort Bragg, twenty years ago, one of my men, Major Tom Braddock, started a special military police group under my direct supervision.”

Wayne sat on the other couch Kitty corner to Don. “The 76th special investigators, right? You mentioned them a couple times back then.”

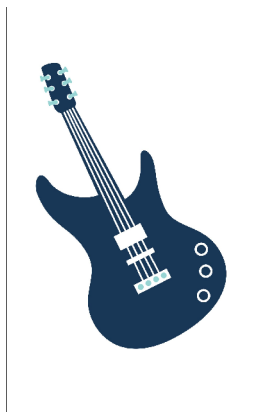
Don grinned. “Good memory.” He didn’t talk about the group often. Mainly because approximately ninety-eight percent of what they did was a hundred percent classified. Don found the number he was looking for in his phone and hit dial. He explained as the phone rang. “One of the men in that unit is a talented hacker and now works for the feds.”

Wayne frowned. “Is this idea of yours legal?”

A cheery voice answered the phone, “Don Clayton, either the world’s coming to an end or ... I don’t know how to finish that sentence.”

Don chuckled. “Joseph Murphy, how the heck are you?”

Chapter 22



AXEL

Flipping the business card around in his hand, Axel let the phone ring through as he sat on the bed in the guest room.

He'd spent the better part of the morning and afternoon staring at a blank page in the music and lyric notebook Kate had given him. They were so fresh, like a new start, Axel still hadn't been able to conjure a word, a phrase, or even a simple tune. He hadn't pulled it out earlier this morning, because he hadn't wanted to ruin the clean pages with his nonsense.

An hour ago, he'd given up altogether. There was no way he was going to be able to write a song right now. If his creativity had been blocked before he'd come here, now it was just gone. Like a magic trick. Kate kicked him to the curb, and poof,

whatever creativity he had left in him evaporated in a poof of smoke.

He was packed within fifteen minutes, but it'd still taken him another half an hour to make this call.

Someone answered the found with a grunt, followed by a muffled "Hello," like they were chewing food.

"Mack?" Axel asked.

A big gulp came next, followed by, "Sonny Crockett?"

Axel laughed, though it was a hollow sort of sound, to go with the emptiness filling what was left inside him. "How are you?"

"Good, good," Mack said in his thick Caribbean accent. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"But you thought I'd call?" That was interesting.

"Well, I figured you'd need a ride to the airport again at some point. I just didn't think that would be anytime soon," Mack said.

Axel rubbed at the ache in his chest. "Why is that?"

Mack made a clicking sound in the back of his throat, and Axel could practically see him shrugging. "You seem like you were going to stick around for a while."

That had been the plan. When he'd arrived a week and a half ago, he'd had no plans to return. He hadn't even considered booking a return flight. A lot had happened in a short amount of time.

“Something’s come up,” Axel said feigning his best happy, or at very least, my-world-isn’t-coming-crashing-down-around-me, voice.

“What time would you like me to pick you up?” Mack asked.

“As soon as you can,” Axel set the music and lyric journal on his bedside table.

“I’m on my way.”

Grabbing his bag, and Odette, Axel gently closed the door behind him.

“Grandpa?” He called when he reached the living room.

No one was there. Just a note on the door. Seemed a fitting end to his stay. Setting his stuff down by the couch, Axel went to the door and grabbed the note.

Axel,

Your father and I are at Polly’s, the first house in the row of bungalows. Grandma is taking a nap. Will be back shortly.

Grandpa

As if on cue, the sound of something crashing came from Grandpa and Grandma’s room. Axel rushed back to check on Grandma. He found her in her wheelchair, awake, and staring out her window to the beach with as blank an expression as

ever. Next to the wheel of her chair on the floor, was the alarm clock.

Axel took a deep breath and put the alarm clock back on the bedside table. “Whew, you scared me, Nonna.”

She didn’t even look at him, and that gaping hole in his chest got wider.

Gently, he took her hand and rubbed his thumb over the top of it. “Would you like to go in the living room?”

He gave her a moment to answer, then stood and pushed her down the hall. “I’ll play you some music.”

Axel set her up in her favorite spot by the piano with the view of the bird feeder, then sat down on the piano bench.

Slowly, he rested his fingers on the ivory keys, and let the tips sweep over the tops of them. With a deep breath, Axel played one of Grandma’s favorite songs of his. “A Familial Love” from his Gold Dust album.

When that song ended, he went into another of her favorites. And then another. Those songs had come to him so easy then, and they still came easy now.

He finished a fourth song and was just about to start a fifth when a knock sounded at the door.

That must be Mack.

He opened the door, and there was Mack on crutches. “What happened to you?” Axel stepped back to let Mack in.

Mack laughed and glanced down at the big black boot his foot was in. “You’ll never believe it, but my drummer dropped one of his symbols on my foot last weekend during our set. Broke a bunch of the little bones.”

Axel cringed. Those symbols weren’t light, and if they fell on your foot on the edge, they could do a lot of damage. Obviously ...

“It was a really good show though.” Mack smiled like that made all the difference between a foot with broken bones and one without. Axel respected that. A lot. He was on his third or fourth rotation of band members, and Chaz still hadn’t been able to find a group of musicians who weren’t a bunch of whiny babies.

“You finished it?” Axel remembered doing five shows in a row with the flu once. Not fun, but it had been worth it to not disappoint his fans.

Mack nodded, and spread his arms wide, being careful not to drop his crutches from his pits. “Of course, the show must go on.”

“A true musician, I see,” Axel said.

“I’ve had worse,” Mack said.

“Thanks for coming so quickly,” Axel said. “Are you still able to drive?”

“I only need my right foot for that, and it’s good as new,” Mack said with a chuckle as he took in the bungalow. “Wow, nice digs.”

Axel smiled. “Thanks, I’ll let my grandpa know you said so.”

Mack extended his hand toward Grandma. “And who’s this lovely lady?”

“Mack, this is my grandma, Amelia. Grandma, this is my friend Mack.”

Mack gave a wide smile, one of those all-encompassing ones Axel had seen on his first day here and Axel felt a little envious of him. Here he was driving an Uber for a living, playing music at a club on weekends, and yet he was happier than Axel, who had the world at his fingertips.

“My grandpa and dad went down to a neighbor’s house for a minute, do you mind waiting until they get back? I can’t leave my grandma alone.”

“Of course, no worries.” Mack shoved up the sleeves of his bomber jacket over his elbows.

“Axel, why don’t you invite your friend to sit?” Came Grandma’s voice.

Axel whipped his gaze toward her, and his jaw dropped.

She laughed. “Now I know you weren’t raised in a barn. Offer him a drink.” She looked at Mack, smiled, and pointed to one of the couches. “Please, have a seat.”

Axel’s heart thudded in his chest as he watched the light inside her grow brighter like someone had flipped on a switch. One minute she wasn’t there, the next she was scolding him with a teasing tone for not offering hospitality to his friend.

Axel immediately went to her and wrapped her in a hug.

She laughed against his chest, her frail arms coming up around his back. “What’s this for?”

Axel sucked in a breath, only now remembering to stay calm. Act normal. Grandma wouldn’t remember she had Alzheimer’s, and they were always told that the best thing to do was act like everything was business as usual. He gave himself one more second to enjoy her comforting embrace, then pulled back and smiled. “You know I love your hugs, Nonna.”

She swatted his arm and blushed.

Mack grinned from his place on the couch.

“Can we get you some lemonade or a glass of water?” Grandma asked.

Mack waved a hand through the air. “That’s kind of you, Mrs. Clayton but I’m good.”

Grandma glanced around the room. “Where’s your grandpa? You should introduce him to your friend.”

Axel’s chest tightened painfully like some big hand had wrapped around his chest and squeezed. Grandpa!

He pulled out his phone and dialed. Grandpa didn’t answer. So he called dad next. But he didn’t answer either. He didn’t know Polly’s number.

A sense of urgency fell upon Axel as he realized this moment of lucidity wouldn’t last long. Even as he stood there,

her time was ticking down. Axel glanced at Mack, and the boot on his broken foot, then back to Grandma. Looked like he only had two choices. He could stay here and enjoy the few minutes he would probably ever get to spend with her again in his life or ...

Axel spun on his heel and headed for the door. "I'll be right back, Grandma. I'm going to grab grandpa. He wanted to meet Mack."

With some effort, Mack stood when Axel reached the door. "Is everything alright?"

He nodded as he flung the door open. "Just stay with her, please."

And then Axel was running. Running possibly faster than he'd ever run in his life.

His muscles protested, his lungs ached, and his heart nearly burst from his chest, but he kept going. As soon as he could see the white bungalow at the end of the row, Axel screamed. "Grandpa! Grandpa!"

Just as he was turning up the path to Polly's door, Grandpa, Dad, and Grandpa's friends pushed out the front door.

Grandpa rushed forward, eyes wide in fright. "What is it? Is your grandma okay?"

Axel stopped, dropped his hands to his knees, and sucked in a breath. "She's awake!" He knew Grandpa would understand what he meant.

Before he'd even come to a standing position again, he felt airbrush by him, not once, but twice. Pulling to his full height, he watched as Grandpa and Dad raced back toward the bungalow.

Grandpa's group of friends came down the steps, their eyes all wide, the woman's mouths hanging in little Os.

Axel took one more breath and ran to catch up with them, going into a jog behind them. Across the street up at The Palms' main building a group of five-year-olds in Halloween costumes were being led into the back of the building.

Grandpa was in amazing shape, but he was still eighty-four years old, and that meant dad could easily outrun him. But he didn't. He stayed behind Grandpa, and Axel stayed behind them both.

When they reached the house, Grandpa burst through the door. "Amelia?"

Grandma's cheery voice found his ears as he and Dad came to a stop just inside the door. "There you are, dear."

Her eyes sparkled with mirth as she watched Grandpa approach. He fell to his knees in front of her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Don? What on earth?" Grandma said, sounding startled. "Everyone's in a hugging mood today."

Grandpa pulled back and cupped her face in his hands. "I love you, Amelia. Do you know that? Do you know how much I love you?" his voice came out choked.

Grandma chuckled. “Of course I do, dear. You tell me all the time. And I love you, too.”

Grandpa placed a kiss on her cheek and pulled her into his embrace again.

A lump formed in Axel’s throat, and a hand came down on his shoulder. Dad smiled at him, then looked back to his parents.

“Oh, Don,” Grandma said in a mock scolding tone, signaling to Mack. “We have guests. We must be embarrassing him.”

Axel had forgotten about Mack. He turned to the man and felt the ache in his chest loosen just a little as Mack wiped a tear from his cheek.

It wasn’t just them feeling how momentous what was happening was. Mack swatted a hand through the air. “Don’t mind me, I’m just glad to be here.”

This was what Axel had been missing. Being in a place where people really cared. Where love was felt not just from hearing the words, but in every deed as well. Felt in a coconut angel food cake made just for him, in his dad showing up unannounced because he’d just wanted to say hi to wrinkled delicate fingers stroking over beloved keys they could no longer play. It was in his dad standing back and letting grandpa have this moment, even though they all knew this was probably the last time Grandma would ever be lucid. This was real love. This was true love. And seeing Grandpa kiss

Grandma's hand, Axel knew he could never settle for anything less.

And suddenly he also perfectly understood what Kate had meant when she'd said he had a voice, that he just needed to figure out what it was he wanted to say. Because he now knew exactly what he wanted to say. All the words were coming together, crystal clear in his head.

And there was another thing he knew. He wasn't going anywhere, because he was going to win Kate back.



Dad had gotten a chance to talk to Grandma. Grandpa had made sure of it. She'd remained cognizant for ten whole minutes. Ten minutes where they'd all gotten to see her smile, hear her laugh, and feel her love for them. And as if that wasn't blessing enough, she faded slowly, peacefully, staring out the window at her favorite bird feeder.

Now, Axel sat out front with Dad, Axel on the porch swing, and Dad leaning against the rail, in companionable silence, with only the sound of a stray cricket here or there, as Grandpa

got Grandma settled for the night. Mack had made a quiet exit some time ago.

Sometime later, grandpa came out and took a seat next to Axel on the swing.

A few minutes later, Grandpa broke the silence. “You know, that was the fourth time I’ve ever cried in my life.”

Axel glanced over at him; his eyes were still a little red. He could barely believe his ears. He wasn’t sure he even realized Grandpa had tear ducts until today. And now he was talking about crying? “When was the last time you cried?” he asked softly, his curiosity getting the best of him.

Grandpa swallowed hard. “After the last time, your grandma was cognizant. I sat in the living room in the dark and cried like a baby. I didn’t tell her I loved her.”

Dad let out a breathy laugh. “Well, you made up for it tonight.”

Grandpa and Axel chuckled as well.

“When were the other two times you cried?” Dad asked.

Grandpa swiveled toward him on his seat. “First time was the night you were born. The nurse put you in my arms, and I didn’t think I’d ever seen anything so perfect. I was so proud. Of course, then you had to grow into a mouthy teenager and ruin it all.”

Dad smiled taking Grandpa’s teasing for what it was. Harmless prodding. It eased Axel's soul a little.

“That’s three by my count,” Axel said. “What’s the last one?”

Grandpa smirked and shot a look between Axel and Dad. “When your dad named you Axel.”

They all burst into laughter, and it felt so good. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d talked or laughed like this with his dad and grandpa.

Dad shook his head. “Well, since we’re confessing stuff, I guess I better tell you that Linda and I had always planned on calling Axel Alex.”

Don sat a little taller in his seat. “What?”

Axel snickered. “You didn’t know this? Man, I thought this story was infamous.”

Dad rested his hands on the rail on either side of his hips. “The day Axel was born, I was so overcome with excitement, I spelled Alex wrong. I didn’t even know I’d done it until you saw the birth certificate and started telling me I couldn’t name him after a car part.”

Don closed his eyes and let out a huff of air. “So you left it just to spite me.”

Wayne shrugged his shoulders. “Pretty much, yeah. Real adult of me, huh?”

“Not like I was much better, telling you what you could and couldn’t name your kid.” Don pointed one sausage size finger at Dad. “You and I need to get better at communicating.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dad said.

Behind dad, grandpa’s group of friends walk down the sidewalk, and up the path to the porch.

Winnie wrung her hands together. “Are we interrupting?”

Don waved them up. “Of course not, come on up.”

Dad glanced down at his watch. “Well, I’ve got to get going. I’ve got a group meeting tonight with obsessive-compulsives, and if I’m late, they’ll start rearranging my office.”

Axel at that, his dad waved goodbye and headed down to his car.

Don led the group inside. “Why don’t you join us, son? We have something we want to talk to you about.”

There was no way Axel could say no to an invite like that.

They all got settled on the couches and in the armchair, and Axel took a seat at the piano.

“So, what’s up?”

Grandpa rested his elbows on his knees and looked Axel in the eyes. “I take it you’ve decided to stay?”

He should have known Grandpa would have guessed it. “Diamond Cove is my home. Took some bumps in the road for me to figure that out, but it is. Yeah, I’m staying.”

Rosa clapped her hands, Winnie cupped her cheeks, Nancy and Polly sat a little taller, and Walt and Harry smirked. It made Axel smile. He was glad to know this makeshift family of Grandpas approved of him staying on.

Nancy tugged on the sleeves of her running jacket. “And what are you going to do about Kate?” she asked.

Axel frowned. Maybe Nancy needed his dad’s OCD group. “Get her back.”

Walt twitched his mustache. “We heard about what happened from Rosa’s grandson, Michael.”

“He’s a cop,” Rosa supplied helpfully. “Oh, and he escorted Kate safely home last night, and the Chief of Police set up a night watch.”

Relief washed over Axel that Kate had been taken care of after she’d sent him away. “Thank your grandson for me?”

Rosa sat a little taller. “Por supuesto. Of course.”

“The point is,” Walt interjected. “We know why Kate’s mad at you.”

Didn’t surprise him that much. They’d probably heard it through the grapevine. This place had a prolific grapevine.

Axel leaned on his elbows on his knees, mimicking Grandpa’s posture. “I don’t suppose you have any brilliant ideas to help me win her back?”

“That’s what we wanted to talk to you about,” Don said. “We want to help you win her back.”

“Oh man, I’ll take it. I could use all the help I can get.” He had no idea what he was doing. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in this position with a woman—the dog house—if he ever had been. “Any suggestions for my first step?”

“Make a big gesture,” Polly said.

“A big gesture?” Axel asked.

“It’s where you do something big, and usually really romantic to prove you love her,” Rosa explained.

Axel blinked, and an idea popped into his head. “Like playing in Diamond Cove’s Fall Concert next Saturday?”

They all looked at him like he was crazy.

“Kate signed me up for it before she knew who I was,” he explained.

Nancy tapped her bottom lip with her index finger. “That could work. What woman wouldn’t want to be serenaded by her hot boyfriend?”

Heat rushed to Axel’s cheeks.

“Especially if he sang her a song he wrote for her,” Winnie said.

Polly clapped her hands. “Yes, that’s perfect.”

Grandpa held up a hand. “Wait, wait. Axel’s having a hard time writing right now, I don’t think—“

“It’s okay, Gramps, I can do it,” Axel said.

Grandpa leaned closer. “You sure?”

He nodded. “A hundred percent.” So sure he doubted he’d be getting much sleep tonight. He had lyrics to write.

Leaning back, Don smiled. “That’s my boy.”

“All right,” Polly said. “We have our big gesture. What else?”

Axel frowned. “That’s all fine and good, I guess, but the Fall Concert is a week out. Shouldn’t I try to talk to her before then?”

“I was worried about that as well,” Nancy said.

Winnie shook her head, sending her homemade sewn earring swinging. “Samantha will know. We can ask her what she thinks.”

“Good idea,” Polly said. “Anything else?”

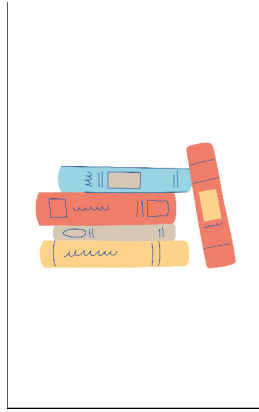
He’d talk to Samantha as soon as he could. “Actually, yes.” Axel turned to Harry. “Think you could find me an antique four-leaf clover pendant? Preferably made of white gold or silver.”

Harry grinned. “Yes, sir.”

Axel sat back and took a deep breath. For the first time in a long time, the ache in his chest, the one that was always there, even if only barely noticeable, blinked out.

This was going to work; he could feel it.

Chapter 23



KATE

“**B**ear,” Kate called to her lab who sat at the front doors of the library staring down the path. He’d been doing that since Axel left. “Bear!” she called again.

He ignored her. He’d been doing that a lot lately too.

She couldn’t blame him. As mad as she was at Axel, she still missed him. She’d lost count of the times she’d nearly called him since she’d sent him away last week or expected to find him on a ladder on the second floor.

What stopped her was the realization that he’d never called *her*. And that fact hurt. Wasn’t this why she’d decided to give up men? Because she could never tell when she was falling for someone she shouldn’t be? Because she’d spent the last decade-plus in one bad relationship after another.

And this one was the worst of them all because she feared she might actually be heartbroken. Served her right really, falling for a guy with his celebrity status and background. He'd probably made an art form of lying; probably had a girlfriend in every city in the world. Including the one he was kissing in that picture. He was a busy man! He had no time to call. Too busy making conquests and lying about stalkers.

She slammed the book in front of her closed; the thud echoed throughout the building.

From the couch, ninety-four-year-old Betty Mitchell, Aaron's grandmother, glanced up from her book with a startled look on her face.

Kate hunched her shoulders. "Sorry," she whispered.

Aaron and Cocoa weren't back from their honeymoon yet; had decided to stay on an extra week at a wildlife preserve. Kate was happy for them, but another week of them gone meant another week of Sweetie being gone too. And between Sweetie's absence and Axel's, Bear was impossible to live with.

That was another thing! Bear was always such an excellent judge of character. How had he missed the mark so far with Axel?

She called Bear again.

On instinct, Bear glanced over his shoulder, but then as if he realized Kate'd tricked him, he stuck his nose in the air and turned from her.

“Buddy,” she said. “It’s not my fault.” None of it was her fault! She hadn’t lied to Axel. She hadn’t kept him in the dark about something concerning his safety. And she certainly had been going around kissing other men. She’d flattened the one who’d tried, and they hadn’t even been dating yet.

Bear stood and moped his way out the door and away from her.

Fine, be that way.

She grabbed another book and set it on the stack of books she needed to put back where they belonged. Picking the stack up, she placed them on her little rolling trolley, already in order according to the Dewey Decimal system. It made things faster.

Before she could push off, Samantha marched into the library in a black pencil skirt, a beige button-up blouse with black detailing, and a thick black belt. She pointed over her shoulder. “Is there something wrong with Bear? He seems sad.”

“He’s fine,” Kate snapped, making the library do that echoey thing again. Shoot. She scrunched her eyes closed and shook her head. “Sorry, he’s been crabby ever since ...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it.

Samantha folded her arms over her chest. “Since Axel left?”

Kate took a deep breath. “Can I help you with something?” She used her most saccharine tone.

Stepping forward on her high-heeled, beige retro Oxfords, Samantha clasped her hands in front of her. “I have some news for you.”

Kate started organizing the books on her cart. They could be straighter.

Samantha grabbed her arm. “Kate, some really *good* news.”

That caught her attention. “Okay, what is it?”

“The Library Times sent someone in here last Saturday incognito,” Samantha said. “Apparently their judge was already in town, and couldn’t resist taking a peek.”

Kate thought back to last Saturday, trying to remember everyone who’d come in. But it was an impossible task. Halloween was always a busy day for the library. “Okay?”

A huge smile spread over Samantha’s face. “He was so impressed with our library, Kate, he went back and demanded they re-enter it into the contest.”

Kate held her breath. “What does that mean?”

“We’re back in the running.” Samantha clapped. “The panelists will come next Saturday at five pm to make their final decision.”

This couldn’t be real. After that scathing email she’d gotten from that Lyons woman, Kate couldn’t believe it. “The judge just couldn’t help himself? He just had to come see?”

Samantha nodded. “Okay, there was a little more to it. Axel called in a favor. Found out the judge here in town was a fan

of The Venturists and got him tickets to the next concert.”

“Ugh,” Kate said, and pushed her trolley away. “Then it has nothing to do with our library. Axel bought the judges off.”

Going into a light run, Samantha caught up with her. “That judge still took one look at the library and demanded it be put back in the running.”

“Probably another bribe.” The cart got its wheel stuck on one of the runner carpets. Kate tilted the cart back, lifting the front wheels off the carpet, and moved on.

Samantha rolled her eyes behind her square glasses, and grabbed Kate’s arm, making her stop. “Does that sound like Axel to you? Really?”

Kate raised her chin. No, it didn’t. “Well, he’s trying to ease his conscience. Like with the door.” She pointed to where the stalker had stabbed the knife into the paneling. The morning after it’d happened, one of the best woodworkers in town had stopped in bright and early, and an hour later, you couldn’t tell anything had happened. And he’d managed to pull it off before the holiday foot traffic commenced.

“Or maybe he loves you and is trying to make things right.” Kate lifted a hand like it had a tray on it. *Maybe?*

Quickly glancing over her shoulder, Kate checked to make sure no one had heard her annoying friend. The old folks at The Palms loved good gossip and the last thing she needed was people passing around a rumor he was in love with her, especially when he’d already jumped town. Kate lowered her

voice and stepped closer to her friend. “He lied to me. He lied about the stalker, who, if you forgot, stabbed my door! And, he has a girlfriend. He kissed her days before coming here. We have photographic, time-stamped proof!”

Samantha grinned from ear to ear, sending Kate on high alert. Samantha pulled out her phone. “I’m so glad you mentioned that. Here, look at the picture again.” She shoved her phone and Kate’s face.

It was the picture of Axel kissing that girl again. Lillie Anne Mae Ellis. Ugh. The woman was beautiful, talented, pocket-sized—not that Kate had looked her up—and Kate really wanted to hate her. But she didn’t.

She tried to shove the phone away. “No, thanks. I’ve seen enough.”

Samantha grabbed her wrist and shook her. “Kate, look at the picture.”

Begrudgingly, Kate took the phone back and looked. “What am I supposed to be seeing? Other than Axel kissing this woman.”

Samantha laced her fingers together and went up on her toes. “What’s Axel missing in that picture?”

Kate frowned and looked again. Missing? She couldn’t see that he was missing anything. He wore his usual uniform of jeans and a T-shirt, his black baseball cap, and his perfect chiseled jaw was on prominent display from the angle at which he kissed her. Kate felt her heart sink, and a headache

forming behind her brow. “I don’t know Samantha; would you just tell me already? I don’t feel like playing games.” She handed Samantha her phone back.

“What did Axel have last week that he doesn’t have this week?”

Kate shook her head. “That sounds like a riddle.”

Samantha threw her hands up. “A beard. A big *thick* one. One that probably took him months to grow.” She held her phone up in Kate’s face and pointed to Axel. “This guy has no beard. I did a little research of my own. Axel hasn’t been in public for the last year or more. No one’s seen him. So no one would know he’d grown a beard. This guy isn’t Axel.”

A seed of hope sprouted roots in the middle of Kate’s chest as she looked closer at the photo, but she shoved it down. The guy looked just like him, but the photo was time-stamped, and Axel hadn’t been wearing a stick-on beard. She’d been close enough to him all week to know his beard had been a hundred percent genuine. “So this guy was a stand-in?”

Samantha nodded. “I hear celebrities do this kind of thing all the time. Fake relationships to help increase interest, and therefore sales or whatever.”

Kate scrunched her nose. “That doesn’t sound like something Axel would do, though, does it?”

“I don’t know,” Samantha shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t have much choice in the matter. When it comes down to it, we don’t know much about his line of work. All we know for a fact is

that this guy, kissing whoever the heck this woman is, wasn't Axel."

Kate folded her arms over her chest. "He still lied to me."

"Yeah, he did that," Samantha said. "But it wasn't for selfish reasons. Like because he was cheating on you, or stealing money out of your sock drawer—"

"That only happened once!" Fifty bucks, four boyfriends ago, and Kate had learned her lesson.

Samantha held up a staying hand. "He was trying to protect you. He didn't know the extent of the danger and didn't want you to be scared."

Kate turned back to her trolley. "That doesn't make it okay."

Samantha went in front of the cart, blocking Kate from moving. "You're right, it doesn't make it okay. But given the circumstances, I don't think it's a good enough reason to break up with him. Especially considering you're in love with him."

"Maybe that's exactly why breaking up with him was the right thing to do," Kate said. "So that I only have to feel a little pain now instead of total heartbreak later." She left out that she'd spent every night this week crying over pints of Häagen-Dazs

ice cream while listening to Axel's *Midnight Rendezvous* album, which he'd clearly written for her, on repeat. "Let Her Through?" and "Cheated and Cheated on?" and "Girl in the Pink Sweater?" and "The 12:15 Train." Clearly, all about her.

Samantha shook her head. “Since I’ve known you, you’ve always dated the wrong guy. After a while, I figured it was intentional so you wouldn’t get your heart broken. And man, oh, man, was I right. You never cared about any of those guys, which made the breakups easy. But this time, it’s different. Axel’s a good guy, Kate. He cares about you a lot, and you’re just going to let him walk away? Really?”

Kate lifted her chin and sniffed.

“I understand not wanting to get your heart broken, but I never thought you were a coward.” Samantha folded her arms over her chest.

Kate sucked in her breath. “That was harsh.”

Samantha shrugged. “Am I wrong?”

Was she? A coward? She let out of breath. “None of this was my fault.”

“Well, as long as you have your high horse.”

Gripping the smooth metal handle of her trolley, Kate huffed. “It’s not like it matters anyway. He hasn’t called. Hasn’t once tried to contact me. I haven’t seen him all week. I’m sure he’s long gone by now.”

Samantha pulled out a piece of paper from her skirt pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Kate. It was a flyer for the Diamond Cove Fall Concert, and in big letters in the middle of the page, it read “Come watch Axel Clayton perform live this Saturday at six-thirty pm! “Wrong again. He’s still here. And

look at that! He's playing at the concert you signed him up for."

Kate's breath hitched. He was going to perform in a teeny, tiny small-town concert? She straightened her shoulders, but felt less confident this time when she said, "That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Maybe not." Samantha moved out of the way of the cart. "But for someone who doesn't believe in lost causes, I figured you'd want to know."

Chapter 24



DON

“**W**hy can’t he see me?” Don asked the group gathered behind him.

“Don?” Joseph Murphy wore a white button-up and aqua blazer, his blue eyes looking freakishly bright as he stared into the camera. “Are you there?”

Huffing, Don signaled to his computer screen and glanced over his shoulder at Axel. “Why isn’t there a picture?”

“It should just pull up,” Nancy said, tapping on some keys like she knew what she was doing. She probably did—she video-chatted with her granddaughters every week.

“I already tried that,” Walt grumbled.

Axel got up from his spot at the kitchen table, smirking, and headed over.

“You need to turn on your camera,” Murphy said, with a fish-eating grin that made Don want to smack him.

“I’m not talking to you, Murphy,” Don barked.

Murphy held his hands up in surrender. “Take your time. I’m just at work keeping national secrets from falling into the hands of dictators. No rush.”

“He’s a handsome guy,” Rosa said. “Is that a natural blond?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Murphy replied, not missing a beat.

Rosa fanned herself.

Harry sat forward in his seat. “Have you tried turning it off and on again?”

Winnie stared down at a pair of earrings she was sewing or whatever the heck she was doing. “I keep telling Samantha she needs to do more computer classes.”

“She’s already promised more phone classes,” Polly reminded them. “She’s got a lot on her plate, let’s not overwhelm the poor thing.”

Axel reached past them and turned the laptop around on the coffee table. “You have your camera covered.” He moved something up by the camera, then turned the computer back around. “There.”

Don's image pulled up in a little box next to Joseph's, and The Secret Seven crowded around him to get a better look.

Murphy waved. "Folks. Don."

"Murphy," Don replied. "That's a cute jacket you have on there."

Murphy grabbed his lapels and stuck his chest out—man was obsessed with clothes. And his hair. He had one of those cuts where it was shorter on the sides and tall on top. "Right?"

A woman popped into view from the upper-right-hand corner of the screen, and Don and his friends all lurched back. Couldn't see much of her, just her forehead, long brown hair, and her large green eyes, which were magnified by her cat-eye glasses. "He prefers handsome to cute because he's a man and men aren't cute."

Murphy pulled her back. "They can't see you." She took a seat next to 76th special investigator's former front man.

"I beg to differ." Nancy chuckled.

Don quickly made introductions. "This is Joseph Murphy. I worked with him and his unit for a little over a decade. Murphy works for the FBI now and is a hacker and an analyst."

"Ah," Nancy said. "That explains why he got you involved."

Nodding to the woman next to Murphy, Don asked. "Who's this?" He hadn't wanted his family business to become FBI business.

Sitting taller in his seat, Murphy said, “This is Bree Gallagher, my girlfriend.”

Don’s jaw dropped.

She was a cute thing, just the type of gal Don would’ve dated when he was a boy. She reminded him a little of Amelia. But she didn’t seem like Joseph’s type. As long as Don had known Murphy, he’d always gone after supermodels, with high hemlines and low IQs.

Murphy continued, “She’s an agent with the IRS and helped me look into your problem.”

“Thank you.” Don nodded. “Now, we have to keep this short because I need to pick Amelia up from the salon in an hour.”

“Understood,” Murphy said. Amelia had doted on Murphy and the other men in his unit, and they loved her in return.

Axel moved to leave.

“Stay, Axel,” Don grabbed Axel’s arm. “This involves you.”

Axel pulled over the piano bench and sat down.

“Nice to meet you,” Don spoke to Bree.

Bree’s eyes widened in delight, but when she spoke there was little inflection in her tone. “You too. I’ve heard a lot about you. You’re like their Alan Greer from *Jack Ryan* or Alan Hunley from *Mission: Impossible*.”

“Oh?” Don folded his arms over his chest.

She leaned forward, inching her glasses up her nose as she did. “I have questions about the mission you had the guys run in Bagdad across the Mojave Desert. Don’t you think it would’ve worked better to start with the single envelopment rather than starting with an attack from a defensive position?”

Don thought about it. Aside from the fact that all of this was classified information, she made a good point. “Ideally, yes, but with insurgents coming at us from all sides—”

“You had to establish ground before you could enter.” Bree nodded in understanding but looked like she still wasn’t sure.

“Did I mention Bree is a talented hacker as well as an IRS agent?” Murphy asked, clearly pleased with his love.

Polly cleared her throat. “Anyone know what they’re talking about?”

All around him, Don’s friends shook their heads.

“Do you think an indirect approach would’ve been better?” Don asked.

Murphy cleared his throat. “I thought we were here to discuss your grandson?”

Nancy swatted a hand through the air. “We just got to let them finish.”

Don made a slashing motion through the air with his hand. “Let the woman speak.”

Bree scrunched up her little button nose. “Maybe,” she said. “The guys are great at those maneuvers—especially because

Chris has no trouble taking big risks and Brandon can take out a rat at two-hundred yards. Ultimately, what you did got us the classified files, so ...”

Wow. Don leaned back in his seat. “I like her.”

Murphy chuckled and gave Bree one of those looks—the kind that said, he was in this for the long haul. About bloody time the man found a sensible woman to settle down with. “So do I,” Murphy said, draping an arm over her shoulder. “Now, as fun as this trip down memory lane has been, would you like to know what we dug up on your grandson’s stalker?”

This time Axel leaned forward. He grabbed the computer and turned it to face him. “Wait, what?”

Don got up and went to stand by Axel.

“Turns out there is no stalker,” Murphy said. “At least not really.”

“How do you figure?” Axel asked.

“There was a very real knife in the door at the library,” Rosa said. She’d come up behind Axel on the other side.

Bree jumped in to explain. “There was a woman by the name of Cindy Bale who had gotten your address and was sending you love notes—”

“I’m aware,” Axel said.

“But considering she was in jail last Friday for breaking into Zac Efron’s house to take a bath,” Bree said, “she couldn’t have been the one who threatened your girlfriend.”

Don folded his arms across his chest. “Do you know who was?” The last thing Don wanted was for Kate to be in any danger.

Bree nodded. “I did some more digging and discovered some interesting information for you about Chaz Collins.”

“My manager?” Axel asked.

“He's been embezzling money from you for years,” Bree said.

Murphy cleared his throat. “Did I also mention she works for the IRS?”

“Millions of dollars,” Bree continued, “that he then turned around and made bad deals with. He's in a hole he's not going to be able to dig himself out of. Either he's getting arrested or killed.” She lifted a shoulder. “Do you have a preference? I can get agents to his place within the hour. If he's in custody, he'll be protected.”

“Let's leave that question on the table for now.” Joseph winked at her.

Axel scrubbed a hand down his face. “I can't believe this. I've worked with Chaz for years.”

“Which put him in a perfect position to steal from you,” Joseph said. “Listen, the reason I set this meeting up in the middle of my workday is because there are some important, immediate things you need to know.”

“Like?” Axel asked.

“Collins didn’t like that you were planning on staying in Florida,” Murphy said. “The longer you were there, the harder it would be for him to control you and maneuver your career as he’s been doing for years. Plus, the sharks are closing in on him and he needs results, like yesterday. Push, push, push you to write more music. You make the most money in the years you release albums—even bad ones. No offense.”

Axel scrubbed a hand over his freshly shaved chin. “None taken.”

“He didn’t like it,” Murphy said. “So it appears he took a situation that was already an issue—”

“Your stalker,” Bree added.

Murphy nodded. “And turned it to his advantage.”

Nancy came up on Don’s other side. “Chaz is the stalker, isn’t he?”

Bree shrugged a little shoulder. “I don’t like to guess, I prefer right or wrong, black and white, yes or no. Math.”

Murphy dropped his hand to hers and squeezed. “But?”

“But,” Bree let out a sigh. “He was in Florida the night Kate was attacked and caught the first flight back to California the next morning.”

Axel cursed under his breath.

“Language,” Don snapped.

Walt and Harry were squeezing in now too.

“Sorry.” Axel leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. “So, what should I do? Call him and ...”

Murphy shook his head.

But it was Rosa who spoke next. Her eyes were sharp and her posture said they’d stepped into her arena of expertise. She came up behind Axel. “No. Cease all communication with him immediately. We’ll need to show in court that as soon as you found out, you cut all ties. Don’t answer his calls. Better yet, block his number.” Rosa looked at Bree. “Did you inform your bosses about his embezzling?”

Bree gave one succinct nod.

“And I tagged him in the FBI database too, just for ticking me off,” Murphy said. “Any man who tries to get his way by terrifying a woman deserves to go to jail.”

Don cracked his knuckles, the urge to crush someone hitting him full force.

Axel let out a low whistle. ““There’s a man going around taking names,’ huh?”

A few scattered chuckles came from Don’s friends behind them at Axel’s ad libbing of the Johnny Cash song. Don might have laughed under different circumstances. He was still seeing red. Not only had Chaz scared a perfectly innocent woman, he’d messed with Don’s grandson.

Polly hunched down a little closer to Axel and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Yeah, his name’s Don. And he’s ticked.”

The vein in Don's neck throbbed.

Axel chuckled.

"Do we need to worry about safety, you think?" Don asked, bringing the conversation back on topic.

Murphy leaned forward and rested his hands on his desk. "Until he's arrested, a healthy level of caution would be wise."

Right. So, they'd have to keep an eye on Kate. Hmmm.

Axel gave him a lopsided grin. "Thank you."

"Happy to help." Murphy nodded. "Your grandparents are great people. Especially your grandma—she made the best banana bread I've ever had. I can't tell you how it felt to walk into her house after being deployed. Meant the world to all of us."

Axel looked at Don. "I might know what that's like."

"We sure love them," Winnie said, filling in whatever space there was left around Axel. It was easier for her because she was so tiny.

"By the way," Joseph said. "We love your music."

Don straightened his spine as pride washed over him. Murphy listened to Axel's music.

"Not your last album, though. That was a disaster," Bree made a face.

Axel chuckled. "We can blame Chaz for that."

"Figures," Bree said, then nodded toward Murphy. "Also, Joseph plays guitar way better than your guy. You should

consider replacing him.”

Murphy gave her a smolder.

“And that’s our cue to say goodbye.” Don groused.

“I can’t thank you enough,” he added. He never would’ve figured out all that stuff on his own.

“Any time.” Murphy arched a brow. “Plus, I think we still owe you a handful of favors. Good luck.”

They disconnected, and Don shut his laptop.

“This is such a mess,” Axel dropped his head into his hands. “Chaz has handled the business end of everything for me. I won’t even know where to begin cleaning up this mess. He had big stakes in my production company, too. I’m going to have to wipe the slate completely clean. Drop everyone.”

Nancy placed a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t fix the damage he’s already done, but I can look at where you’re at and design a model that’ll steer you straight from now on.”

“And my family’s firm will handle all the legal aspects,” Rosa said. “We’ll take care of you.”

Polly shoved forward. “Did you say production company?”

Axel nodded. “Yeah. Pulse Records.” Axel let out a breath. “The other members of The Venturists have life contracts with them. Not that it matters. I’ve only been with this group for three years. They swap out my band members often.”

“But you don’t have a contract with them?” Rosa asked.

“Nope,” Axel said. “I may not have had a hand in the business end of things over the years, but I never sign a contract without going over it with an attorney. I signed one contract with them that ran out two years ago. They still record my music, but all my music belongs to me.”

Rosa clapped her hands together. “Brilliant. That will help a lot.”

Axel let out a humorous laugh. “Great.”

Polly tapped the side of her nose, a clear sign the wheels were turning in her brain.

“What are you thinking, Polly?” Don asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” she said with a glint in her eye. “At least nothing yet.”

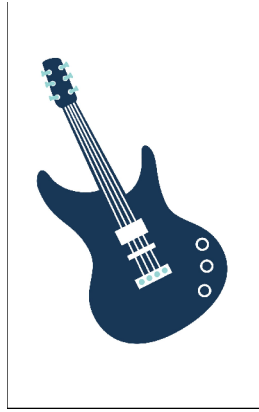
Axel glanced around. “I can’t thank you all enough for helping me.”

Walt dropped a hand on Don’s shoulder. “Your grandma and grandpa are like family. That means you're family too. We’ve got your back.”

Don stepped back and took it all in. These people, gathered around his prodigal grandson, had his back—like his military brothers he’d served with over the years. They'd shoot a man for him. While Polly might not be a sniper, she was sharp, Rosa was fierce, Nancy was shrewd and calculating, and Winnie cunning. And as for Walt and Harry, he knew they'd take a bullet for him, and at this point in his life, he couldn't

think of any group he'd trust with his grandson's safety and happiness more.

Chapter 25



AXEL

As the sun set over Diamond Cove Bay, Axel tried to ignore the nervous churning in his stomach. He hid out in the Surf Shop owned by Nancy's son-in-law, Chad, waiting for the concert to start, his mind ill at ease.

The concert presenters set up a large stage at the end of the pier shops and told Axel that this was the biggest turnout the Fall Concert had ever had by and large. Axel could believe it. There were no parking spots anywhere that he'd been able to see, the streets were teeming with crowds, and the venue itself had concertgoers packed in like sardines between the shops that led up to the stage. The audience was still a fraction of what it'd be at one of his concerts, but Axel hadn't performed in a concert, or anywhere else, since his last world tour ended

a little less than two years ago for his last album. He was nervous.

Nervous to be performing again after such a long time, nervous about sharing his new songs, and nervous about Kate. Would she come? Would she like his songs? The one he'd written for her? Would she forgive him? He clutched the little box in his jacket pocket with the sterling silver, four-leaf clover pendant Harry had procured for him, the man really was amazing at finding things, and took a deep breath.

A lot was riding on this thirty minutes of his life.

A week without Kate had felt like an eternity. And while he'd planned on sending her flowers and lunch every day, serenading her while she worked, and overall begging on bended knee if it came to it, he'd run into Samantha last Monday morning, and she warned him off.

He'd felt like a recalcitrant schoolboy when she pulled him off to the side during breakfast to explain. "I saw the flowers you sent to Kate this morning."

Excitement rattled around inside of him. "Did she like them? What did she say?"

An elderly couple passed by, shooting glares in his direction.

He frowned. What was that about?

"Keep your voice down," Samantha said. "Kate asked Michael and Eric not to say anything about what happened Friday night, so naturally everyone in town knows."

“What exactly do they know?” Axel frowned.

“We have security cameras set up at the library.” Samantha touched his shoulder. “They heard your entire argument. To be fair, it might not have been Michael or Eric who spilled the beans, but anyone at the police station who might have seen it. And considering we don’t see crimes in Diamond Cove very often, I wouldn’t be surprised if they pulled up the footage with several tubs of popcorn to pass around. If it showed up at Dive-In Movie Night, I wouldn’t be remotely surprised.”

Axel’s mind was a whirl of thoughts, two mainly. First, why was she babbling when, second, they had footage of what happened? Yeah, he was pretty sure it’d been Chaz, but he still wanted to see it himself. “So they have footage of who broke in?”

Samantha shook her head. “No. The power went out, remember?”

He did. He’d been out on Grandpa’s porch, taking a breather from trying on his costume, strolling at the library, and wishing he could be with Kate when the lights had gone out. It’d sent a shock of adrenaline through him, and he sprinted off to make sure she was okay.

“So no infrared lights?”

Kate folded her arms over her chest. “This is The Palms Retirement community, not a movie studio in Hollywood, California. Security cameras are about as fancy as we get. But back to the point. You can’t send Kate flowers.”

Huh?

“Or chocolates, or love songs, or any tokens of affection.”

“Why?” How else would he get her to talk to him if he didn’t apologize first?

“One, because she’ll be expecting it. Two, because it’s what most of her exes did to try to win her back,” Samantha said. “This is always how it goes. The guy ticks her off, she dumps them, they try to grovel their way back into her good graces, she shuts them down over and over until she’s annoyed, and they’re finally too put out to keep trying. She’s already expecting you to go in guns blazing, like all the other nameless losers she’s dated.”

Axel scratched his head. “But if I do nothing, I’ll fade away, like all those nameless losers, right?”

“I know, it sounds like a catch twenty-two, but I know Kate,” Samantha said. “If you leave her alone as she asked, she won’t have an opportunity to get annoyed. Her defenses will stay down, and she’ll start to miss you. And if she does that, you’ll have a chance to win her back.”

He didn’t like it. Not one bit, but if Samantha was right ...
“How long?”

“Huh?”

“How long would I have to leave her alone for?”

“At least a week,” Samantha said. “It’d be even better if you could leave The Palms for a while, maybe even Diamond Cove, so she has no chance of running into you.”

All his plans of winning her over before the concert, so that when the concert came around he'd have a nice surprise for her, deflated like a party balloon before his eyes.

“Look, Don and Polly told me your plans for the Fall Concert.” Samantha glanced around the room. “I think it might work, but only if you listen to me now.”

“How will I get her to the concert?” he'd asked.

Samantha gave him an encouraging smile. “Leave that to me.”

Begrudgingly, he agreed. What else was there to do?

So he'd left Diamond Cove for the week, gone to Orlando, and holed up in a hotel suite writing music. And it had flowed. He had so many songs now, he hardly knew what to do with them. At least he'd be able to fulfill the part of his upcoming world tour contract that stipulated he'd be sharing new songs as he went. And the joy of getting words down almost made up for losing the Grammys.

But now, eight days later, the distance between him and Kate felt like Grand Canyon; wide, deep, impossible to cross, and his joy at writing again was seriously quashed.

He had a perfect view of the horizon over the water and stood mesmerized as the reds, pinks, and oranges of the sunset slowly faded to grays and blues, and soon, Axel would be up doing his set. And he still didn't know if Kate would even show. So, he did the only thing he could do. He tried to put her out of his mind.

Instead of the niggling thought she wouldn't show, Axel's mind turned to Grandpa who sat at the front of the stage with his dad, mom, Sean, some of his aunts and uncles, and a bunch of his cousins. This was the first time Grandpa had ever been to one of Axel's shows, and that thought horrified him. What if Grandpa hated it? What if this performance was the reason he decided never to listen to Axel play ever again, even at home? What if someone threw their bra on stage? Axel gulped and ran a hand over his face.

This was getting ridiculous. Axel wasn't a nervous performer. "Snap out of it!"

"Snap out of what?" a woman asked.

Axel turned and smiled at the two women approaching him. Polly and Nancy.

Nancy was out of her usual tracksuit uniform and in jeans and a frilly blouse, and Polly looked equally good in black slacks and blazer, a white button-up, and her ever-present turquoise jewelry.

"Wow," Axel said. "You ladies look gorgeous."

They both blushed. Polly swatted a hand through the air.

"Just wait until you see Winnie and Rosa," Polly said.

"And your grandpa," Nancy added. "You look stylish yourself. I like your leather pants."

Polly nodded. "Very rockstar."

He grinned. “Thanks, so what are you doing here?” Axel asked. “I don’t want you to lose your seats.”

Grandpa’s friends had all made it too, including Julia, her boyfriend Logan, her parents, and Cameron. That was something Axel could be excited about. He’d loved singing for Cameron in the library last week. Had loved witnessing his unfettered joy as he danced around to “Cheated and Cheated on.” The kid was a beacon of light.

“I have some good news for you,” Nancy said. “I finished going through your business records last night with my granddaughter, Elizabeth. It’s not as messy as I expected. For a crazy embezzler, your manager sure kept clean records. Give me another week, and we’ll have a foolproof business model set up for you.”

The day after their call with Joseph Murphy and Bree Gallagher, they’d been able to get their hands on all of Chaz’s files, courtesy of Rosa’s family’s law firm. It helped that no one had seen Chaz for days and that his executive assistant had been the one to respond to the letter.

“Of course,” Nancy continued, “you’ll probably have to change some things up to accommodate aspects of your business I don’t understand, but we’re leaving room for those eventualities.”

He started to thank her, but before he could, Polly jumped in.

“Now for my part,” Polly said, rubbing her hands together. She stepped over to the side of the stage and to a tall man with

brown hair.

He smiled down at her as she took his arm and led him toward Axel. The guy had to be in his late forties or early fifties with shaggy brown hair, and a kind look about him. Also, he seemed familiar. Really familiar. Axel furrowed his brow trying to place him.

They stopped in front of Axel.

Polly smiled at Axel. “I don’t know if you know the story or not, but my grandson, Paxton, did some landscaping for my friend here—” she signaled up at the guy Axel still hadn’t placed. “Anyway, he had us for dinner a few nights ago and turns out he’s a music producer. Axel, I’d like you to meet—”

The man reached out his hand to Axel. “We’ve met.”

Nancy and Polly smiled from ear to ear.

“You have?” Nancy asked.

Axel shook his head. “I feel terrible because you look familiar, but I can’t place you.”

The guy tossed his head back and laughed, then extended a foot and said, “Care to lick my other boot too?”

It all came rushing back. Axel’s first-night opening for a chart-topping band, Midnight Panther, getting hit in the head by a Jell-o shot, meeting Kate, and ... “Callum Sloan?”

Callum laughed again as the two shook hands more enthusiastically.

“I know, I look different,” Callum said. “Last time you saw me, I was a drunk who could barely get dressed most days, let alone bathe.”

“And now?” Axel asked.

“Getting sacked the night you opened for Midnight Panther was my wake-up call. I got into rehab, found God, and ...” Callum pointed to the side of the stage where a beautiful blond stood, with her arms wrapped around two boys around the ages of eight and ten. “Got married and started a family.”

A grin split over Axel’s face. “That’s amazing. I’m so happy for you. I’ve wondered about you over the years.”

“I haven’t had to wonder about you,” Callum said. “You’ve certainly made your mark in the industry.”

Axel lifted his hands. “So, what are you doing here?”

“Well, as the lovely Mrs. Polly mentioned, I just moved to Diamond Cove, and I have my own record label. Unconventional.”

Axel’s brows shot to his hairline. He’d heard of it. That label was making waves.

Nancy clasped her hands together. “He’s in charge of the concert this year. He’s the one looking for new talent.”

Polly jumped in then. “And we thought that new talent could be you!”

Axel was dumbstruck. “What? You’re not serious.”

Grinning, Callum said, “They are. And they’ve told me a little of your story. That you’re finally dumping Chaz and moving on to greener pastures?”

“That’s the plan,” Axel couldn’t believe it. “You’re taking on unknown groups?” Callum’s record company was the golden grail.

Callum nodded. “A few. I’ve been working the circuit for over a decade now, and have lots of mainstream groups signed up, but there’s always someone new coming around, and if they’re any good, I don’t want to miss a chance to sign them too. And I would love to talk to you more about this, I never forgot how you stood up for me that night—it’d be a pleasure to work with you, but it looks like you’re about to go on, so—”

Axel glanced over his shoulder as the current band finished up their set and excited screams and applause followed them off stage and the commentator took to the mic.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Axel said. “But let’s talk.”

“Don’t worry. Polly’s got my number,” Callum said, clapping him on the shoulder. “And just think, if Paxton hadn’t landscaped my yard, and if you hadn’t signed up to do this concert, we would’ve missed one another. It must be fate.”

Axel liked that idea. Like the idea of everything going full circle.

The commentator announced Axel was up, and the crowd went wild.

“We better take our seats!” Nancy yelled.

He gave them a thumbs-up as they walked off.

Axel turned to his band and lifted his arms. “You ready?”

Mack and the other members all cheered, but then Mack thumped over to him on his crutches, and spoke in a stage whisper over the screams of the fans. He pointed in the direction Callum had gone. “Was that who I think it was?”

“If you think it was Callum Sloan, then yes,” Axel grinned.

Mack’s all-encompassing smile spread over his face. “Man, that’s exciting. Wish I’d gotten to meet him.”

Axel had a feeling Callum would make an effort to meet Mack and his group after they were done with their set. Axel had dropped in at the club where they played to hear them last Sunday when he realized he didn’t have his band anymore. They were phenomenal. Each with their own unique style on their instruments. He’d asked them on the spot if they’d be interested in playing with him, and they’d responded with a resounding yes!

The commentator announced they were up, and the screams increased tenfold.

Mack and his band, all took deep breaths.

“You’ve got this, guys,” Axel said. “You’re naturals.”

“Yes,” the bassist said, “but naturals who’ve never played for a crowd larger than a couple of hundred people.”

“Then you’re in for a new experience.” Axel clapped him on the shoulder.

They made their way on stage, and Axel introduced his band members and their first three songs. He'd let Winnie, Harry, and Cameron each pick their favorite for this event. He looked for them, spotting Cameron first jumping up and down in the front row with a Venturists big foam finger—Axel hadn't even known they made those. Then he spotted Winnie, Rosa, and Harry in Venturists T-shirts, along with the rest of Gramps group and their spouses, along with Axel's family, and smiled. They were all there except Grandma who was hanging out at The Palms with Samantha until they were done here because she couldn't handle the crowds.

But the *best* was seeing Grandpa in a T-shirt, that was probably a size too small for him, with Axel's face on the bottom and "If found, please return to," above his image.

Axel snorted. Him. Hadn't been able to help it. And Kate hadn't been there for it. He'd seen that t-shirt before at his concerts, mostly on women, and wondered if Grandpa knew that. Doubtful.

He glanced out over the crowd as Mack and his band started playing the first song, hoping beyond hope he might see Kate, her radiant smile, her luscious brown locks, and those aqua eyes of hers. He wanted to share this with her. She was nowhere in sight. His heart dropped.

So, he gave himself to the music, grabbing the mic and jamming out to Cameron's choice first, "Cheated and Cheated on,"—Cameron really loved that song—then Winnie's choice, "Amelia," which felt appropriate since Grandma couldn't be

there, and finally Harry's choice, 23 Lions, an all-out, in your face, America-loving song Axel had written about Sean and his unit of twenty-three men in the Navy Seals.

Sean danced to that one, or more like moshed, right along with Cameron.

At the end of those songs, Axel took a swig of water and went to the mic. "I have a couple of new songs I'm going to be sharing with you tonight to wrap up," he said. The crowd erupted in cheers. Still no sign of Kate. "The first is a ballad I wrote about—"

Grandpa stood up and walked to the edge of the stage.

Axel cleared his throat. "—finding your voice. If you've ever felt like you're drowning in the weight of expectations, this is for you."

Grandpa waved him over, and some security guards rushed his way.

"He's okay," Axel said and went to the edge of the stage. "What's up, Grandpa?"

The guards backed off. One of them eyed Grandpa's muscles and then glanced down at his own arms, frowning.

Grandpa rubbed the back of his neck, then glared over his shoulder at Dad. "I was talking to your father, and he suggested it might be a good bonding experience for us if, uh, if ..." He cleared his throat. "If—"

Dad jumped up and came over. "If he sang the song with you."

Axel blinked. Okay, he hadn't seen that coming. "You want to sing with me?"

Grandpa's face turned red, and his voice boomed, but quietly so people wouldn't hear him. "Well, you said you liked it when I harmonized with you when you were a kid, and I heard you working on this song all week; it has two parts."

Axel's chest expanded, joy filling him from the inside out. "Grandpa, I would love for you to sing with me." Never in a million years would Axel ever have guessed that one-day Grandpa would sing a song with him at what was essentially one of his concerts.

Dad clapped Grandpa on the shoulder and winked at him. "Told you so."

"I never said—!" Grandpa whacked his arm away and took a deep, stuttering breath as Dad went back to his seat, laughing.

Sean fist-bumped Dad.

Axel offered Grandpa his hand and pulled him up the two feet to the stage floor. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a surprise vocalist singing with us tonight. Let's give a round of applause to Don Clayton, my grandpa."

A hush went over the crowd, followed by a dubious, "That's Axel's grandpa?"—which made Grandpa blush and Axel grin—and then ruckus applause.

Grandpa huffed and pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket as the band started the song.

“What's that?” Axel asked as the two sidled up to the microphone.

“The lyrics,” Grandpa grumbled. “I know the tune, but I couldn't remember all the lyrics. Did you know this is a seven-minute-long song?”

Axel nodded. “I did know that.” He couldn't believe what was happening. This wasn't a last moment decision. It'd all been planned. Planned long enough in advance that Grandpa had written down his lyrics. This was awesome!

“Really long song,” Grandpa said under his breath, making Axel laugh.

And then they began to sing.

For so long, there were no words inside,

Nothing on my heart. Nothing in my soul.

Nothing to hide. Nothing to tell.

*A curser blinking, mocking; a time bomb ticking and
tocking,*

Silence is a prison, a place you can't break free.

I wanted to speak, to say my peace,

But my voice bounced back to me.

My voice always bounced back to me.

*The walls closed in, I couldn't breathe, isn't it easier to
become nothing?*

*Run. Run away. To the place where ivory tickles,
Memories from long ago are safe as the sands of time.
Be where your story goes and watch the birds through the
window.*

Love lasts longer than the mind, it's in God's design.

*I tried to push through my barriers,
And it came back to me in small trickles, then streams.*

*A light descended and reminded me,
that home isn't just where that heart is.*

I saw the truth, my voice was stymied but never gone,

*I saw it on others who were silently strong,
The strength to continue on. In their eyes, my reflection
shone.*

And the words written there went down to the bone.

My heart, my heart beats in the place called home.

Axel and Grandpa continued through the rest of the verses with Axel singing melody, Grandpa singing harmony, and an epic guitar solo toward the end.

When they were almost done, Axel glanced over at Grandpa at just the right moment to catch him wipe a tear from his eye. And then the song was over and the cheers never seemed to end.

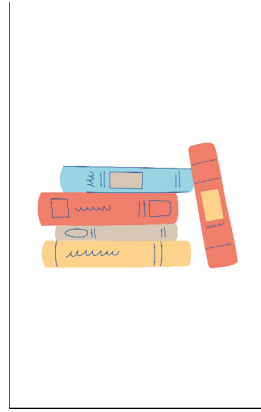
Grandpa folded up his note page with Axel's lyrics and put them back in his pocket.

Axel dropped a hand to his shoulder. "Hear that, Grandpa? They're cheering for you?"

Shaking his head, Grandpa pulled Axel into a hug. "No, they're cheering for you. You've done well, and I'm so proud of you."

It was one of the best moments of Axel's life, and almost made him forget that Kate still hadn't shown up.

Chapter 26



KATE

Five pm.

That's what time Samantha had told Kate the panelists from The Library Times would be coming.

At five-fifteen, Kate hadn't given their tardiness much thought. She didn't have any plans for the night, she definitely wasn't going to the Fall Concert. There would be way too many people. So, not a big deal. It wasn't like she wanted to hear Axel sing anyway.

By five-forty-five, Kate was feeling a little jumpy. She never would've expected these people to be late.

Restless, as he had been the last week, Bear paced the carpet in front of Kate's reception desk, plopping down every thirty seconds to a minute or so before jumping back up and pacing

again. He was such a weird dog. But she was feeling restless herself, and if she didn't have so much work to do, she would join him.

Ninety-four-year-old Betty came in with a big grin on her face. She'd started making a habit of coming to the library a few times a week to read her mysteries. She sent a little wave in Kate's direction then took a seat on her favorite couch by the fireplace.

"Bear, come sit by me, dear," she called while patting the seat.

Bear immediately listened and lay down by her feet.

By the time the grandfather clock dinged six times, Kate completely gave up the pretense that she didn't want to go to the concert. It was easier to lie to yourself when you had plenty of time to change your mind. It wasn't so easy when the clock was clicking down faster than the time you had.

She checked her email and checked it again. She'd almost texted Janet Lyons, but then decided it would have to be a cold day in Hades before she contacted that woman again.

Betty glanced her way for the umpteenth time. "Just go, dear. You don't want to miss Axel's performance."

Kate's heart jumped into her throat. No, she didn't. She really didn't. But ... she glanced around the library. They had already replaced Halloween decorations and crafts with Thanksgiving ones. A Cornucopia, complete with real pumpkins sat on the mantle of the fireplace, beige candles of

varying sizes sat on beds of brightly colored fall leaves and adorned the centers of every table, garlands made of leaves, decorative white pumpkins, wheat, and pine cones covered every banister, and two massive wreaths made of pampas grass adorned the twin front doors. Bruno had even stocked the place this morning with pumpkin, turkey, and leaf-shaped cookies—and baking wasn't even his specialty!

Kate loved this library. She loved it because of what it was, a haven for anyone who needed it, from kids to the elderly to fussy librarians to rock stars. She loved its beauty, and its past as an observatory, and she loved its present of reading buddies, but mostly she loved that the community saw it as their own, and went out of their way to make a place for everyone.

Sure, she worked here and kept it clean and organized, but this wasn't just her library. It was a library that belonged to the people of Diamond Cove, and that was reflected in adornments that normally came over the month, but had all shown up practically overnight the moment The Palms residents found out the contest was back on.

That's why she wanted it to win. For the people here who also loved this library as much as she did.

Betty stood and made her way over. "Winning an award won't make this place anymore or less special than what it is."

She was right. Of course she was. But ...

"I don't want to let anyone down. Everyone's been so excited about this." She made a sweeping gesture with her

arm. “I mean, look at what the crafters put together in just a few days.”

Betty laughed and rested her weathered hand over the top of Kate’s. “We’ve all been excited for you, dear. This was what we wanted for you. We see you and love you for who you are. The crafts aren’t here for the contest, they’re here for you. And if going to that concert is what’ll make you most happy, that’s what we want for you.”

The words hit Kate like a bullseye to the heart. We see you. We love you for who you are. We want you to be happy.

The door swung open with a bang, making Betty and Kate jump, and Bear yelp. In walked five disheveled and irritated folks in business attire.

“Finally,” a severe-looking woman said at the front of the group.

Betty and Kate exchanged looks, and Kate’s heart sank.

Betty grabbed a sugar cookie and took a big bite.

Bear sat tall from his place by the couch to look at the newcomers, tilting his head to the side.

Six-fifteen and they finally showed. Kate would have to leave now to not miss Axel’s performance. But why should she care? It was silly really. He’d given her no reason to think it would matter if she went. He’d done exactly as she’d asked and left her alone. She wanted to cry. Why had she done that?!

She came around the counter and approached the group.

“Hello, and welcome to Diamond Cove Library, I’m Kate, the librarian.”

The woman in front arched a brow and stepped forward. “Oh, yes. I recognize you from the tabloids.”

Kate grit her teeth and kept smiling.

“I’m Janet Lyons, and these are my colleagues.”

Janet Lyons. Meh. Kate forced a smile and shook their hands. She couldn’t help but notice the haughty looks on their faces as they glanced around. All except for one guy, who had stars in his eyes as he took the place in. Kate kind of wanted to hug him.

Still, Kate felt her soul shriveling. These were the judges? These stiff-upper-lip suits? Would they be able to see the true heart of the place?

“Sorry we’re late, but some *rock*,” she sneered over the word “rock” “concert downtown had traffic backed up out of the city limits.”

Kate’s eyes popped wide. Backed up out of town? Holy Toledo!

The starry-eyed guy, who looked a little familiar, stepped forward and smiled. “I thought this place looked amazing last week with the Halloween decorations, but this is fantastic too. Did you do this all yourself?”

Kate shook her head. “No, The Palms retirement residents made the decorations and helped me get them up. They do

something like this for every major holiday, including St. Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, and Flag Day."

"That's wonderful," the man said.

"Hmm," Lyons slanted a glance in his direction. "Well, let's get this over with."

Let's get this over with. Kate's gaze drifted to the clock. Six-twenty. Her stomach flipped and then flopped.

Well, there was no hope for it now.

She took them around the main floor, showing them the special things that'd always made her love the place, from the green Tiffany lamps that adorned every table to the little, hidden reading nooks, and the bookcases that arched over pathways between rooms, to the stained-glass window dome to their special collections of books. The place was magical.

But one judge yawned, another was more interested in texting than in their first editions, and the Lyons woman, while attentive, seemed determined not to be impressed.

The grandfather clock chimed again, alerting Kate that it was six-thirty. Axel's concert would be starting right now.

"Should we move to the second floor?" Lyons asked.

Kate froze. Why was she doing this again?

"Ms. Hart?"

"I have to go," Kate said and skirted around them.

"Excuse me?" Lyons followed her.

“I’m needed at the *rock* concert,” Kate said making a beeline for her desk. “My boyfriend is performing—you know, the rock star from the tabloids.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. At least she hoped she might still have a chance with him.

Lyons scoffed. “All this effort to get us back here, and you’re leaving to go to a concert. Why did we even bother?”

Kate grabbed her keys. “Please, stay, make yourself comfortable, read a book, eat a cookie or two. Maybe then you’ll be able to see and understand the real beauty and charm of this place. I’d be happy for you if you did. But let’s not pretend you’re here because you want to be. You’re here because a rock star, made an anonymous donation to your magazine on the condition you give this library another chance; a fair chance.”

Lyon’s jaw dropped.

Kate grinned. “Yes, even some *rock stars* love libraries.”

That’d been Axel’s way of showing her he cared. And she’d refused to see it. Hope bloomed, and she let it.

“Betty, would you take over, please?”

Betty lifted a cookie in the air in salute. “Yes, dear. Have fun!”

“Thank you.” She set the library keys on the desk. “Just lock up on your way out. Bear, come!” Kate said. “We’re going to get Axel.”

Bear lunged to his feet and raced after her, letting out an excited “woof” as he went. *About time!* Look like she wasn’t the only one eager to see Axel.



The loud thrum of music and Axel’s full-bodied tenor and another familiar voice filled the air as Kate got closer to the pier shops. She reached the end of the row of shops where they always set up the stage, but they’d blocked it off with red velvet rope and security guards. Kate skidded to a stop by the guards and Bear ran circles around her legs.

“Please, I need to get through.” She begged them. The feeling that she’d been here before overwhelmed her.

Small gaps opened between the partitions they’d set up at the back of the stage, and Kate caught a quick glimpse of ... Don?

The security guard folded his massive arms over his massive chest. “You’re going to have to go around.”

Kate didn’t miss the irony of this moment, but this time around she had a lot more to miss than her train.

Going on tip-toe, she glanced far up the row of shops. The square was jampacked. Like nothing she’d ever seen in her

little town before. The atmosphere sparked with energy as people swayed along to the music. And magic filled the air.

Then came Axel's voice, hitting her in her chest, making her heart race, though she couldn't focus on his words.

"Miss, you can't be here," the security guard said.

A lump formed in Kate's throat. "Right." Turning, she made a beeline back the way she came. She'd go up behind the businesses, and try to go between shops. "Bear, come!"

As she darted off, the security guard warned off someone else. "Sir, this area is restricted."

Two rows of multiple shops ran parallel and faced one another and there were alleys between every few shops. Kate sprinted up the first alley but turned around as soon as she saw the barricade. She sprinted back to the alley, up a couple more shops, and turned again. This time, it was open but people were crowding the exit.

"Excuse ... me!" She squeezed between two massive guys in leather chaps, sleeveless shirts, and durags. "I need ... to get ... through."

Pushing through into the square, she stopped and frowned. Axel and Don stood together on the stage, singing into the same mic, but from where she stood, she could only barely make out their features. There were too many people. She'd never make it back to the stage through this.

Bear came up under her hand and whined.

The song ended, and the crowd lost its ever-loving mind. Someone slammed into her, and it was all she could do to keep her balance. Don hugged Axel, then stepped off the stage.

Kate took a deep breath and started pushing through.

Axel picked up Odette from where she sat on a stand, then grabbed a stool and went back to the mic. He sat on the edge of the stool, and strummed Odette's chords, tuning her. He glanced up at the crowd and ran a hand through his hair.

"This next song, and my last for the night, was written for a special woman who lives here in Diamond Cove. A woman who I'd hoped would be here tonight," he said.

"I'm here!" Kate screamed, but her voice was lost in the show of support from the crowd in the form of "awes," "boos," and groans. "Axel!"

A hand came down on her arm, and suddenly, Kate was yanked back from her forward trajectory and spun around into some guy's chest. He was big, almost as big as Axel, and a cloud of cheap cologne engulfed him making her nose tickle; her stuffy nose.

She glanced up at him, and the breath left her body.

The man scowled down at her like a momma dog whose puppy she'd just crushed under her heel. His lips curled back over his teeth as he growled down at her. "You ruined everything."

Kate tried to wrench her arm from his painful and unyielding grip. "Let go of me."

Bear growled at the guy, his hackles rising.

The guy kicked out a big leg, and Bear dodged it.

“No!” Kate screamed and reached for her bag and Taser. But it wasn’t there. She’d left it at the library in her haste to get here.

“Until you came along, Axel did everything I told him to.”

Kate shot a glance over her shoulder. Axel was still introing his song. And she still wasn’t close enough for him to hear her screams. “Who are you?”

“I’m Axel’s manager.”

“Chaz?” Kate tried to wiggle out of his grasp.

He smiled a crooked smile that sent shivers up her spine. “That’s right.”

Kate turned to Bear. “Get Axel.”

Bear glanced at her and whined.

“Go!”

Immediately, he turned, and his white body disappeared into the crowd.

“Axel was my meal ticket,” Chaz said, yanking her back the way she’d come. “My life was good. I had things under control. We were headed to bigger and better places.”

Kate slammed her fist down on his arm, kicked, and tugged against his hold. “Help!”

People skirted out of the way, staring but not helping. Ugh!
Who were these people?

“None of this needed to happen. If Axel had just come home when I told him to, I would’ve left you alone.”

Sucking in a breath, Kate came up short. “You stabbed that knife in my door.”

He turned on her. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I was just trying to nudge him back in the right direction.”

“Your direction?” Kate asked.

Chaz nodded.

A raging fire burst through Kate’s core up to her head, and down to her toes. She stepped in, and with all her might, brought the wood heel of her bootie down on Chaz’s foot.

His grip loosened, and she yanked her arm away and shoved him. Then she was pushing through the crowd as fast as she could.

A burst of laughter rolled over the crowd, then Axel’s voice.
“Bear?”

Kate glanced up at the stage.

Bear was in Axel’s arms, licking his face.

“Bear!” Axel smiled. “Where is she, buddy? Where’s Kate?”

“I’m here!” Kate screamed.

“Stop!” Chaz called from behind her. Too close behind her.

Axel still couldn't hear her.

She kept moving, then off to the side, spotted Michael, Rosa's nephew, and Eric. Both men were in their police uniforms, and a lot closer. "Michael! Eric! Help!"

They looked her way, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "He's trying to get me!"

Both men went into action and started pushing through the crowd.

The commotion caught Axel's attention, and he gently put Bear down. "Kate?"

She waved her hands over her head as silence fell over the crowd. "Axel!"

Axel's gaze fell on her, then behind her. "Move," Axel yelled and leaped from the stage.

The crowd parted for him as he came for her. She kept shoving through, then people finally started clearing for her.

She kept her eyes on Axel and just kept moving as her breaths came harder, as panic overtook her. Then he was there. Axel was in front of her, and she threw herself into his arms. He enveloped her like a warm blanket—his heat seeping into her veins.

"Kate," he whispered. "You okay?"

Kate heaved in a breath. "He's trying to—"

Axel peered over her head, and the next thing she knew, he was moving her behind him. Don was there. He pulled her to

him, then handed her over to someone else—Nancy. Then Bear sat on her feet.

“Are you all right, dear?” Nancy asked.

She nodded as more Cove residents filed in around her. Polly, Winnie, and Rosa. Then Sean, a man that looked like an older Axel or a younger Don, Harry and Walt, and three guys holding instruments, even drumsticks. They all stepped past her all looking fit to spit and start a brawl. The crowd pushed back.

“Wait, Axel!” she whipped her gaze back in his direction just in time to see him haul back and throw his big old fist right into Chaz’s face.

Chaz stumbled back, then dropped to his butt.

Axel went at him again, but Don and Sean grabbed his arms, pulling him back. Axel let loose a slew of swear words that might normally make Kate blush. Not now.

“You hurt one hair on Kate’s head, and I swear, I’ll end you,” Axel roared for all the throng to hear.

“You got him, son,” Don said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “He’s not going anywhere.”

Then Michael and Eric were there, hovering over Chaz. Michael immediately pulled out his cuffs and handcuffed Chaz.

“He hit me,” Chaz complained.

“I’d have hit you myself if I’d gotten here before him,” Michael said, shoving Chaz’s head as he got back to his feet.

Eric stepped forward, hands on his police belt, one resting on his gun. “What’s going on here.”

Don released Axel and faced Diamond Cove’s finest. “I think you’ll find a warrant out for this man’s arrest.”

Chaz started yelling. “I’m innocent. It was all her!” He caught Kate’s eye and cursed and cursed her to the winds.

But Kate wasn’t afraid anymore. She thought of everything he’d put Axel through now, and felt strongly he’d probably had a lot to do with Axel’s rock-bottom-on-a-bender month then, not that Axel would ever blame anyone but himself. Kate suddenly had a deep-seated need to set Chaz straight.

She pushed past her friends and right up to Chaz. The whole left side of his face was bright red. He’d have a nasty shiner later. She squatted down in front of him and spoke low enough so only he and those closest could hear her. “As much power as you think you had over Axel and as much power you think I have over him, you’re wrong. Axel has a mind of his own. He’s a good man, and that’s what guides his life. He may have been turned around for a minute, but he didn’t lose his way. Not this time.”

Chaz went silent, blinking at her.

She stood, and Eric and Michael were immediately pulling him up. She turned her back on him and came face to face with Axel. Sean, smug grin firmly in place, released Axel’s

shoulder. He reached for her, and she stepped into his big comforting arms.

“Are you all right?” he crooned against her head before placing a kiss on the top of it.

She shivered, suddenly super aware of the fact that it was freaking cold out here, and that she’d also left her sweater at work. She was never so unprepared. “I’m fine.”

Axel rubbed his hands up and down her back, and Kate became vaguely aware of murmurs running through the crowd. “You’re not. You’re shivering.”

“I’m cold.”

“Of course you are.” He laughed into her neck. “It’s only seventy-five degrees out here.”

She smiled into his chest. “I have poor circulation. Axel ...” She stepped back and stared up at him. “I’m so sorry. I overreacted. I never should’ve asked you to leave. I don’t want that.”

Axel smiled at her and brushed a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “What do you want?”

Kate’s heart thudded against her chest as she put her heart on her sleeve for the first time in her life. “You.”

“You got me.” Then he kissed her.

The crowd went wild.

Not that Kate noticed. All her attention was intently focused on the feel of Axel’s lips moving in time with hers in a perfect

melody, the truest song she'd ever heard. She felt it from the top of her head all the way to the tips of her fingers and her toes. And nothing had ever felt so right. Here in his arms was where she belonged, more than she belonged anywhere else, including in the library.

He was, as Axel would put it, her “Soul and inspiration,” the one she'd “walk 500 miles for and 500 hundred more,” her “Dustland Fairytale.”

Someone cleared their throat, and reluctantly, they pulled apart. A handsome man smiled down at them, he had his hand on Axel's shoulder.

“Hate to interrupt,” the man said, “but you had one more song to perform?”

Axel laughed, removed his bomber jacket, and draped it over her shoulders. It smelled like soap and citrus and dreams and everything good in the world. “Right, that. Callum, this is my girlfriend, Kate. Kate, this is Callum Sloan.”

Kate shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Callum placed his hand on his chest. “The pleasure is all mine. From what I hear, you're the one we need to thank for getting Axel to perform here tonight.”

Axel wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, dropping a kiss on her head before nuzzling into her hair and making “mmm” noises. Her face burned with embarrassment, not that she had any intention of telling him to stop. Though,

she might have to get a new shampoo and conditioner if he kept doing that in public.

“Oh! You’re the talent scout, right?” She remembered seeing his name on the signup sheet she’d put Axel on.

“That’s me,” he said, then laughed. “Though, I’d sign Axel to my label just for punching Chaz. I bet that felt good.”

Axel extended his hand and looked at it. “It did, but now it’s sore.”

Callum arched a brow. “Worth it though, right?”

“Absolutely,” Axel said.

Okay, Kate would have to get the backstory there later.

“Well, let’s get you back up there.” Callum pointed to the stage, and they made their way back, Bear staying close by her side.

Axel tucked her in among his family and friends. “Watch her for me, would you?” But before he left, he reached into his jacket pocket that she wore and pulled out a little box. “This is for you.”

He was on stage again before she could ask him if she should open it now.

Sean rolled his eyes and leaned into Kate. “You realize he’s going to be impossible to be around now?”

Kate laughed. “For you maybe.”

Axel got back on stage and grabbed the mic. “That was exciting wasn’t it?”

The crowd cheered.

Rosa leaned over Nancy and Polly and winked at her. “You’re going to like this.”

She had no doubt. Carefully, she slid the lid from the little box. There tucked in black satin was a four-leaf clover pendant. Way prettier than the one she'd purchased at the mall years ago. Her jaw dropped and she whipped her gaze up to Axel. He was beaming.

“Now that our short intermission is over, I have one more song to play for you. As I mentioned earlier, I wrote this song for a very special woman.” He pointed at Kate and winked. “Kate Hart, this one’s for you.”

Kate sucked in a gasp as the people around her looked at her and smiled.

“Told you,” Sean said.

Axel picked up Odette again and began to sing a lively tune.

You're the story I want to tell

The girl I want to fall for

But your train left the station

And I'm runnin' behind.

“Oh, my goodness!” Kate cried. “Is this our story?” She knew in the next beat.

Axel set Odette back in her stand—and Kate thought she was starting to like the instrument—and let the band take over as he grabbed the mic, and started tapping his foot.

Baby, you're single—I'm single

Let's solve this problem together.

Kate burst into laughter. It was the pickup line he'd used on her on his first day in the library. Axel grinned down at her and winked—screams of women nearby notched up by ten, and Kate had the weird sensation she was back in time at an Elvis Presley concert.

Rosa and Polly fanned their faces, so maybe that counted?

Then Don shook his head and dropped it to his palm.

Axel continued on, crooning to his mic as he strutted around the stage.

You're the waves in my ocean

The kiss I want to steal.

But you didn't see me coming

And I fell into your stars.

Baby, you're single—I'm single

Let's solve this problem together

*You're a fireplace on a cold day
The coconut on my lips
But you thought I was a fly by
And I'm tripping over your barriers*

*We belong together
We'll make out in the stacks tonight; forget about Chester.*

*I PLEDGE to always sing the words
You've written on my heart.*

*Baby, just let me in
And we'll tie this crazy little knot of love
I'll be your old flame,
It's time you're lucky in love, so run to me*

*I'm yours, you're mine.
We'll solve our problems together.*

Axel finished and stepped away from the mic, letting his band finish the tune. He went to the end of the stage and jumped off.

Kate was out of her seat and running into his arms in the same beat.

He wrapped her up and whispered into her ear. “About time.”

She snuggled in deep and agreed. “About time.”

Epilogue



DON

THREE AND A HALF MONTHS LATER

Don sat silently with his head in one hand, and Amelia's hand in his other, as Sean read Johnny's latest article. A puff piece on Axel's newest hit.

"While Axel Clayton is an incredibly gifted artist, no one, including yours truly, expected this comeback," Sean laughed from his seat on the couch. "He's not pulling any punches, is he?"

"And neither will I next time I see him," Kate grumbled, rubbing her thumb over the four-leaf clover pendant Axel had given her.

Axel, sitting to her right, lifted her hand and kissed it.

The women in the room, including the ladies in The Secret Seven, Harry and Walt's wives, Callum's wife Denise, and Wayne's wife, Linda all nodded in solidarity. The men, including Winnie and Rosa's husbands, Mack, and the other members of his band, who'd been signed by Callum the week after the concert, and Sean all chuckled.

Kate was super overprotective of Axel. Had been since he'd sung to her at the Fall Concert months ago when she'd left the library judges to find him. (The Diamond Cove Library had won, by the way.) She'd almost come to blows with seventy-year Albert at poker night last month when he'd suggested Axel couldn't sing to save his life.

Axel had proposed the next day. Bought a house that was currently under renovation, the day after that.

Still no ring, though. Axel was a fastidious man, wouldn't settle for just any ring. It had to be the *right* ring. That'd left Kate ringless, but not literally because Kate always had tons of rings on her fingers, but Don thought he had just the thing.

It was currently nestled in a blue velvet ring box in Don's pant pocket. Amelia's engagement ring; a two-carat cushion-cut diamond on a simple platinum band. She hadn't worn it since they'd gotten married, just her wedding band. Said she was afraid she'd lose it. Don thought she didn't like it but was too polite to say anything. He'd made it up by buying her lots of other jewelry she had liked over the years. But Don had heard Kate drop hints about what kind of ring she'd want. No physical description, only sentimental crap. No wonder Axel

had been having such a hard time. But a family heirloom should fit the sentimental bill.

The group sat in Callum's living room after dinner, talking about all the changes that'd happened lately, when Sean had pulled up Johnny's article on his phone—the knucklehead.

Sean continued his dramatic reading of Johnny's article. “Clayton's two new songs, ‘Prodigal Son’ and ‘The Pledge,’ (or as fans call it ‘Forget Chester,’) both hit number one in the charts the week of their releases, Clayton's next world tour sold out overnight, and his performance at the Grammy's, have solidified him as a rock legend in a matter of months. No doubt much of this success is due to his new record label, Unconventional, and his producer Callum Sloan—”

Everyone cheered for Callum, Mack, and his bandmates the loudest before singing one line of “He's a jolly good fellow.”

“Thank you, thank you very much.” Callum waved over his head, and his wife nestled closer into his side.

“He doesn't think very highly of you, does he?” Polly asked Axel, frowning.

Mack chuckled. “I can't wait to meet him.”

“They're just playing around,” Walt said. “Boys.”

Axel chuckled. “He can't lay it on too thick, be complimentary, or people will think he's biased. Or that Pearl Boman is, anyway.”

“He's giving plenty of compliments,” Harry added. “He's just—”

“Veiling them in nicely placed insults?” Axel asked.

Pearl Bowman was Johnny’s alias. Axel’s younger brother had grown up loving Silence Dogood, and how Benjamin Franklin had used the name to further his cause. Johnny had been a young man when he’d decided to become a reporter, and the rest, including the girly name, was history.

Sean held up a hand. “But, surprisingly, despite all that, what fans really want to know is who is Chester.”

Rosa glanced heavenward, crossed herself, and said, “Santa Maria.”

Her husband wrapped her in a one-armed embrace, and Nancy patted her on the hand.

Axel snickered into his shirtsleeve as Sean tried to keep from laughing.

“There are many conspiracy theories online as to the mystery of Chester, a random name appearing in Clayton’s new hit single that range from Chester being a pseudonym for Clayton’s former manager, Chaz Collins, who’s currently serving prison time for embezzlement and attempted kidnapping, to being a metaphor for one’s own problems in life.”

Everyone but Rosa was laughing now.

Kate even snorted. Bless her.

“It gets better,” Sean said and continued laughing so hard his face was turning red. “One fan said, ‘So, like, Chester is just a way of saying something’s bad. So, if I were to, I don’t

know, stub my toe or something, that'd be Chester.' So, whether Chester is Collins, a metaphor, or a new slang word, is yet to be seen, but this reporter can say with certainty, Mr. Clayton won't be fading out of pop culture any time soon.'" He barely got through the rest of it.

Wayne wiped tears from his eyes. "Well, at least we can always count on Johnny for a laugh."

Wayne's boys would be the death of him. He turned his gaze to Amelia's lovely face. She'd always known how to handle them. Don worried he might never even figure out how to talk to them.

Don rolled his eyes and squeezed Amelia's hand. She was staring out at Callum's gardens, which overlooked the ocean. Paxton really had done a bang-up job.

His phone rang in his pocket as his family and friends kept laughing and chatting, and Johnny's name pulled up on the screen. He grumbled and everyone looked at him. "Speak of the devil."

"It's Johnny? For real?" Sean flopped back on the couch with a laugh. "Ask him if his nose was itching."

Yeah, Don would do that. He answered. "Johnny, how are you?"

Heavy breathing came over the line like Johnny was running. "Hey, Grandpa. How goes it?" And now he was trying to sound like he hadn't been running.

"Are you all right, son?" Don asked.

Wayne arched a brow in his direction.

“Uh ... yep. I’m great. Just, uh ... jogging.”

Don gave Wayne a thumbs up and Wayne jumped back into the convo. Amazing how much their relationship had improved. If he’d asked “are you all right” a few months ago, Wayne would’ve thrown a fit until he knew exactly what was happening.

His friends kept talking and laughing, and Don struggled to hear what was being said. “One second.” He got up and went outside, pulling the sliding glass door shut behind him. The weather in Diamond Cove was always beautiful in March. “All right, Johnny, go ahead.”

Johnny let out a deep breath. “I was thinking about coming to visit for a couple of weeks. Spend some time with you and Grandma.”

“We’d love to have you,” Don said. That’d be perfect. Johnny’s career always kept him busy. If Don could convince The Secret Seven to let him take another turn while Johnny was here, he might get the boy settled. Heaven knew he needed some stability.

“It might be a month or so ...”

“End of April?”

“Maybe May, I’ve got a few things I’ve got to get taken care of before I can come,” Johnny said, his voice picking up speed along with his breathing. Running again. “You know what? I’ve got to go. Love you, Gramps!”

He hung up without so much as a goodbye or a pause for Don to reciprocate. Don glanced heavenward. God, give me patience.

Okay, he needed to look for the positive in things. Like all those positive affirmations Samantha included at the top of The Palms newsletters. Maybe he should start cutting those out and collecting them like he did Cocoa's Corner recipes.

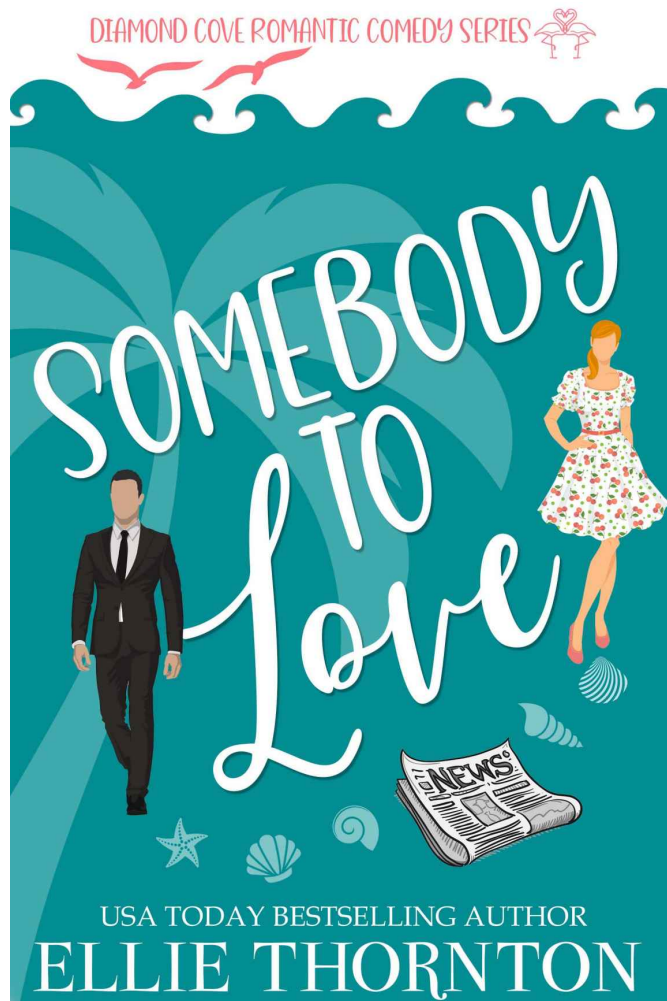
He tapped his phone to his lips. So Johnny was coming in a couple of months. That was perfect. It would give Don and his friends plenty of time to find him the perfect woman. He nodded. This would turn out just right.

Don shoved his phone back in his pocket and headed inside.

One grandson down. Two to go.



The Secret Seven are back at the marriage board with a new target. To be a part of their matchmaking schemes, read *Somebody to Love*, releasing in May 2023! Just click on the image below.



Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed *Crazy Little Thing*, please consider leaving a review here. Reviews are the lifeblood of authors and allow us to do what we do.

About Author

Ellie Thornton is a USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author who has been writing since she could lift a pencil and making up stories even longer than that.

For years she worked part-time jobs so she would always have time to write, read, and travel. Some of her favorite filler jobs include working as an editor, at a nursery (flowers not children,) as a driving instructor (not as harrowing as one might think,) writing a blog called Confessions of a Property Manager, and being a ghost tour guide.

If she's not at her computer, you can typically find her reading, listening to podcasts, at the local library, in her garden, in her kitchen, or with her sister and her sister's kids.

If you'd like to be kept apprised of her upcoming books, freebies, and giveaways, (she's also been known to send amazing recipes,) you can sign up for her email list below.

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retelling

To keep her he has to be an angel. To solve this case, he must
act a devil.

Book 7 (Coming Soon!) - A *Snow White* Retelling

Each book in the Reboot Mystery Series can be read as a stand-alone by simply skipping the prologue. To find out what's happening with Daley and Shea's memories, keep reading the series and don't skip the prologue.

Acknowledgments

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