

NY TIMES & USA TODAY bestselling author

JILL SANDERS

Finding Love



A Pride Oregon Novel

FINDING LOVE

PRIDE, OREGON

BOOK 12

JILL SANDERS



GRAYTON

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SUMMARY

Brook Masters has always known what she wanted. To follow in her father's footsteps and be in the coast guard. But being daddy's little girl has a few drawbacks. Especially when you live in a small town where everyone knows you.

James Ryder Gallant is a wanderer. A beach bum. A man with only a dog and an old travel van to his name. He likes it like that. Until fate has him quite literally falling at the feet of the most beautiful soul he's ever met.

PROLOGUE

Ten-year-old Brooklyn, or Brook as everyone called her, was a complete failure. She'd not only failed her latest competition, but to add insult to injury, her father had needed to rescue her.

"It's okay, honey, we can work hard again this year. Next year you'll finish on your own," her father said as he lifted her out of the water.

Not even her wetsuit could keep the cold of the Pacific from seeping into her bones.

A thick wool blanket was wrapped around her shoulders to fend off the bite of the Oregon March wind.

"I could have..." she started to say, but her teeth were chattering so badly, it took several tries just get out those three words.

"Brooklyn." Her father's tone warned her to not question his decision to pull her out of the water.

Fine. Okay. So she was a complete failure. She'd just have to live with it for the next year. Let it feed her addiction to working harder.

She vowed right there in the coast guard boat that was jetting her back to shore that she would never allow herself to be weak again. Whatever she did, she was going to win at all costs.

CHAPTER ONE

Ryder sat in the sun and lifted his face up to the sky. His dog, Willy, whom he'd found as a puppy last year, was by his side. The little dog had been tied up in a bag on the beach just outside of San Diego and wouldn't have survived if he hadn't come along. Willy was now a spoiled dog and he happily snored away, unaware of his dark past.

He doubted there was anything better in the world than the sun and surf and a dog by your side.

For the past year, that had been his mantra.

Before then, he hadn't had a code to live by.

In the past year, his life had changed so much, that most people he knew wouldn't recognize him any longer. Then again, he no longer wanted to associate with most people he knew.

Which is why a little over a year ago, he'd packed a bag, bought a second-hand travel van, and hit the road, leaving everything behind.

The last straw had been the fight he and his then fiancée had gotten into.

Shortly after his father, Johnathan Ryder, had died, leaving James Ryder Gallant his multi-billion dollar investment company, Ryder, which he preferred to go by, had dropped everything and returned to Seattle to take over the company his father had built from scratch.

Ryder's father had groomed him for the role his whole life. The man had been all business from the day James Ryder Gallant had been born and had never shown him an ounce of love or kindness.

Ryder's mother, Grace, had been bought and paid for years before. Ryder couldn't remember even what she looked like. According to his father, she'd only married him for his money anyway. Over the years, his father had let some information about her slip, but the only real thing he'd learned was that he'd come from "good stock." To his father, that most likely meant that his mother's family hadn't been poor.

His parents had split shortly after Ryder's second birthday, and his father had described it as fateful, unavoidable. He didn't know who was at fault, nor did he care.

He had no doubt his father had paid the judge off to gain full custody of his one and only son. His prodigy.

Ryder had been shipped off to prestigious boarding schools. Nothing short of perfect grades had been expected of him. If he did slip, tutors were brought in to quickly get him back on track. After graduating from high school, he had attended the finest college, taking the fast track to a degree in business and another in law.

Over the years, he'd been provided many lavish vacations, none of which had his father attended. Instead, he'd been introduced to wealthy families and had been forced to wine and dine them on the slopes of Aspen or the Alps. All in the name of his family's business.

At one point he had rebelled against it all and had done what his father had called some really stupid things. Putting himself out there in the spotlight for people to make fun of him went against everything his father wanted. Still, he'd enjoyed the attention it had gained him. At least for a while.

For most of his life, he'd been a pawn to his father's sadistic game of staying one step ahead of the competition. His father had bought most of his competitors' companies over the years.

Ryder had the best of everything money could buy. The only thing that had been missing was love. Not once in his life had he ever experienced a pat on the back or a hug. Hell, he would have settled for a “well done, son” or a “good job.”

He doubted that his father even knew what love was. Ryder had questioned if he even understood or felt it himself. Until he'd found Willy.

It hasn't been any one thing that had caused him to snap the day he'd left everything over a year ago. But he'd known that, for his mental health, he needed to get away.

He'd given himself a month to sort things out in his head. And here it was a year later and he was still... sorting.

He likened his life to that scene in *Forrest Gump* where Forrest takes off running one day and just keeps running. Only Ryder had a van and a dog instead of a pair of sneakers.

He figured that he'd get tired of life on the road sooner or later, but so far, he was loving every minute of it. Even so, he knew it had to end soon. He may not have grown tired of the life, but he knew he'd pushed his limit, he'd been gone too long. After a year away from the business, his time had run out, no matter if he felt ready to go back or not.

He took a deep breath of fresh salty air and sighed, the weight of his responsibilities forcing him to scowl. It was time to return. He knew it.

But that didn't stop him from wanting one last night. One last ride of freedom.

In the last year, when he'd needed money, he had stopped somewhere and worked odd jobs for cash. He hadn't wanted to let on where he was by using his credit cards. When he didn't need money, he surfed, slept, ate, or just enjoyed the sunshine, like he was currently doing, even though he could see the dark skies hovering over the horizon and moving closer.

He had let the road take him wherever it may and had no use for cell phones, maps, or even bank accounts.

He was a free man, outside of his commitment to Willy. The dog groaned and then jumped up from his nap to go sniff

the sand where a crab had just disappeared.

“Shall we hit the waves one last time?” he asked Willy, who happily barked and did three fast little circles. Laughing, he took up his board and headed back out into the Pacific.

He’d found the best surf spot the evening before on his way back up the coast, heading back to his responsibilities, and today was set to be his last day of freedom.

He and Willy had spent almost three hours enjoying the massive waves that crashed on the quiet secluded beach.

In all the time they’d been there, they hadn’t seen another soul. Which, in his book, made it a perfect spot to enjoy the waves while he plotted his return.

Willy, for his part, enjoyed riding on the front of his surfboard as he paddled out. It was mid-spring, and the water was cold enough that Ryder had on one of his wetsuits. He’d gotten Willy a life vest, which he made him wear all the time. Willy had gained a little weight since Ryder had picked the vest up which meant that it was time for him to get the next size up.

French bulldogs were stocky to begin with, and Willy a mix of French bulldog and mutt. He’d been just a puppy when he’d found him. No doubt his mixed lineage was the reason behind being dumped instead of sold for thousands of dollars. But the last vet Ryder had taken Willy to had assured him that Willy was a healthy weight.

He heard and felt the storm growing closer and building stronger behind them but guessed that they had enough time for a few runs. He knew he was pushing it, but since it was his last day, he didn’t care.

“Here we go,” he told Willy as they caught the next wave. The dog moved up into position as Ryder paddled to join the wave, become one with it. When he popped up on the board, Willy moved to stand at the front of the board, letting the wind flop his tongue and his short pointy ears around.

Willy loved to surf, and whenever they’d surfed together on crowded California beaches, they’d always attracted a

crowd. Which is why they were now hiding out in a small town in Oregon. He didn't like prying eyes.

He sank down on the board in the water when the wave died and turned the board back around.

The dark sky had gotten a lot closer. Still, he calculated that it was about half an hour away. One last wave.

His stomach growled as he paddled back out, and he suddenly realized that he'd skipped lunch again.

"One more wave, then we find ourselves some dinner," he told Willy, who happily barked as he paddled them back out to catch the last wave of the day. Possibly the last wave they'd catch in a very long time.

By the time a good wave finally came, it was almost too dark to see the shore. Damn, he'd lost track of the storm.

He knew that sharks fed at dusk and being out on the water during a storm was quite possibly the worst place to be. He wasn't so concerned about himself, but if they fell into the water, Willy was snack sized.

"Here we go," he told Willy, who got into position. Ryder paddled and, this time, the wave took them before he was really ready. Still, he was able to control the board. Instead of popping up quickly, he stood up slowly, cautiously. Willy moved to the front like he normally did, only at that moment, the board jerked to the side and the whole thing got away from him.

He hit the water, and the board popped back up towards him and smacked into his chin. He saw stars and, for a brief moment, his entire life flashed before his eyes.

Shit. Willy.

His dog was an excellent swimmer, and he knew the moment he hit the water he was to either find Ryder and the board or head towards shore.

As a wave pulled Ryder under the water, he thought about what there was worth fighting for as he used all of his strength to try to surface. To fight for air.

He hadn't really done anything worthwhile. He'd been pampered and handed everything he'd ever wanted and, instead of enjoying it, he'd complained about the one thing he knew that he could never have. Someone that loved him. Someone to love.

He should have sought it out with others. Hunted the elusive feeling that he'd never gotten in his relationship with his father. There had to be someone on this big blue marble who would love him for who he was and not for his position or wealth.

All he'd done was conform to his father's wishes. He'd even allowed the man to dictate who he would spend the rest of his life with.

The woman his father had picked for him had been even colder than the old man himself. Yet Ryder had jumped at the chance to pursue Edith because it was what his father had wanted. It hadn't hurt that she was one of the most famous women that he'd ever been with.

Edith Montague, of the New England Montagues, was a household name thanks to her family and a reality show that had run for many years.

Their relationship had granted him a sliver of her fame. While they'd been together, he'd been offered several movie deals. Acting had never been a dream of his, but he was good at it, and it had been fun for a while.

Almost a year after Ryder and Edith had been connected as the "it" couple, his father had arranged for them to take a trip. His dad had arranged for a romantic stay at a resort and had placed his grandmother's wedding ring in Ryder's bag. The moment he'd found it, Ryder had known instantly what his father wanted from him. The strange thing was, he hadn't even balked at the thought of marrying someone who was almost a complete stranger, an ice queen, which is how he'd thought of Edith at that time.

Now, as the water swirled around him and he sucked in a mouthful of salt water, he felt disgusted by his past actions. He

kicked and fought for purchase, only to flail around like an idiot in the powerful surf.

A whirlpool of water pulled him deeper into the blackness, until he was sure there was no coming back.

All of the air left his lungs, and he accepted his new fate. His entire body relaxed at the realization that this was really the end. This was how James Ryder Gallant died. Would anyone even care?

There wasn't anyone waiting for him back home. Not really. The only ones who cared only did so because they were waiting for their share of the handout they believed was coming.

Who would take care of Willy?

That thought made him fight again. Using all his strength, he kicked and swam until he finally surfaced and gulped in a deep breath, coughing and spitting out the salt water he'd inhaled.

His first thought was to find Willy.

Another wave pummeled him, and his surfboard, which was still attached to his leash, pulled him under by his leg once more. This time, thankfully, he surfaced more quickly.

He shoved the board aside and started making his way towards the shore, but another wave hit him, and the board smacked him just above his right ear. It hit him so hard that he had to bite his lip to stop himself from passing out.

Thankfully, that last wave had pushed him far enough into shore that he finally gained his footing in the wet sand and stumbled the rest of the way ashore. Dragging his surfboard by the leash along with him, he coughed as he made his way further up the beach.

His ears were ringing, and he was fairly sure that he was seeing double. Still, through it all, he could hear Willy barking somewhere nearby.

"Willy?" he called out. He fell to his hands and knees, retching up everything he'd swallowed.

“What in the hell do you think you are doing?” someone said from above him. He blinked a few times and glanced up to see a dark-haired beauty hovering over him.

Running his eyes briefly over her, he tried to focus and get his vision to work properly.

It took a moment before the two versions of her combined. His head swam as he tried to breathe through the pain.

She had long dark hair that went down almost to her hips, where her hands were placed. Her skin was sun kissed, almost as much as his was. Her sexy hazel eyes were unlike any he'd seen before.

She had on a sequined green swimsuit top that showcased a perfect pair of breasts.

“Are you a mermaid?” he asked, blinking a few times.

Before she could answer, darkness crept from all corners of his vision and he passed out, face-first in the sand.

CHAPTER TWO

Brook watched the surfer and his small dog out her front window for almost ten minutes before marching across the sandy beach towards them.

Didn't the man know there was a storm brewing? It was getting dark, and the waves had easily doubled in size in the past half hour.

The conditions out there were far too dangerous to surf right now, even for someone with his obvious talent for surfing.

She'd made it halfway across the sand before the wave took him and his dog down. She rushed the rest of the way across the sand with her eyes glued to the spot that he'd disappeared. She pulled off her shirt and shorts while she ran, prepared to dive in after him if necessary.

When she reached the edge of the water, she saw him crawl out of the waves, dragging his surfboard behind him. Her entire body relaxed.

Glancing around, she noticed the little dog had appeared about ten feet down beach and was racing towards its master, barking happily.

She stopped just shy of the man as he fell to his hands and feet, coughing and spitting out salt water and sand.

“What in the hell do you think you are doing?” she asked, her hands on her hips. She was ready to berate him further, but then he looked up at her and she quite literally lost her breath.

His rich brown hair fell forward in his eyes. It was longer than any other man's in town. He had a short, neatly trimmed beard. Still, she could see his chiseled jawline underneath.

When his sea green eyes landed on hers, she felt her insides burst into flames.

My god. The man was beautiful.

She swallowed her next words, just as he mumbled, "Mermaid," and passed out at her feet.

"Shit." She knelt down beside him. Seeing a bump just behind his ear, she flipped the man over and checked for a pulse. It was strong and his breathing seemed good.

The dog rushed over and began licking the man's face. Before she could gather the small French bulldog up, the man groaned.

Good. He hadn't been out for long. That was a good sign. Still, she should call for an ambulance. She glanced back to where her cell phone sat in her short's pockets, halfway across the beach.

"What?" The man groaned and grabbed his head as the dog continued to lick his face. "Willy, I'm okay," he said, rolling slightly. He stilled when he noticed her. "You're real?"

"Yup, and you are trespassing on my beach," she joked.

He groaned and seemed to ignore her words while he sat up and looked around.

It was full dark now, and the only light was coming from her front porch. The clouds had blocked out the moon and stars, but there was an occasional flash of lightning that lit up the sky.

"The storm's coming really fast," she said, standing up. "We can wait for the ambulance inside." She started walking towards her phone.

She was surprised at how fast the guy moved. Suddenly, he was blocking her path.

“No, I don’t need an ambulance.” He held up his hand. He held the dog in his free arm, tucked tight to his chest like a football. “I’m good.” He kicked at his surfboard leash as he walked backwards to block her. When she stopped, he leaned down and removed it from his ankle. “Please, I’m okay. Really,” he said when he straightened.

She took a deep breath, then a bolt of lightning and a loud crash of thunder less than a second later had them both jumping.

“Where are you staying?” she asked him, walking over to where her shorts, shirt, and shoes lay.

“Just down the road,” he answered quickly.

She frowned. “Where?”

He motioned. “About a mile that way.”

There was a public parking access that way and pretty much nothing else. Did he mean Edgeview? The town was in that direction but about fifteen minutes from there.

She knew it wasn’t wise to let him drive all that way, especially after hitting his head.

Another bolt of lightning had her clenching her back teeth.

“You’re not going to make it to your car before the storm hits. Grab your board and follow me.” She waved at him and then started making her way quickly back towards her place. If the guy was smart, he’d follow her, if not... he was on his own. If he left, she’d call it in, and he’d be someone else’s problem.

When she reached her porch, however, she noticed the man was carrying the surfboard and the dog across the sand towards her cottage. Apparently, he felt well enough. The long board must have been heavy and awkward to carry that far with the dog.

Still, when he set the board down next to her own surfboard and kayak, he wasn’t even winded. He did sit down on the cushioned sofa she had on the porch, putting the little dog next to him.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, running her eyes over him.

The lightning and thunder were almost deafening. Rain had started falling just before they’d made it to the porch and now it was coming down sideways. Good thing her porch was almost as big as the rest of her house. It was one of her favorite spots to sit and watch storms.

“Like I got hit in the head with a surfboard,” he said as he grabbed his head with both hands. “Can I trouble you for some water?”

Without saying anything, she walked inside and grabbed a glass of water and the bowl of water that she kept for her parents’ dogs and brought it all outside.

She set the bowl for the little dog down on the seat first, then she handed the man the glass.

“Thanks.” He proceeded to drink the entire thing in one large gulp.

When she’d first spotted him, she’d assumed that he was just another surfer, a beach bum that had wandered up from California in hopes of some bigger more private waves. No doubt he’d known there was a storm coming and hoped to enjoy the massive waves it brought in. If that was the case, he was an idiot. Especially since he’d taken the little dog out on the water with him.

She was thankful that the dog had a life vest on. Sure, she could tell they were both skilled, since the dog obviously knew what to do on the surfboard. Actually, they had looked really good out there. Until they hadn’t. Until the weather had been too much for them. Too much for most.

“Are you always this reckless?” she asked, sitting down in the chair across from him. She leaned down and turned on the gas firepit. Even though it was in the sixties still, the rain and wind had brought cooler air. Then she leaned back and propped her feet up on the firepit, enjoying the warmth.

He didn’t answer, but just kept rubbing his forehead.

“You know that you could have killed your dog.” She motioned to the little dog, who had finished lapping up the water and was now happily snoring on the pillow next to him.

“Willy,” he said.

“Well, Willy, you’re very lucky—”

His chuckle stopped her.

“My name is Ryder, that’s Willy.” He motioned to the dog.

“Right, well, Ryder...” She narrowed her eyes. Maybe he was an idiot? “You appear to be good enough on that”—she motioned to the surfboard—“to know better than to be out in something like that.” She motioned towards the storm, which had only grown in the past few moments.

Still, Ryder didn’t seem fazed by the dark clouds or the booming thunder. Even Willy seemed at peace during the storm. She could tell that it wasn’t the first one the pair had waited out.

“It was our last ride,” he said, and coughed.

She thought to get up and get him some more water, but he leaned back and closed his eyes. “I hadn’t planned on staying away this long,” he said softly.

Brook watched his chest rise and fall and noticed when it slowed. His tight wet suit showcased the muscles of his arms and chest. His breathing slowed even more and she grew worried, until she realized that he was asleep.

What kind of man could fall asleep that quickly? Should she be concerned that he had a bump to his head?

She should call her father or, better yet, Dr. Stevens to come check up on him. Instead, she sat there listening to the storm, the crackle of the fire, and Ryder and Willy happily snoring together.

She lost track of time, listening to the hypnotic rhythms, as she was deep in her own thoughts.

Thoughts about her life. How she’d ended up here, living in a small cottage along a lone stretch of beach. She liked her

solitude. Liked living alone. Sure, she loved her family and the town of Pride, but there was just something about being... alone.

For as long as she could remember, she'd wanted nothing more than to be in nature.

Her mother had been from Pride. After leaving for school and returning to open Sara's Nook, Pride's very own bakery, she'd met and had fallen in love with Brook's father, Allen Masters.

Her dad was her hero.

He'd moved to Pride to teach at the coast guard training facility. He still did. But now, instead of being just an instructor, he was one of the men who ran the entire facility. Which is why Brook had grown up loving the water.

Even though she'd been stuck helping her mother in the bakery most of her life, she dreamed of being on the open water. That thought filled her as she drifted off to sleep.

"Hey?" A deep voice shook her mind clear from a dream of a sexy green-eyed merman who was saving her from the storm in her dreams. "You awake?"

She blinked a few times and nodded. Her eyes focused on Ryder, who was standing over her.

"Hey," she said, clearing her throat and sitting up. She didn't know how many times she'd fallen asleep in that chair over the past few years. It was one of the reasons she'd splurged on the nice furniture out there. She ran her hands over her face and then glanced up to see Willy rushing back onto the porch. He jumped up on the sofa as Ryder sat down.

"Thanks for letting us crash here last night." Ryder's eyes moved over her.

"How's the head?" she asked as he rubbed the spot above his ear.

"Sore, but I can still remember my name," he said with a smile. Her heart kicked in her chest at seeing his grin. God, he

was sexy. Where had he come from? More important, why the hell did she always fall for the stupid surfer guys?

“That’s good. Ryder and Willy.” She motioned between the man and dog.

What she needed was to send them on their way and get into town. No doubt her mother would need her help at the bakery today.

She’d made it very clear to her mother a while back that she didn’t do early mornings. Her mother and aunt were notoriously early risers.

“Yes.” His eyes traveled over her face. “We didn’t get your name last night.”

“Brook.” She stood up and saw his eyebrows shoot up.

“Brook...” He waited.

“Masters.” She sighed. “And...” She glanced at her watch and winced. “I’m late for work.” She walked inside to shower and change.

When she came back outside, she wasn’t surprised that the man, the dog, and the surfboard were gone. What did surprise her was the note attached to a small wooden carving of what was very obviously Willy.

“Brook, thanks again for letting us crash here. You have a really great beach and surf spot. I hope we didn’t put you out too much. Willy wanted me to leave you some cash for your trouble, but he’s broke and a dog. So I hope you’ll accept this little token instead. See you around, Ryder & Willy.”

Smiling, she put the small figure in her pocket, then locked up her house and rushed to work.

When she walked into the bakery almost half an hour late, her mother smiled and asked, “Did you sleep on your porch again?”

“There was a storm.” She pulled on her apron and walked over to make herself a cup of coffee.

“Morning,” her aunt Becca said as she came out of the back carrying a large tray of maple eclairs.

Brook took one and shoved it in her mouth.

“Wasn’t that a great storm last night?” her aunt asked her.

“The best,” Brook answered. “Where do you want me?” she asked her mother.

“You can work the register. Rush hour should start...” Just then the door opened, and her mother smiled. “Right about now.”

She loved her job at her mother’s bakery. The hours were really flexible, her mother and aunt were great to work with, and she loved chatting with everyone who came in daily.

Still, her mind kept playing over the sexy dream she’d had about Ryder and, well, the man himself.

It wasn’t often that Pride got visits from sexy strangers. A lot of people came and went, but none had slept on her porch or called her a mermaid before. And none had sparked her interest like Ryder had.

An hour later, just when things were starting to slow down, she looked up to see Ryder stroll into the bakery. The moment he saw her, surprise and desire flashed behind those sexy green eyes she’d dreamed about all night long.

CHAPTER THREE

The last thing Ryder expected was to see Brook standing behind the bright pink counter in an even brighter frilly apron.

Whatever his first impressions of the women had been, he just couldn't imagine her wearing this much pink by choice. He'd gotten more of a worn jean's surfer style or a Dr. Martens with leather pants kind of vibe from her. On closer examination, he could see that was what she was currently wearing under the lacey pink apron. The outfit was somehow still a major turn on to him.

"Hey." He strolled up to the counter, his eyes zoned in on her.

"Hey." She smiled back, something he hadn't seen her do before. Damn, it knocked the breath out of his lungs almost as much as the waves had the night before.

"So, you work here?" he asked, glancing around the bakery for the first time.

Most of the inside was painted pink and red. Almost like a Valentine's Day card blew up in it. Still, it was classy enough that it wasn't obnoxious.

"Yup," she said, then she glanced around. "Where's Willy?"

He nodded behind him. "I tied him to a chair outside. He's not allowed near this much sugar. I made that mistake once." He shook his head as she laughed. "He goes nuts when he

smells baked goods, and I didn't want to be responsible for any losses when I couldn't control him."

He enjoyed the sound of her laughter and wished more than anything he could spend the entire day listening to it.

"Something tells me that ten-pound dog is the boss between the pair of you," she said.

He chuckled. "You know it."

She leaned on the counter and tilted her head. "What can I get you?"

Damn. The first thing that flashed to his mind was her lying underneath him, her legs wrapped around him as he...

Brook snapped her fingers in front of his face, a frown on her lips as her eyebrows arched up.

"Maybe that surfboard hit you harder than we thought?" she said, straightening.

He smiled. "Nope, just low on sugar." He motioned to the eclairs. "Two of the chocolate ones and coffee. Black."

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't trust anyone who drinks their coffee black."

"No?" He leaned on the counter slightly. "Why is that?"

She shrugged and turned to get his order. "Call it an intuition after growing up working in a bakery."

"You've worked here a long time then?" he asked as she put the eclairs in a bag.

"My entire life. My parents own this place." She motioned around.

Just then, a woman came out of the back room carrying a massive white cake. Instantly, he could see the resemblance.

"Your mother?" He motioned as she started making his coffee.

Brook glanced over and then chuckled. "No, this is my aunt Becca." The woman turned and gave him a smile as another woman stepped out from the back room holding

another cake. “This is my mother, Sara,” Brook said. “This is Ryder, and his dog Willy is waiting outside.”

Both women ran their eyes over him and said hello.

Brook looked more like her aunt than her mother. Still, it was obvious the three women were related. He was surprised at how young the other two looked. They looked more like Brook’s sisters than her mother and aunt.

“Good morning,” he said casually.

“Are you new in town?” Brook’s mother asked.

“Just passing through. Your daughter helped us out last night during the storm,” he said easily as he took the mug of hot coffee from Brook and then handed her a twenty-dollar bill.

“Oh?” Becca nudged Sara, a move Ryder caught out of the corner of his eye.

“How long are you staying in Pride?” Sara asked.

He wanted to tell them that he and Willy were heading back up to Seattle after breakfast, but instead he shrugged. “For a while.”

“Where are you staying?” Becca asked.

“Right now, we’re camping not too far from Brook’s place.” He took a sip of the coffee. It was good. Good, good. He’d grown up in Seattle and had always had access to good coffee, but this was some of the best he’d ever had. He frowned at the cup.

“Something wrong with the coffee?” Brook asked.

“No, just the opposite. It’s really good.” He took another sip.

“Eva Elliott, formerly Eva Chapman, hooks us up with her special brand,” Brook said.

“Chapman. As in...” Ryder frowned.

“Coffee King.” Brook smiled.

Ryder went on guard a little. His father had known Harry Chapman. Hell, he knew Eva. He had even dated her way back when... long before her brother had died, and she'd disappeared from Seattle.

"Eva and Rafe live just outside of Pride. Rafe and his sister own the Brew Ha Ha," Brook added, handing him back his change. "It's a bookstore slash coffee shop slash wine bar down the street. They open their doors at eleven, we close our doors at one."

He tried to relax. It was a small world. He doubted that he would be in town long enough to run into Eva. Even if he did, she might not remember him. After all, he looked completely different than he had years ago. How long had it been anyway? Ten years? Shit. More than that.

"Good to know." He turned towards the other women and added, "It was nice meeting you both." He held up the bag and coffee, then turned to go.

When he stepped outside, he frowned instantly when he noticed someone kneeling down to pet Willy. His heart jumped and then sank when he realized it was Eva.

She'd changed so much in the last ten years. Still, he'd recognize her anywhere. She had a stroller with a young boy in it. It was obvious she had only stopped because her two dogs were sniffing Willy.

"Aren't you the cutest?" Eva was saying with a chuckle. "Do you have an owner?"

"Yeah," Ryder said, moving over. "I'm here."

Eva glanced up and for a moment, her eyes narrowed, then she smiled and rushed over to hug him. "It is you. I saw you walking inside the bakery and thought I'd imagined it." She leaned back and ran her eyes over him. "Gosh, you've changed. You're..."

"Older?" he offered.

She laughed. "Tan."

He nodded. "Yup, I've been surfing a lot."

Eva tilted her head and then noticed the bag and his coffee. “I’m keeping you from your breakfast.”

“No.” He motioned to the table where he’d tied Willy up. “Sit. We can catch up while I eat.”

They sat down and just as he gave Willy a bite of the éclair, the door to the bakery opened and Brook stepped out, holding a tray.

“Morning, Brook,” Eva said with a smile.

“I thought Willy and Merwin and Arthur would like one of our pooch-chinos.” She motioned to the three dogs. “And I figured you and Nate might want a cookie,” Brook said, after kneeling and giving the dogs each a cup of whipped cream. She held out the tray so the young boy could take a cookie before handing one to Eva.

“Thanks.” Eva smiled. “I was coming over to grab my usual. Nate might like a chocolate milk to go with the cookie.”

“I’ll go grab it for you,” Brook said, her eyes darting between the two of them. She turned and headed inside.

“What brings you to Pride?” Eva asked, setting her cookie down.

“Just passing through. I didn’t know you lived here,” he said, trying to change the subject.

“Yes, for the past few years. I met my husband, Rafe, right there.” She motioned down the street. He turned and saw a two-story brick building with a sign above the door that said Brew Ha Ha.

“Yes, I just heard. Your husband owns the place?” he asked.

“He is partners with his sister. But Rafe doesn’t really run the place. He’s a psychologist. He actually has a practice just there...” She motioned to another building. There was a smaller sign that read Family Counseling.

“Nice,” he said, taking a bite of his éclair and washing it down with the coffee.

“I’m actually in the process of writing a book,” Eva surprised him by saying, then she chuckled and held her hand up. “Don’t get too excited. I’ve been writing it for a while now. I do some freelance articles for a local paper every now and then, more so before this monster came along.” She chuckled as her son finished his cookie.

“I’m still impressed,” he said with a smile. Then he motioned to the cup. “I heard you had a hand in the special blend I’m enjoying.”

“I did.” Eva smiled. “I’ve lent my father a hand with his business every now and then. I came up with a few special blends in the past few years.”

“Good. I’d like to get my hands on some when I return to Seattle.” Only after the words had left his mouth did he realize that Brook was standing next to him with a cup of coffee and a chocolate milk for Eva.

When he met Brook’s eyes, he could tell she was trying to figure something out.

“Thanks, Brook. Oh, this is an old friend of mine, James Gallant,” Eva said, causing Ryder to wince.

“I go by Ryder now,” he corrected.

Eva’s eyebrows shot up, then she nodded. “Ryder suits you much better.” She touched his hand.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Brook said, then she turned on her heels and disappeared inside.

“Where are you staying?” Eva asked.

“Willy and I have our van.” He motioned to his home away from... well, everything. “We’ve been going up and down the coast for a while.”

Eva frowned. “I heard about your father. I’m so sorry.” She took his hand again.

“Thanks,” he replied. He felt nothing when talking about his father’s death. Nothing. There had never been any emotions between the father and son.

“Ryder, I...” Eva sighed. “After the accident, when Nate died, I took off. I spent a year running from my family, from the pain.” She sighed and looked around. He followed her gaze. The sun had come out from behind a cloud and the little town was blanketed in sunlight, making it almost look surreal. “From the guilt. It wasn’t until I found somewhere I belonged, someone who made me want to stop running”—Eva’s smile grew—“that I realized that running wasn’t doing any good.”

He nodded and turned back to her. “Yeah, Willy and I decided to head home today.” His eyes moved back to the bakery, to where Brook stood just inside the windows. He thought back to the previous night. To how Brook had treated him. He’d never experienced that much kindness from one person in his entire life.

Even when he and Eva had dated, she’d been... different than she was now. He supposed they both were. They’d been young, spoiled, selfish.

Eva’s eyes followed his and her smile grew. “Pride is unlike any place on earth. The people here are... not like the ones we grew up around,” she finished as she took the empty chocolate milk container from her son and wiped milk and cookies from his face. “If you can, stick around for a couple more days. I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

“I might do that.” He smiled when Brook glanced up in his direction. He thought about spending more time with her. Seeing if there was anything beyond the flash flood of lust that he felt for her. “Do me a favor though,” he said, turning back to Eva, his smile slipping. “If anyone asks about me...”

A look crossed Eva’s eyes, something close to sadness and understanding. Once more, her hand reached out and touched his. “I hid out here in Pride myself once.” She glanced over his shoulder at the town and her smile returned. “Your secret’s safe with me. Well, except from Rafe. I tell him everything. He has an uncanny knack of knowing when I’m lying or hiding something from him.” She chuckled. “He’s a really good psychologist.” She started to get up but stopped. “You might want to check out Pride’s Bed and Breakfast if you need a place to park and stay. It was really good seeing you again.”

“Yeah. You too. Congratulations on the marriage and kid.” He motioned to the young boy. “Thanks.” She laid her hand over her stomach. “Nate will be getting a sister in six months.”

“Congrats.” He smiled.

Eva’s smile slipped a little. “Stay in touch. You know where to find me now.”

He nodded and then watched her walk away.

Willy gave a happy little bark and did a circle. Ryder glanced over and saw Brook standing behind him.

“So, you and Eva appear to go way back.” She sat down across from him with a plate of sticky cinnamon rolls and a coffee.

“We knew each other from school,” he said, wanting to change the subject. The rolls looked even better than the eclairs that he’d had. “Are those fresh? Can I have one?”

She leaned on the table a little. “That depends.”

His eyebrows shot up as his stomach sank. Here it was, she was just another person who wanted something from him. “On?”

“If you and Willy will join me for an after-lunch sail.” She leaned back and slid the plate towards him slowly, as if waiting for his answer.

He couldn’t explain it, but at her words, his heart did a little flip. “Do you know how to sail?” he asked.

She smiled. “My dad runs the coast guard facility just outside of town.”

He chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Well?” she asked, pulling the rolls back towards her.

“You’ve got yourself a deal.” He took the fork and the plate from her.

CHAPTER FOUR

What the hell had gotten into her? Why had she asked him to come along? Had it been a moment of weakness?

Brook stood on the small sailboat that she'd purchased a few months back, waiting for Ryder and Willy to show up.

She had taken the time to pack food for them since she planned on being out until after sunset.

At least twice a month starting in the spring and all during summertime, a bunch of her friends got together and spent the day at a beach area not far up the coast from Pride. Her cousin Kate and her fiancé Tom had arranged the gathering earlier that week.

Tom's sailboat was much larger than hers, and he'd shuttled at least a dozen of her friends to the cove earlier that morning.

She didn't know why she'd invited Ryder along, other than she'd figured it would be a good way to get to know him a little better. A way to possibly get to the bottom of the dark, sad look she'd seen on his face when he'd talked to Eva.

Everyone in town knew Eva's story. How she'd lost her younger brother in a car crash where she'd been driving. How she'd blamed herself for the accident and taken off for a full year, living on the streets, running from her family.

She'd run into the Brew Ha Ha in an attempt to hide once and had landed in the path of Rafe. The pair had fallen hard and fast for one another and, through patience and love, Rafe had convinced her to work things out with her parents. It just

so happened that Eva's parents owned a large well-known coffee company in Seattle.

Brook wanted to find Eva or, better yet, ask Ryder about how well the two of them knew one another. But she had been raised better than that.

People kept secrets and when others pried, sometimes the wedge they caused in the relationship was irreversible. Something told Brook that whatever Ryder was hiding, he didn't want her to know. At least not yet.

She knew and trusted Eva and had seen how her friend had treated and talked to Ryder. Whatever he was hiding, it wasn't that he was a bad guy. Eva genuinely cared for him, either as a friend or as an old lover.

When she heard a dog bark, she glanced up to see Willy rushing towards her down the dock.

"There he is." She smiled and bent down to give the small dog some attention. Then she glanced up to see Ryder strolling towards her. He walked as if he had all the time in the world. A man without a purpose. "You found it okay?" she asked, straightening.

"Yeah." Ryder smiled at her, then glanced behind her to the sailboat. A slight frown creased his forehead. "Fair warning, I've never been on a sailboat before."

"I've been warned." She motioned to the sailboat. He moved past her and stepped on board. "What about Willy?"

"He's never been sailing either," Ryder said with a smile. He snapped his fingers and the dog jumped on deck.

She liked his humor. Liked that it was dry and witty. Not a lot of people in town got her humor, which was much the same as his.

"Ready?" she asked when she stepped back on deck.

"Sure." He moved over so she could unhook the ropes holding them to the docks. "Where are we heading?"

She motioned to the water. "Out." She tossed the rope back onto the dock, then nudged them away. "Trust me?"

He shrugged and then sat down on the bench and relaxed back as if he didn't have a care. When she was on the water, she felt as if the world stopped existing beyond her and that moment.

Her heart rate slowed, her energy level spiked, and she felt more at home than anywhere else.

She pulled out of the small inlet that Pride docks sat in, raised the sails, and enjoyed the instant tug of the smaller craft as it headed north.

One thing she could always count on was the steady winds would take her where she wanted to go. Except during a storm.

“How long did you say you'd been sailing?” he asked once they were on their way.

“I've had *Calypso* for almost six months. But I've been sailing and on boats my entire life.” She relaxed back as she steered them along the rocky coastline. As they went, she pointed out a few of the sights. “That's Sunset Events. They host weddings, parties, and other large events. Last winter, we enjoyed our very first ballet there, thanks to my cousin Kate. She just opened a dance studio in town last year. She's engaged to Tom. He's a police officer here in Pride. They're getting married this fall. Anyway...” She motioned to the hillside. “That's Hidden Cove neighborhood.” She motioned to the new subdivision. “They have their own little beach and dock just...” She waited until they passed the small cove and then smiled. “There. If you blink, you'll miss it.” They were traveling so fast that the small cove area passed by quickly. “The neighborhood is new to Pride in the past five years. My friends Jacob and Rose oversee the building and design of the entire neighborhood.”

She continued to chat about everything they passed—all the homes, the story of the town—as the flat beachy terrain turned rocky and the cliffs grew higher until most of the land was far above them.

The lighthouse sat just beyond Hidden Cove on a rocky cliff, and its beauty never ceased to surprise her. A massive house overlooked the lighthouse.

She'd always dreamed of owning the old place on Ocean View, ever since seeing it for the first time as a child when her dad had taken her out on the water. Whenever she passed it, she dreamed about what it would be like to live there, high above the water, in what to her seemed like a castle.

The old stairs leading down to the water's edge had fallen into disarray several years back, and she'd heard that the house had sat empty for years now.

"I bet they have a great view," Ryder said, motioning to the house.

"Yeah, too bad the place has sat empty for so long." She sighed. "I've always dreamed of buying it and fixing her up again."

"Have you been up there?" he asked, shifting slightly to get a better view now that they had passed the property.

"Nope." She glanced at him and realized he was watching her instead of the shoreline.

"You love it here," he said.

"I do." She smiled. "Where is home for you?"

He shrugged and turned his eyes away.

"For the moment, here is good." He leaned back slightly. "What do you do? Besides working at your mother's bakery?"

"I volunteer with the coast guard occasionally," she answered, remembering how she'd failed her final exam once more. Her father allowed her to volunteer, but because of the last part of the test she couldn't get past, she was stuck in the classrooms and not out in the field.

"That's cool," Ryder said, turning back to face forward.

She frowned and watched him. She'd expected him to treat her like everyone else that she knew did. To argue with her that it wasn't safe. Even though there were more than a dozen women currently working at that coast guard facility. Somehow, everyone she knew believed that she should stick to the bakery.

“A lot of family and friends don’t think I have what it takes,” she said, watching for his reaction.

He glanced back at her. “I’ve only known you for a few hours and, in that time, you’ve done nothing but prove you do.” He smiled at her, and she felt her heart kick in her chest.

Damn.

“What about you?” she asked, trying to steady her heartrate.

“Me?” He shifted so that Willy could lay on his lap.

“What do you do?”

“This and that,” he said, slowly stroking Willy’s head. “In the past year I’ve waited tables, bartended, shoveled manure, roofed homes, taught surfing lessons, among other odd jobs.”

“And before that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “School.” He avoided her eyes, and she could tell he was hiding something.

“You’re from Seattle?” she asked. He nodded. Okay, so he wanted to avoid talking about his past.

“Yes, but I went to school out east,” he answered. “You? Did you go to college?”

“Some. I went through the basic coast guard boot camp training. Since my dad was the teacher...”

“Right.” He nodded. “So, why do you work at the bakery instead of that?”

She took a deep breath. “Because my dad and friends keep taking me off the schedule,” she answered, only lying a little. He had his secrets, she had hers. “So, I have to make ends meet. Plus, my mother and aunt really needed the help.” His eyes narrowed slightly. “It really sucks when you can’t even control your own life.”

He watched her and then nodded slowly. “I know the feeling.”

She was quiet for a moment as they grew closer to the secluded cove area.

“Your parents?” she finally asked.

He shook his head. “Gone now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “We weren’t all that close.”

She wondered if she’d misjudged him. After all, even though her family and friends liked to shelter her, she knew they were just trying to keep her safe. As much as it annoyed her, she still loved each and every one of them. The thought of losing them stung. Yet, Ryder seemed unfazed about losing his family.

“Do you have any siblings?” she asked, trying to understand him a little more.

“Nope. You?”

She shook her head. “No, not from the lack of my parents trying. Or so they’ve told me. They finally ended up giving up after my mother needed surgery.” She shrugged. “She’d lost a baby and... I won’t bore you with the details. Anyway, I’m an only child. I have two cousins. Nick and Kate. We’re as close as siblings.”

“The cop and the dancer?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And the dancer is marrying a cop?”

She smiled. “Yes, Nick’s partner.”

“Right.” He nodded.

Just then Tom’s sailboat came into view. It was much larger than her own, and it sat anchored just at the entrance to the private cove.

“We’re here,” she said, motioning towards the larger sailboat.

Ryder glanced to where she was pointing.

“Looks like a party,” he said.

“Yup,” she answered, lowering the sails. The small boat came to rest next to the larger one.

She could see everyone on the beach, enjoying themselves. When they were spotted, several people shouted and waved at them.

After putting down both anchors, she pulled out the inflatable dinghy. She'd purchased the same model Tom had when she'd gotten the *Calypso*.

“Need any help?” Ryder asked.

“Do you know how to work the air pump?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He took it from her and while inflated the dinghy that would take them to shore, she grabbed the cooler and basket holding their food.

“We could always get some exercise and swim in?” Ryder suggested as he lowered the dingy into the water.

“The currents between the two rock shears are very strong if the tide is going out.” She pointed to the two tall walls on either side of the inlet. “It’s why I purchased this with the sailboat.” She put the cooler and basket into the dinghy. “Come on.” She climbed off the back of the sailboat into the dinghy.

He carefully picked up Willy and then handed the dog to her.

She waited until he sat down in the dinghy and then handed him the paddle.

“If you want the exercise, you can row us to shore,” she said with a smile.

He took the paddles and pushed them away from the sailboat, and they started heading towards shore.

She watched his strong arms work with each stroke and felt herself melting. Even though he was a mystery and a total beach bum, with probably not a dime to his name, there was something that drew her to him. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

The way he'd looked when he'd talked to her about not being affected by his parents being out of his life. What would it be like to go your entire life and not feel the love she had growing up?

As much as he tried to seem nonchalant, she could see the hurt and pain clearly behind those sexy sea green eyes.

Maybe that was what pulled at her? She had always been a sucker for a wounded soul. Obviously, her small problems paled in comparison to his.

She'd grown up with so much love, she'd never questioned it.

As the dinghy hit the soft sand and Nick and Tom rushed to help them and carry their gear to where everyone else was set up, she realized that maybe this was why she'd invited Ryder. To show him that he wasn't alone. That there might just be something better than being a loner.

CHAPTER FIVE

Inside, Ryder was freaking out. He tried very hard to act casual, but there were a dozen strangers on the beach that Brook was trying to introduce him to. Strangers that were her family. Or people she considered to be like family.

He met Brook's cousins Kate and Nick, neither of whom looked much like Brook. Yet the three of them were as close as what he imagined siblings would be.

Nick and Tom acted like best friends. Then there was a man named Reece Crawford, who had dark hair and was easily as tall as Ryder at six four. Reece's younger sister Hannah was a pretty brunette.

A brother and sister duo, Avery and Wyatt Auston, were easy to keep track of since both were redheads. Avery's hair was a fiery color, while Wyatt's was a much darker brownish-red shade.

Sisters Haley and Harper Davis looked so much alike he at first thought they might be twins.

Then there was Robin and her sister, Kara, who were married to Conner and George Jordan. He was a little confused as to whom was who since he'd lost track of people at this point. There were a few other people, two of whom were named Jordan, as well as their spouses.

"I think that's enough introductions for now," Brook said. "How about we grab a sandwich?" She sat in the sand and began taking food out of the cooler that he'd carried onto the beach. Then she handed him a cold beer, and he sat next to her

while the rest of the group went back to playing a volleyball game.

“Did everyone here come on the big sailboat?” he asked.

“Yeah, Tom shuttles them up here. I usually take a few with me, but I had to work this morning. They’ve been here since this morning.” She shrugged and handed him a sandwich. “Which is why I brought you and Willy along.” She motioned to where his dog was playing with a few other ones.

He was thankful that his dog got along great with all creatures and humans. He’d really lucked out when he’d saved the little guy. He doubted that he’d have stayed on the road so long without the constant companionship. He probably would have returned to Seattle a lot sooner.

“How often do you and the rest of them come up here?” he asked, glancing around.

He realized that the beach’s only access was from the water. Tall cliffs hung over all sides and even the ocean view was cut off by the narrow channel that he’d rowed them in through.

If they were in the tropics, this would have been a total paradise. As it was, he guessed that once the cooler weather set in, the cove would turn into an outright dangerous place.

“For about three months each summer, we come at least every other week. Sometimes more if we’re lucky.” Brook shrugged. “I came up here in the winter once.” She shook her head. “Not a good idea.” She motioned to the two cliffs on either side of the entrance. “Those mammoths nearly turn the chilly waters here into a vortex. The waves during a storm could easily crash any boat that even gets near the channel.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Still, I bet it would be a surfer’s dream to shoot the pipe.”

Brook frowned. “My dad has rescued, or tried to rescue, more idiots trying that than he can count.” She pointed to her right. “There are memorials of about half a dozen over there. Most of them died within the last ten years.”

In the last year, he'd been careful not to do anything stupid. Until last night, anyway.

He'd always promised himself that when he grew sloppy, he would hang up the board. He knew that last night's stupidity was due to his mind being on returning, but all day long, he kept thinking about what could have happened, and realized how dumb he'd been.

He could have lost Willy. Could have lost his own life.

He wanted to assure Brook that he wasn't stupid, but each time he opened his mouth to do so, he realized that it would probably only make him look even more so. So he sat back with her watching the volleyball game until they were pulled into a new game.

He could tell instantly that she'd played the game many times before. She and her friends easily set up and spiked the ball more times than he could count.

When the game ended, the group sat around a fire and sipped beer as the sun sank lower. He chatted with a few of the guys, answering basic questions. Where he was from. What he did for work. If he had any family. He dodged the questions by being very vague.

When the sun started getting lower, everyone gathered around the fire and chatted or joked with one another.

Suddenly, he wondered how everyone was going to make it back to town in the dark. Shortly after the sun set, everyone started gathering up their things and combed the beach to make sure no trash was left behind. He helped Brook put her things back in her dinghy and pushed off and started rowing back to her boat. Three other small dinghies filled with people and items headed to the larger sailboat.

He helped Brook and Willy on board, then set the cooler down and pulled up the dinghy.

"Thanks," Brook said as she helped him. "If you deflate that, I'll weigh anchor."

Deflating the thing took more time than filling it up. By the time he was done, they were already on their way.

“How do you know where you’re heading?” he asked, looking out into the darkness. He could see the lights from the larger sailboat following them. There was a full moon, which had everything sparkling and lit up enough that he could see fairly clearly. He hadn’t seen her use her phone or a GPS device yet.

“The lights.” She motioned towards the shore. “I guess I’ve done this so many times, I know it by heart.” She glanced over at him. He could just make out her face in the moonlight. “But I do have my phone as backup.” She chuckled. “Did you enjoy today?” she asked after a moment.

He sat back, letting Willy jump up into his lap. “Yeah, it was... needed,” he answered as thoughts of returning to Seattle caused his stomach to turn. Then he turned his face upward and sighed. The stars overhead reminded him of how small and insignificant he really was. His problems were miniscule in comparison to everything else. “I’m thinking of going home,” he blurted out.

Brook was quiet for a while. “Back to Seattle?” she finally asked.

“Yeah.” He turned his eyes back to her and saw her tilt her head.

“With both of your parents gone, is there someone else waiting for you?” she asked.

He smiled a little. “I’m single.”

He saw her roll her eyes. “Not what I was asking, but that’s good to know.”

“You?” he asked. He wanted to change the subject. He didn’t know why he’d brought it up in the first place.

“I’m single,” she said.

His smile grew. He reached out and laid his hand over hers. “Thank you for inviting us today.”

She nodded quickly. “I’m glad you tagged along.” They rode in silence for a while before she asked, “Why is Seattle home?”

He thought about telling her a short version of his story, but instead answered, “I was given a lot of responsibilities when my father died.”

“So you took off to go surfing instead?” she asked.

He chuckled. “You could say that.”

“You’ve been on the road for a year?”

He nodded. “About that.”

“Your father died last year?”

He frowned. “It’s been three years now.”

“These... responsibilities. Are they business or personal?”

“Both.”

She nodded quickly and then glanced off to the shore. “We’re coming into Pride.” She pointed, and he could see the lights. Then she turned to him. “Are you sleeping in your van?” she asked suddenly.

“It’s a sleeper van,” he answered. “I’d wager it’s bigger than your place.”

She laughed at that. “Hey, the cottage isn’t that small. I have six hundred square feet all to myself.”

“And half of it is the front porch, from what I saw.” He smiled.

She shrugged. “I like being outside more than inside.”

“Who could blame you with the view you have.” He watched as they drew closer to the lights of the town. The two days he’d spent in Pride made him realize the reason so many were drawn to it.

Not only was everyone friendly, but they also didn’t ask him all the daunting questions that he’d assumed small-town folks would. Who was he? Who were his people? Why was he living in a van?

Sure, Brook had asked him questions. But he’d asked her just as many. Besides, the sexual pull he felt towards her had loosened his tongue.

“Where are you parking for the night?” she asked as the sailboat slid into the dock.

He glanced over to where his van sat under a spotlight in the small parking lot.

“What’s wrong with right there?” he asked.

She frowned as she tied off the boat. “A lot. First, Tom and Nick can see the docks from their homes and it’s a no-overnight parking zone.”

“Right,” he said, helping her with the cooler. “Any suggestions?”

She stepped onto the dock just as the larger sailboat bumped into the slip next to them. “You can park at my place,” she said quickly and then turned to put her cooler on a cart.

While he helped her secure everything for the night and haul her stuff to her car, he wondered why she was helping him.

He was a stranger. Sure, they’d spent the night sleeping close to one another and practically all day with each other, but what would cause someone to help a stranger so much? What kind of person was she? People he knew from his past just didn’t do things like this.

No one he’d grown up with or knew in business would so much as open a door for a stranger. Especially not someone who looked like him.

He caught his reflection in his van’s window as he put Willy inside. He fit the description of a beach bum almost completely.

“You can follow me back to my place,” Brook said. “If your van has hookups, I have power and water at my place. The people who owned the cottage before me had RV hookups installed.”

He liked the thought of hooking up his van to power and water. His tanks were pretty much empty, and he’d planned on hitting the state park to refill his water and charge his batteries before heading back up to Seattle.

“Thanks,” he said. He walked around to climb behind the wheel of the van after helping Willy inside. He honked and waved to the group of people he’d spent the day with, all of them just as nice as Brook was. Then he pulled out of the parking lot and followed Brook back through town. He had stopped off at the little grocery store, O’Neil’s, before heading to the docks and had gotten some basics that he’d been low on.

They turned off the main road and traveled down the narrow dirt road that led to her small cottage. When the lights from her small place came into view, he felt his nerves spike for some reason.

Was she toying with him? No one could be this nice. Right?

To allow him to crash at her place last night and then invite him on the sail and then back here to use her power and water.

Brook parked and then jumped out and motioned to him to where the power and water hookups were. He pulled next to her cottage, turned off the van, and got out. Willy jumped out and raced into the grass to do his business.

“Wow, I guess he really had to go,” Brook joked as she hauled her cooler over to a water hose and dumped out the melted ice.

He glanced over at Willy and smiled. “I think he held it in on the sailboat.”

“Hookups are there.” She motioned. “There’s an outdoor shower.” She waved to a wood booth that sat on the side of her house. “If you don’t have one in the van.”

He did, but the thought of not having to bend halfway over to wash himself appealed to him.

“Thanks,” he said as he plugged in the electric and water.

“If you have laundry, my washer and dryer are in the garage.” She turned and showed him. “Help yourself.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked her.

“Doing what?” She turned, her eyebrows raised.

“Being so... accommodating.”

Brook’s smile flashed, and he felt his heart jump in his chest. His dick also jumped but he tried to ignore that.

“Hasn’t anyone ever helped you out without ulterior motives?” she asked, leaning against the railing of the front porch.

“No,” he answered honestly.

She frowned. “Well, then it’s obvious you haven’t known the right kind of people.” She crossed her arms over her chest as he leaned against the railing next to her.

“No, I haven’t.” He ran his eyes over her.

She smiled slowly, then surprised him by uncrossing her arms and taking a step closer to him. She lifted her hand to his face, reached up on her toes, and brushed her lips across his.

He froze, holding his breath as her taste mixed with the feeling of her soft lips. The combination completely shocked his system.

“No motives, just... kindness.” She turned and climbed the steps of the porch. “Good night, Ryder,” she said as she disappeared inside.

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

He must have stood there for a full minute before finally moving. He grabbed his shower bag and used the shower to wash off the sweat and salty spray. Willy joined him, and he gave the dog a scrub down as well.

When man and beast were clean, he dumped a load of his dirty clothes into her washing machine and moved over to lay in a hammock that hung between two oak trees. With Willy snoring happily on his chest, he dozed off to sleep under the oak leaves and the stars.

CHAPTER SIX

Brook got all of an hour of sleep. The night before, she'd slept like the dead on the porch with Ryder and Willy snoring across from her. That hadn't been the case this time.

For some reason, just knowing he was right outside her bedroom window showering had set her off. Or maybe it was that kiss. She didn't know why she'd kissed him, but afterward, her brain had completely shut off.

Actually, everything had shut off except her libido.

Which was why she'd had a rough night. She woke about an hour before her alarm and figured that a run on the beach would help clear her head. She changed into her running shorts and tank top and quietly slipped out of the house and off the porch. When her shoes hit the hard sand near the water's edge, she took off, letting her mind clear and focusing only on her breathing.

This stretch of beach was only two miles long before she came up against the cliffs near the Jordan's encampment. She could normally run the four miles twice. Today, however, she was just coming up on the Bed and Breakfast when she spotted Ryder and Willy walking towards her.

She hadn't heard them stirring and expected them to still be asleep.

"Morning," she said as they came into earshot.

Willy raced over to her, and she knelt down and gave the dog the belly scratches he wanted.

“Morning.” Ryder smiled and stopped next to her. “Nice morning for a jog.”

She glanced up at him and nodded. “Yes, it is. We’re supposed to get some more rain later today. Possibly another storm tonight.”

“We didn’t mean to interrupt your jog,” he said when she turned and started walking with him back towards her place with Willy leading the way.

“You didn’t. I was hoping something would break in to save me from the run,” she joked.

“Do you work again today?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“Yes,” she answered and glanced at him. She wanted to ask him what his plans were, but something held her back. Besides, she could see he was deep in thought, debating something heavy.

Then he turned towards the water and took a deep breath. She stopped and stood next to him, looking out over the water. The view was breathtaking. Even though she’d been raised right here and had seen it every day of her life, it still gave her joy knowing she would see it for the rest of her life.

Already, Brook could see the clouds building far off in the horizon. The rain would be starting within a few hours.

“I was determined to head back up to Seattle. Before...” He glanced sideways at her.

She felt her heart kick and remembered the passion she’d felt in that quick kiss the night before. She’d spent the entire night dreaming of what being with him would be like.

The sultry looks between them had been hotter than anything she’d ever had with her ex-boyfriends.

“And now?” she asked, a little breathless from the desire she saw in those green eyes.

He turned to her and, moving slowly, laid his hands on her shoulders. “Now, I’m not so sure. I’d like a little more time to

discover... this.” His eyes moved down to her lips. “If possible.”

She smiled and then nodded slightly as she moved closer to him.

His hands stiffened and a slight frown formed on his lips.

“Are you always this... trusting with strangers?” he asked suddenly. She wanted to laugh but saw the seriousness in his eyes.

“I trust Eva’s judgment of people. And since I met you, you have done nothing to indicate to me that you are anything other than someone running from something that is out of their control. I know how that feels. Maybe not to the same extent.” She leaned closer. “I do live in a small, secluded cottage,” she pointed out, and he smiled. Then she sobered again. “Besides, I think there is... something here.”

He moved closer so their bodies were pressed up against one another.

She looked up into his sea green eyes with the salty air washing over them. She felt her insides start to heat as his lips moved down to cover hers.

Brook could count on one hand the number of times a kiss moved her so much that her knees actually went weak. Ryder’s kiss blew all of those out of the water. If it weren’t for his arms being wrapped around her, holding her up, she would have melted into the sand.

“Yeah,” Ryder said, pulling back a little. “There’s definitely something here.” He rested his forehead against hers. Then he surprised her by taking her hand and turning them so they could continue walking. “I’m thinking I’ll stick around to see what it is.”

She smiled and tried to hide her excitement. “You’re welcome to stay parked where you are for as long as you need.”

“Thanks.” He smiled at her. “But I’ve been putting off going home for a year.” He stopped just outside of her cottage.

“I will take a week though.” He pulled her closer and ran his eyes over her face. “At least for now.”

She thought about the coming week and mentally rearranged a few things so she could have some time with Ryder.

She didn’t know what was between them, but like him, she wanted time to figure it out. To explore what it could be.

From the way he was talking, she could tell he wasn’t one to shy away from commitment or relationships. Then again, it wasn’t as if they knew one another all that well. Even though she’d spent half of the day yesterday with him, the conversation they’d had during the sail had been light.

“I’d better head in and shower.” She glanced at her watch.

“You don’t start at the crack of dawn? You do work in a bakery,” he joked as they crossed the sand.

“Nope. I made it very clear to my mother that I’m only a morning person as long as the mornings start after seven.” She smiled and unlocked her door.

Willy had jumped up on the sofa on the porch and was fast asleep.

“Will you two be okay here?” she asked.

“Sure. We were thinking of heading into town to grab some food. We might see you there. Those rolls were really good, and Willy told me he wanted another one of those pooch-chinos that you gave him yesterday.”

“It’s basically nondairy cool whip,” she joked. “My aunt started giving them away to all the dogs years ago.”

“He liked it just fine,” he said, motioning to Willy.

“Then I’ll see you there,” she said before stepping inside. She tried to steady her nerves as she showered the sand off and pulled on a pair of jeans and a blouse. She even took a little more time than usual to fix her hair and makeup before stepping outside.

She noticed the van was gone and her heart sank. Then she realized that he would have to drive it into town. After all, it was not only where he was staying but his only mode of transportation.

When she got into work, her aunt nudged her hip against hers.

“So...” Becca smiled. “Kate and Nick tell me that you invited that boy and his dog who stopped by here yesterday out sailing.

Brook rolled her eyes. “His name is Ryder,” she said. “And I would hardly describe him as a boy.” She chuckled.

“I never did hear exactly how you two met? He’s camping? Where is he staying?” Becca leaned on the counter and watched Brook as she made her own favorite coffee and took an apple fritter for herself.

“I rescued him.” She smiled and took a bite of her fritter. “He’s parking his van at my place. For now.”

“Oh?” Becca leaned a little closer and lowered her voice. “Is it true that he lives in a van?”

“He does for now. It’s a sleeper van. He even has a kitchen in there,” she said, having seen the inside of it for a split second. She’d been impressed with not only the size of it inside, but how neat he kept it. She’d noticed the bathroom and shower and had wondered how he stood up in there. Which is why she’d offered to let him use her outdoor shower and her washer and dryer. She’d taken plenty of family camping trips in her youth and knew how bad it could be living in a camper.

“Well, what does he do for a living? Where is he from?” Becca asked as several townspeople came in.

Brook didn’t answer until they were finished with the customers. Then she told her aunt that he was from Seattle, and she didn’t know what he did for a living.

After that, the main rush hour commenced, and they were both too busy to chat.

Ryder and Willy strolled in shortly before the end of that hour and once again sat outside in the sun and enjoyed their breakfast.

Her aunt came back out front with a plate of brownies. “Go, get some answers. Your mother and I are dying for details.” Brook chuckled until her aunt poked her in the ribs. “Go.”

“Okay.” Brook laughed. She took the brownies, grabbed a bottled water, and stepped outside.

“Hey,” she said, sitting across from him at the table. “My mother and aunt sent me out here to sugar you up and get details so they can gossip about you to everyone in town.” She set the plate down.

“Hey.” He glanced at the windows where her mother and aunt were watching them. He smiled and waved before taking a brownie. “What kind of details do they want?” he asked.

“You know, the basics. Who are your people? What do you do for a living? What blood type do you have? How many grandkids can you give them? Same old questions every meddling aunt and mother want answers to.” She sighed and took a sip of her water.

“Right.” He shifted after taking a bite of the brownie. “Damn good,” he said, leaning back in the chair. “I have no people. I’m an investor of sorts. A positive blood type, and I’m not sure just yet how many children I want. I suppose it depends on who I’m lucky enough to talk into settling down with me,” he answered smoothly.

Her eyebrows shot up and she had to admit, he was smooth. Very smooth.

“Good to know,” she said, taking another sip of the water.

“We were going to head over to that bookstore, the one Eva’s husband owns,” he said, glancing down the street at the building.

“The Brew Ha Ha,” she supplied.

“Right.” He chuckled. “What a name.”

“Rafe and his sister Cindy co-own the place. His other sister Cora used to own a floral shop in town, before she and her husband moved to Colorado. Now the only flower shop is All in Bloom.”

“Right, I met the owner and her husband—Suzie and Aiden—yesterday.” He nodded.

“Right.” She smiled. Okay, so Ryder was extremely charming and had a really great memory. “What exactly does an investor of sorts do?”

“This and that.” He shrugged. “Mainly, I took the job after my father died.” He avoided her eyes, and she could tell he wanted to change the subject.

“Well, whatever it is, it must be nice to be able to travel so much.” She sighed as she looked out over the town. “I love Pride. I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else, but it’s always nice to go and see new places.”

“Oh. What sort of places do you want to go see?” he asked, his eyes running over her.

“I’ve actually been to a lot of places. Paris, Italy, Alaska.” She chuckled. “I’d still love to go to Brazil during Carnival. My friend Rose’s uncle and aunt have this whole crazy backstory of how they met and fell in love in Brazil when they had to escape some crazy drug lords.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You mean Senator Kenneth Rhodes’s daughter?”

Brook leaned forward. “You know about Ann and Ethan?”

“I don’t know them personally, but yes, I’ve heard the story. I had to do a paper on it in school once. Plus, there was a movie about it...” His eyes narrowed as if he was trying to remember the name.

“Secret Guardian,” she supplied with a laugh.

“Right, it sounds like it was a pretty crazy situation. You know them?” he asked.

“I do. They come to Pride every so often. Ethan’s sister Rob is my friend Rose’s mother. Rob is married to Ric

Derby...”

Ryder tensed. “Seriously? I know Ric.”

She laughed. “It’s a small world.”

“Yeah,” Ryder said.

Instantly, this news had her wondering why he was frowning and looking around the town as if he expected the man to turn the corner and beat him.

“Hey.” She touched his hand. “Ric and Rob aren’t in town. Actually, I think they’re in Paris for an art show right now. Ric owns several galleries overseas.”

“Right. I like the guy. Seriously,” he said quickly. “It’s just ___”

“I get it,” she interrupted, feeling her heart sink. “You want to keep your secrets for at least another week.” She sighed and before he could respond, she stood up. “Well, I’d better get back to work.” She turned and disappeared inside before he had a chance to say anything else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shit. What the hell was that? Why was he being so jumpy? Hell, it had been a shock to see Eva in the small town. Now he'd heard that one of his father's old business acquaintances lived here too.

If there was ever a sign that he had to return home, this was it. Still, he'd promised Brook he'd stay for the week.

What if Ric Derby returned and bumped into him. Sooner or later, Brook was bound to look him up online. It wasn't as if she hadn't already heard his full name, thanks to Eva.

Still, something told him that she was purposely avoiding doing so. Maybe because she wanted to give him that freedom. Or maybe she was waiting for him to tell her himself.

It wasn't as if he owed her anything. Hell, they hadn't even slept together. Yet.

That thought had his mind switching gears quickly.

What would it be like to be with her? That kiss last night had been a spark, then the ones this morning had been full-blown explosions.

While his mind kept telling him he should leave, his libido and his dick reminded him that it had been almost a full year since either had been used.

He and Willy left the bakery and walked down to the bookstore. It had been over a month since he'd gotten something new to read. Not that he'd have a lot of time to start

something, since he planned on spending most of his time with Brook, but at least he could shop.

When he stepped into the two-story bookstore, a dark-haired woman was behind the bar, reading a book. She glanced up quickly and almost turned back to her book, but then stopped and pasted on a huge smile. He figured this would be Cindy, Eva's husband's sister.

"Well, hello." She set her book down and leaned on the counter. "You're new in town."

"Just passing through town." He moved to stand at the bar as he glanced around the bookstore. The place was filled with natural wood bookshelves that were completely filled. There was an old iron stove along the back wall with comfortable leather chairs arranged around it.

Several people were either browsing the shelves or sitting in leather chairs reading. An older woman was sitting in a booth reading while sipping a glass of wine.

"What's your poison?" the woman asked, her eyes still running over him.

"I'm good. I'll just look around. Is he okay in here?" he asked, motioning towards Willy.

"Oh!" The woman squealed and rushed around the counter to give Willy some attention. "Yes, of course. We're very pet friendly," she said as Willy enjoyed some belly rubs.

"Thanks." He smiled and then noticed a man walking towards him.

"You must be Ryder." The man held out his hand. "I'm Rafe. This is my sister Cindy."

Ryder shook the man's hand. "Eva mentioned she'd bumped into you. She and Nate had to run to the store. They should be back any minute."

Cindy stood up and walked over to help a customer who wanted to order a coffee. He noticed that there were many more coffee choices here than at the bakery. They also had an assortment of wines and teas.

“Can I get you something?” Rafe asked.

“No, Willy and I were just going to grab a few books.”

“Have a look around.” Rafe motioned.

“Thanks.”

“Cute dog.” Rafe bent and gave Willy attention now.

He walked over and started browsing the shelves. Minutes later, Eva walked in with Nate in his stroller.

Ryder watched the couple kiss and talk quietly before Eva glanced his way and smiled. Rafe pulled the sleeping boy out of the stroller and carried him towards the back room.

“Hi,” Eva said when she stopped next to him.

“Hi.” He motioned to the back. “I met Rafe.”

“Yes.” Her smile grew. “He mentioned you were here.” She nodded to the three books he’d picked out already. “It’s hard to leave here without something.” She sighed. “I never realized how much I loved books until I ran in here.”

“I rekindled my love for them last year when I hit the road,” he said, leaning on the bookshelf.

“I heard you went sailing with Brook yesterday,” Eva said as her eyebrows rose slightly.

“I did.” He held back a chuckle. “Here I was thinking the whole thing about news spreading fast in a small town was just a cliché.”

“Oh no.” Eva shook her head. “Pride is known far and wide for how fast news can spread.” She laughed. “I guess that’s why I couldn’t hide who I was for long here.” She bit her lip and then said, “You know, if you stay here long, everyone’s bound to find out everything there is to know about your past.”

He nodded. “I’m not necessarily keeping it from anyone. Just... wanting a few days,” he admitted.

“So, does that mean you’re sticking around?”

“For at least a week.” He remembered how excited Brook had looked when he’d said he’d stay.

“That’s good.” Eva touched his arm. “As much as I feared being found, a lot of good came from it. I finally found a place worth sticking around. It sucked, don’t get me wrong, to have to face my past, but still...” She sighed and glanced towards the front windows of the bookstore. “Not a day goes by that I’m not thankful I rushed in here and jumped behind that counter,” she said with a chuckle.

“You actually jumped?”

“She did,” Rafe said from behind him. The man walked over and wrapped an arm around Eva. “And landed right at my feet. Then she tried to climb out the bathroom window,” he said with a chuckle.

Eva smiled. “Yeah, I doubt I could even fit now. What with the new baby coming.” She ran her hand over her small belly.

“Congratulations, again,” he said.

“You’re just as beautiful as the day you tried.” Rafe kissed her.

After leaving the bookstore, he and Willy walked around town. He stopped into the pet store, Carrie’s Sanctuary, and bought some dog food and treats for Willy. Okay, so he spent about half an hour playing with some of the dogs she had in there. He had met Carrie yesterday and chatted with her about all the other animals she had up at her larger facility just outside of town.

Once they left there, they walked by a real estate office and noticed a few flyers in the windows. The image of the large place overlooking the water that Brook mentioned she’d dreamed of owning caught his eye.

The picture showed a severely neglected home. The price reflected that. If he were in the market, that would have been a good thing. After all, it didn’t take much to flip a place like that. The view alone was worth every penny.

“See something you like?” An older woman stepped out the front door and ran her eyes over him.

“Maybe.” He motioned to the flyer. “How motivated are the sellers?”

Her smile grew. “Why don’t the two of you step into my office?” She waved him and Willy inside.

He sat and listened to the woman’s selling points and when she offered to drive him and Willy out to look at the property, something had him agreeing. Maybe it was curiosity? Maybe it was because of what Brook said about her dream of one day living there?

She’d talked about enjoying the view from the deck that overhung the grassy yard or building a firepit right near the top of the long staircase, which would have to be rebuilt.

The more he thought about her dreams, the more he realized he could imagine all of it.

While Ellen Rodgers drove him and Willy out of town and towards the place, he tried to imagine what it would be like to live there. From what he’d seen, he honestly believed that he’d enjoy it very much.

The entire downtown of Pride was only a couple square miles. He’d easily walked from one end of town to the other. Still, they had everything a small town needed. Tons of little shops, including the bakery, florist, grocery, bookstore, and barbershop, plus a handful of boutiques and other specialty shops. There was even a medical clinic and law offices along with the standard post office, banks, schools, town hall, and both police and fire departments.

Brook had even talked about the old-time theater that still showed movies on weekends. He’d met Robin and Kara, so he knew the large wedding venue brought in a lot of out-of-towners. Not to mention the massive coast guard training facility, which apparently sat outside of town. He had yet to drive by it.

He and Willy had entered town from the south end and, as Ellen drove north, he tried to take in as much as he could.

“Up that road is the coast guard facility.” Ellen pointed as she turned left off the main road. “This road takes us along the

coast. That way will get you back to the highway and straight to Portland.”

The narrow road wound around the hills and finally turned into a dirt road. She stopped at the base of the driveway and got out to unlock the chain holding the gates together.

When she got back in, she said, “The power has been off, but the gate is automatic.”

He nodded and his breath caught when the car climbed the small hill and the house came into view.

The place was far bigger than it looked from the water.

“How many bedrooms did you say it had?” He leaned forward to get a better view.

Ellen parked in front of the three garage doors.

“There are eleven. There’s also a detached four-car garage.” She motioned to another building off to the side.

“It looked smaller from the water,” he pointed out as he stepped out of the car and let Willy rush to sniff at the bushes.

The wood siding gave the home a very natural look and helped the place blend into the many trees that surrounded the home.

The place was spread out and at some areas appeared to be three stories while in other spots there were only two visible. There was a section to the left of the main door and garages that you could actually drive a car through. A sort of tunnel area. He itched to see that area first, but Ellen started walking towards a circular front porch. The house was built around it and above the covered porch there was a two-story circular tower with large pane-glass windows.

No wonder Brook called the place a castle.

Low cement flower beds sat on either side of the porch, and he could just imagine them filled with brightly colored flowers instead of the overgrown weeds that filled them now.

“You only see a little of it from the water. The trees block the rest. I’m sure you could always cut the trees down, to get

the full view of the water,” she said, pulling out a set of keys. “Shall we look inside first?”

He motioned to her to show the way and snapped his fingers to have Willy follow them up the cement porch. To the left of the porch was the tunnel area separating the lower floors. He noticed a doorway on either side of it. There was enough room for a truck to fit under the overhang, and he figured it was used as a loading area.

Glass windows sat on either side of the massive wood front doors. Ellen swung them open and stood aside.

Stepping inside, he walked directly into a circular two-story entry area. On the left was a one-story circular staircase. He glanced up and smiled. The windows he’d seen from outside let in so much light.

The old brownish-red tiles of the entryway were cracked and would have to be replaced. There was a small iron door to what he assumed was a coat closet under the stairs.

“That leads to the wine cellar,” Ellen said. He followed her up the short staircase into the main part of the house. The living room was long and wide with white walls and natural wood beams in places. The wood floors would need some work, and the walls needed fresh paint.

There was a long hallway that led to both the right and the left. The right would take you over the tunnel area and lead you to what he assumed were bedrooms. To the right he could see the kitchen and more rooms.

French doors ran the entire length of the hallway and from there he could see the yard and, through the trees, the water beyond.

Ellen was correct, if he trimmed or cut down a handful of trees, the view would totally open up.

There was a patio area that ran the entire length of the back of the home.

A fireplace sat on the back wall of the living space with more of the brownish-red tiles. Each of the French doorways had rich wood doorframes that needed sanding and fresh paint.

Ellen motioned. "I'll let you look around."

He headed to the right first and stepped past the living space into another hallway. To the left was a dining room that had another circular window area, which looked out over the yard. More trees blocked the view.

To the right was a massive kitchen that would need a lot of work. Still, the space was nice, and he could imagine what it would look like once updated. The view out these windows was obviously the area he had seen from the water.

Returning down the hallway, he explored the other side of the house. There was an office, a sitting room, and the main bedroom on that level, most of which would need new carpet, paint, and new tile in the two bathrooms. He went up another circular staircase and found five bedrooms and three bathrooms on the top level. There were five more bedrooms and four more bathrooms on the lower floor, including a massive game room with an actual sauna room attached to one of the bathrooms.

He lost count of the fireplaces in the place. At one point, he stepped out onto the back deck and patio areas to walk around the yard. With the storm brewing over the Pacific, the view was... breathtaking.

The house itself would need a lot of work and someone who could pick proper colors and designs to replace the dull dirty browns currently covering the floors and walls.

Still, the view was worth every penny, even without the house. But though the house needed work, he could tell it had good bones. It wasn't as old as he'd thought it would be. He figured it had sat empty for the last five years or so. Most likely because no one in town wanted an eleven-bedroom home.

The house was huge. Bigger than he'd imagined it would be. Still, at this price, he wasn't sure he should let something this good slip by. Besides, he could always convert some of the rooms. Maybe add a home gym or another office. Maybe even take out some walls and open up a few rooms to be larger sitting areas.

He could always use the place as an investment. If he could find someone who could do the repairs and remodel.

Then he remembered meeting Parker Clark on the beach. The man had talked about his construction business. He figured a job this big would keep the guy busy for at least half a year.

Ryder wondered if he deserved a place like this. In a town like Pride. It was obvious from everyone he'd hung out with on the beach that they all loved the town and everyone in it.

Maybe that was what was driving him to want to purchase here. The desire for what they all had.

He thought about his future, what was waiting for him in Seattle, and felt his stomach drop. He knew in his head that he shouldn't even dream of returning to Pride, let alone purchasing a property here. But his heart wanted him to jump completely into the world of the happy small town.

When he returned to the main part of the house, Ellen stood up from where she sat on the stairs, petting Willy. "Well? What did you think?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brook felt her nerves building the closer it got to quitting time. Both her mother and aunt seemed to notice and kept her busy with cleaning and prepping the dough for the following morning.

Even though their doors closed at one each day, the work kept her busy until past two.

About half an hour before closing time, Ellen Rodgers came in and started whispering to Brook's mother. Then her mother pulled her aunt into the conversation and all three of the women stopped talking and glanced over at her.

"What?" she asked as she stopped sweeping. "What's the latest gossip now?"

Everyone in town new that Ellen Rodgers was one of the biggest gossipers in town. Her and Patty O'Neil.

"Ellen was just telling us that she's signed a contract for the big house on Ocean View," her mother said.

Brook's heart sank. Of course, she knew that someone would come along and purchase her castle. Her dream home. After all, the home had sat empty for years.

"Oh?" Brook sighed heavily as the dream of one day living there fluttered just out of her reach.

Ellen turned towards her. "Yes, I didn't know we had a celebrity staying in town."

Brook frowned. "A... celebrity?"

“Well, he might as well be. In the past few years, the man has been all over the tabloids. Growing up the son of one of the wealthiest men in the world instantly makes you a star. I think he even starred in a few movies. Then, a few years ago his father died, and a year ago he disappeared. Everyone assumed he’d married and settled down and finally quit his jet-set life.” Ellen clapped her hands together. “I honestly didn’t recognize him at first, what with the beard and long hair and that dog...”

The rest of Ellen’s words were drowned out by a high-pitched noise in her head. She sat down in the booth she’d been standing next to, and her mother rushed over to her and took her by the shoulders.

“Brook?” Just hearing the worry in her mother’s voice had her shaking it off.

Of course, Ellen was talking about Ryder. Hadn’t she wondered why he’d looked so familiar to her that first night?

He’d said he was an investor of sorts. She supposed the “of sorts” was the key part there. If he’d been born with more money than god, what was there left for him to do to make a living but push his money around?

She’d been such a fool.

Then Ellen’s words finally sunk in, and she suddenly stood up as the anger grew.

“He bought the big house on Ocean View?” She practically growled it.

Ellen frowned. “Well, yes, I mean, he put in an offer at least. I’m sure the current owners will accept it since it is for asking price.”

Brook’s eyes moved to the windows, and she wondered where Ryder was at that moment. How dare he. She’d spilled her heart out to him about that place.

What gave him the right to snatch up her dream house? Obviously, he had no plans to live there. After all, now she remembered exactly who James Gallant was. She kicked

herself for not remembering who he was when Eva mentioned his real name.

James Gallant was a playboy. When he'd hit Hollywood years back, he'd slept with every star he could, taking a different woman to events each week. There were plenty of rumors about his personal life, which claimed that he'd been engaged at one point. Engaged to... She shook her head, trying to remember.

“Go.” Her mother nudged her shoulder, breaking into her thoughts. “We can finish cleaning up.”

“Are you sure?” She could see the worry in both her mother's and aunt's eyes.

“Yes, go.” Her mother nudged her towards the door.

Brook stormed out the door, determined to hunt Ryder down and confront him. Her mind raced through reason after reason for why he would purchase her dream home.

She made it to her car only to realize that she hadn't even grabbed her purse and keys. Her anger fueled her as she marched past her car, intent on heading all the way to her place, but she stopped short when she spotted Ryder's van parked across the street outside of Baked.

Ryder was sitting in a front booth eating a pizza while Willy snored at his feet.

“You bought my dream home?” she accused him, her hands on her hips as she glared down at him.

His eyebrows shot up and then he slowly smiled as he nodded and motioned to the seat across from him. Willy had woken when he'd heard her voice and was now begging her for attention.

Succumbing to the love of the dog, she sat down and gave the dog her attention for a moment until he lost interest.

“Well?” she asked Ryder when her attention snapped back to him.

“I put an offer on the place, yes. I hadn't intended to, but after hearing the price and seeing it...”

“You saw it? You went up there?” She tried to control the pitch of her voice, but still, it raised high enough that several people looked in their direction.

“Yeah. Ellen gave me the gate code and the one to the door. We could drive up there. After we eat?” He motioned to his pizza.

All her anger was instantly deflated. Maybe she’d gotten so angry because she’d been hungry? She did skip lunch thanks to the nerves about seeing him after work.

Taking a slice of pie, she tried to relax back in the booth. When Corey walked over and set a Coke in front of her, she smiled up at him. “Thanks.”

“Everything okay?” Corey asked, looking between the two of them.

“Yes.” She sighed. “Just... hangry.” She waved her half-eaten slice. Corey nodded and left.

“I had no intention of purchasing the place,” he said. “Really. But the price and that view...” He shook his head.

“Yeah, it is great.” She nodded and took another bite.

“You said you’ve never seen the inside?” he asked.

“Nope. I’ve only snuck on the property a few times and looked in some windows,” she admitted. “What made you decide to put an offer on the place? Besides the price and the view?”

He glanced out the windows and for a moment, sat in silence, thinking. Then he turned to her.

“My entire life, I haven’t felt like I belonged anywhere or was part of anything. I really didn’t have a family. My old man was more of a boss than a father figure.” He glanced out the windows again. “In the couple days I’ve been here, people have treated me like I belonged. When I walked into a store, they called me by my name and, more importantly, didn’t act as if they could get something from knowing me.”

She frowned at this. “What kind of people did you hang out with before?”

He smiled. “Not the good kind. Not that I knew it then, but...” He sighed and took another sip of his tea. “No, it took a year of living in a van and hiding from reality for me to realize that.”

“Pride is... different. Everyone here is...”

“Friendly,” he finished for her, and she nodded.

“We’re family, even if we aren’t,” she explained.

“Exactly.” He leaned back, and they both glanced outside as the rain started. “I honestly didn’t mean to hurt you by making an offer on the property. If you want, I could...”

“Don’t you dare.” She leaned forward. “Don’t tell me you won’t purchase the place, if you really love it, just because of my little...” She waved her hands and rolled her eyes. “Rant,” she finally finished. “I was just hangry and, well, hurt that I couldn’t purchase the place for myself.”

He smiled and tilted his head. “I noticed you didn’t ask me how I could afford it?”

She shrugged and felt her face heat. “Thanks to Ellen, I realized who you were. I’m sort of embarrassed that I didn’t piece it together sooner.”

His smile grew. “I’m thankful you didn’t. I wanted to get to know the real you before you knew who I was. Not that I think you’re the kind of person who would change after, but...”

She could see he was growing flustered, so she reached over and took his hand in hers.

“Ryder, it’s okay. I understand. I’m not shallow. I’m not out for anything. I quite literally have everything I could ever want.” Her smile grew. “Except my dream home, but maybe you’ll allow me to visit it to get my fix?”

He chuckled. “Anytime. Starting now. If you’re done?”

“I am.” She dusted off her hands and took a last sip of her drink. She picked up Willy and carried the sleepy dog outside. They rushed through the rain to his van.

Ryder opened the passenger door for her, and she climbed in, still holding Willy, who had woken up as she'd dashed through the rain. Now out of the rain, the dog jumped down from her arms and settled in a little kennel bed that sat between the two captain chairs.

She had a moment to glance at the rest of the van before Ryder climbed in behind the wheel.

"I like your home," she said as he headed out of town.

He smiled. "I do too. I never thought that living so small would be fun. But it does have a downside." He glanced at her. "It's hard to entertain. At least during bad weather like this."

"Yeah, tell me about it. I've had plenty of cookouts and beach parties, but when the weather turns, everyone usually heads home." Her face heated when she realized his meaning, and she rambled on to cover her embarrassment. "I love my little place, but I have been wondering if I could afford to move to something a little bigger. Of course, it would have to be on the beach. I've been thoroughly spoiled now." She bit her bottom lip, trying to get herself to stop talking.

"I know what you mean. It was another reason I really liked this place," he said, turning off the main road. "That and it's only a few minutes outside of town. And it's far enough out of a city that I wouldn't feel like I'd be making any concessions."

She wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but he had pulled up to the front gate and climbed out to punch in the code and manually open the gate.

When the house came into view, her breath caught like it always did. There was just something about the wood-shingled place that spoke to her heart. It called to her in her dreams. Filled each moment she looked at it with desire.

She felt the same way every time she was around Ryder.

Instead of parking by the three-car garage, he pulled the van under the little tunnel in the building to shield them from the rain.

As she stepped out, a bolt of lightning flashed, making her jump.

“What about Willy?” she asked when Ryder walked around the van.

“He’ll sleep this one out.” He walked over to one of the doors, unlocked the lock box, and used the key to open the door. “Besides, he’s already seen the inside.”

He took her hand and stepped inside.

This doorway led them straight into a huge laundry room slash mud room. The space was easily big enough to host a bench and changing station for those muddy or snowy days. Now, it sat empty. She could see a place for the washer and dryer and her mind was instantly flooded with ideas on how to arrange everything. Then Ryder took her hand and led her to the next room.

It was as if he knew that she wanted to see it all quickly. From one room to the next he led her around the massive place in silence. Her mind upgraded each room and filled them with furniture and colors that would highlight each space.

When they finally ended up back in the living room, he dropped her hand and moved over to the fireplace.

“Well?” he asked, turning to her.

He stood in the dying light as lightning occasionally lit the room. The man fit the home as much as anyone could. He belonged here. Even if he didn’t know it yet.

“Did I just make a huge mistake?” he asked.

She shook her head and moved towards him slowly. Without saying a word, she wrapped her arms around him and lifted to her toes and kissed him.

Maybe she was riding on the emotions of seeing her dream home for the first time, or maybe it was what had been building between them since the moment she’d spotted him surfing. Either way, a spring of passion burst from her the moment their lips touched.

His hands moved to grip her hips and hold her, press her, tighter against him.

“Brook,” he moaned softly against her lips.

“For now, let’s just... enjoy.” She stepped back and tossed off her jacket. It was then that she realized she still had on her work apron. Chuckling, she pulled it off and tossed it to the ground with her coat. “I want to be wearing lace for you.” Her eyes ran over his.

“I like what you’ve got on.” He watched her every movement. “I don’t need lace.”

Her smile grew. “Soon, I’ll make sure you get it.”

His gaze locked with hers. Then he surprised her by flipping a light switch, and the gas fireplace lit up. “I was happily surprised to find out that this worked,” he said, before coming back to her and gripping her face. He kissed her until her toes curled in her shoes. “Don’t move,” he said suddenly and pulled back. “I’ll be...” He held up a finger and then, to her surprise, he disappeared, leaving her standing by the fireplace.

She guessed that he was returning to his van for something and moments later he appeared, winded and holding a large blanket. She stood still as he laid it out on the floor in front of the fireplace.

“At least we can have this.” He took her hand. She toed off her shoes, and he tossed his off as well. When he kissed her again, she melted and realized that he was right. They didn’t need lace.

The passion built so much that soon she lost track of time and place. Their clothes ended up in piles next to them as Ryder’s hands moved quickly over her skin, heating it even more than the fire could have.

Brook tried to take her time exploring every golden muscle on Ryder, really, she did, but her passion was too hard to control. She wanted him quickly. She needed to feel him inside her.

She'd never experienced anything like the passion he had brought her. Hadn't even dreamed it was possible. Until she felt his fingers slip inside her and she'd exploded, she hadn't believed anything in life could be so wonderful.

CHAPTER NINE

Just watching Brook's face as she peaked had Ryder on the edge of his own release. What the fuck? How was that a thing?

Seeing her hair fanned out on his beach blanket, hearing her soft moans of pleasure, feeling her slickness against his fingers as her inner muscles convulsed around him had his want growing into a beast that he doubted he'd ever be able to control.

"Ryder," Brook whispered next to his ear. "Please."

Just hearing her softly beg had him pulling back, sheathing himself quickly with the rubber he'd retrieved, and plummeting into her heat.

She arched for him, wrapped her legs around his hips, and held on as he took what he needed. What he'd dreamed of getting from that first sultry look she'd given him.

As her fingernails dug into his skin and those sexy soft moans of hers continued, he grew even more selfish. He wanted her to come again, to feel her tighten around him before he fell himself.

Reaching down, he laid a fingertip against her clit as he covered her mouth and swallowed her gasps. When she tightened around him and stilled on a scream, only then did he allow himself to enjoy his own release. By then, he knew it was too late.

Brook was the one.

The single person in the entire world that he couldn't live without. How? He'd only known her for a couple of days.

They lay in each other's arms in front of the fireplace, and his mind swirled as their bodies cooled and the storm continued to rage outside.

"We'd better head out," she finally said sometime later. "I hate to think of Willy alone in the van while this is going on outside," she said just as more lightning flashed.

He knew she was right. They should head out. But his desire for her had yet to dissipate.

He rolled over and looked down at her, running his eyes over her face. Her tan skin glowed in the firelight.

"I have to head back to Seattle for a while," he admitted. Now that he'd put an offer on the place, he'd exposed himself, and his life would be hunting him down. "Come with me?"

She blinked a few times, and he felt her stiffen.

"When do you have to leave?" she asked.

He thought about it quickly as her body brushed up against his, causing his desire to build quickly. "Soon." He leaned down and covered her mouth as he slipped back inside her.

This time after they both exploded on cries, he gathered her up and held on for a brief moment, then they stood and dressed and gathered their things.

"Hungry?" she asked as they drove back towards town.

The image of her legs spread wide while he dined on her flashed in his mind. Then his stomach growled loudly, causing her to laugh. How long ago had they eaten the pizza?

"Turn here," she said when he made it to the other side of town. "We can eat at the Golden Oar."

He followed her directions and parked in a packed parking lot by a building on the edge of the water that looked like an old warehouse.

Lanterns lit up the whole front of the building, making it appear to glow in the dark. The whitewashed two-story

building had a decorative sign over the front doors. The Golden Oar was carved in vibrant gold letters just above a ship with massive white sails that sat in dark blue water.

“Your friend’s family owns this place,” he said as he turned off the van.

“Yes, the Jordan family. Sara manages it. Well, she did before the kids. She still helps out, but they just hired Harper Davis. You met her at the beach. She and her sister Hailey are newcomers to Pride. I don’t know much more about them, only that they moved into their uncle’s place after he died.”

“Are you sure we’re dressed for a place like this?” he asked with a frown.

She laughed. “Yes, we’re fine.” Ryder moved to get out, but Brook asked, “What about Willy?”

He glanced down to the snoring dog. “He’ll sleep through the night. I think today wore him out. Come on.” They got out and rushed through the rain towards the front doors.

When they stepped in, the smell of burgers and steaks hit him, and the sounds of laughter and conversation had him relaxing. He could see that most everyone in the place was dressed just like they were.

There were elegant oil paintings hanging on all the walls, including one of a mermaid that hung above a huge stone fireplace near the back of the dining room. The entire back wall was made of glass and overlooked the dark stormy water. With the storm raging outside, it was quite a show.

“Hey, Harper,” Brook said with a smile. “Table for two.”

“Sure thing,” Harper said, and they followed her through the crowded dining room to sit by the fireplace.

After she gave them menus and they each ordered drinks, Brook leaned on the table and asked, “When will you be heading to Seattle and for how long?” Her eyes met his.

He thought about it a moment and took a sip of his iced tea.

“It really depends on if you’ll come with us.”

She glanced around the dining room and then turned to watch the storm out the window. The rain was still coming down sideways as lightning filled the sky.

“I can leave at any time,” she said, turning back to him. “Do you have a place in Seattle?”

He thought about his father’s house. He’d have to contact Benjamin to have the place opened up and ready for their arrival. Still, he nodded. “Yeah, that’s all taken care of.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’ll call my folks tonight. We can leave in the morning if you want.”

He reached across the table and took her hand. “Are you sure? You’ve only known me a few days.”

She chuckled. “You’re James Gallant.” She rolled her eyes. “I should, by all accounts, steer clear of you. But since saving you from drowning...” He chuckled, and she lifted her chin slightly before continuing. “I feel like everything I’ve ever heard about you is wrong.”

He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath, but hearing those last words, he relaxed. “Yeah?”

She smiled. “Yeah. I’d like to get the chance to know the real you. A trip to Seattle might just be the ticket.”

“Yeah?” He was stuck in a freaking loop but didn’t care. She was giving him a chance. He felt like he could fly.

“Yeah,” she nodded as she squeezed his hand.

They ordered their food and, while they waited, they talked about the trip to Seattle.

He felt it only fair that he warn her what was waiting for him.

“I’ve been gone for a year,” he started.

“Okay.” She tilted her head slightly. “You said your parents are gone?”

“My father died a few years ago, leaving me in control of his business.” He felt his stomach roll. He wished he’d ordered a beer instead of an iced tea. He took a sip of the cool drink

and tried to settle his stomach by eating another slice of the warm bread that had been set on their table.

Brook's eyes narrowed. "I don't remember what it was your father actually did."

"Investments. Of sorts," he answered.

"Are you going to tell me exactly what that means?" She leaned on the table.

He shrugged. "Have you seen *Shark Tank*?"

"The show?" Her eyebrows shot up. When he nodded, she nodded in return. "Sure. So, what? You invest money into other people's businesses?"

"Exactly." He relaxed, knowing there was a lot more to it than that.

"Okay, what about your mother?"

He shrugged. "Disappeared shortly after my second birthday."

Brook frowned. "You don't know if she's alive still?"

He shook his head. "No, she's never made an effort to contact me, so..." He sat back as his steak and her burger was delivered.

They were halfway through their meal when Brook's parents strolled in. From their attire, it was obvious they were on a date. Her mother was wearing a shiny silver dress and her dad had on a tie and a jacket. He'd met her mother on two occasions now, but this was the first time he'd seen her father.

He could tell that Brook took after him. Ryder stood and shook the man's hand after her mother introduced them.

"Don't you two look dressy tonight," Brook said, hugging her mother. "Care to join us?"

"No, we're meeting Sean and Becca," her mother said, glancing around. "Who are not here yet."

"Aunt Becca is always late," Brook joked. "Sit until they arrive?"

“We won’t interrupt your dinner,” Brook’s father said.

“You won’t at all, please.” He motioned to the chair.

Her parents sat and her dad narrowed his eyes at him. “I assume you’re the Ryder that I’ve been hearing about?”

“Yes, sir.” He nodded, feeling his stomach dive. He hated that his reputation preceded him in this case.

“It’s hard to recognize you with the longer hair and beard. You did used to go by James Gallant?” He nodded and her father continued. “Sara mentioned something about you being in town.” He glanced over to Brook.

“I wasn’t keeping him a secret.” Sara rolled her eyes as she chuckled. “I only just today realized who he was. Besides, you’ve been busy.”

Her dad smiled and suddenly the mood at the table lightened. For the next few minutes, while they waited for Brook’s aunt and uncle to arrive, the conversation focused on his offer on the house. Only after her aunt and uncle walked through the door did Brook finally mention that she was going to take a trip to Seattle with him.

He’d expected her parents to voice their worry, but they seemed happy and excited for them.

“When are you leaving?” her mother asked as they stood up and waved to Becca and Sean.

“We’re thinking of heading out tomorrow,” Brook answered.

Her mother’s eyebrows shot up, then she smiled. “I’ll move the schedule around. I’m sure I can get Avery to lend a hand while you’re gone.”

“Thanks.” Brook smiled and then waved to her aunt and uncle as her parents moved to join them at a table across the room. “That’s a relief,” she said to him once they were alone. “Avery Auston has been helping out for a while. She jumps between here, the bakery, and the flower shop. A Jill of all trades.” Brook sighed and relaxed.

“Her brother is Wyatt?” he asked, remembering the guy from the other day.

“Yes,” Brook agreed.

“He has a thing for Hannah.”

“What?” Brook sat forward, her eyes going wide. “Seriously?”

He smiled and took her hand. “At least from what I saw of the pair back on the beach.”

Brook was quiet for a moment, then shoved her plate aside. “Why don’t you clue me in on what to expect in Seattle?”

He leaned back and figured that he’d better prepare Brook for the hell he knew was waiting for him.

“When my father died, he left behind a mess. Legally, it was a power grab. It was clear in his will that I would get everything. The house. Cars. The business.” He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering briefly that first year. How he’d had to fight to salvage even a piece of his sanity. “Of course, the board of directors didn’t like that. Especially Mark Lindgren, Vice President of Operations. I wanted to take the business in a direction the board didn’t necessarily agree with. After two years of fighting, I decided to take a...” He shook his head. “Hiatus of sorts.”

“A walkabout?” she offered with a smile.

He chuckled. “Playing the pauper has taught me a lot.” His smile slipped. “What’s important. What isn’t.” He drank down the last of his tea, trying to wash down the bitter taste at the back of his throat that he always got when he thought of returning to Seattle.

“Okay, so, I take it Mark Lindgren is running the business now?” she asked.

He nodded. “A power position he had assumed he would step into after my father’s death.”

“How is he going to feel once you return?”

He took a deep breath and rolled the tension from his shoulders. “I’m just thankful you decided to tag along with me.” He shifted gears. “You have a calming effect on me. Somehow.”

Brook smiled and reached over to take his hand. “Whatever you need from me. I’m just looking forward to the trip to Seattle. It’s been a year or two since I’ve headed up there.”

He flipped his hand around and locked his fingers with hers. “Thanks.”

“What is the company name, anyway? I don’t think you’ve mentioned it.”

“The Gallant Corporation,” he answered, and her eyes went wide for a split second.

“Oh, right. I... somehow forgot that your dad was CEO of one of the largest investment corporations out there. And, of course, that it was your last name.” She rolled her eyes and smiled.

CHAPTER TEN

The drive to Seattle the following morning was more fun than any car trip she'd ever been on. Ryder stopped often at roadside attractions, pretty parks, and places where Willy could relieve himself.

She noticed that he'd made a few calls during the day and wondered if he was arranging things for his return. Did he have a house or apartment in the city?

They left at eight in the morning, and the normal five and a half hour trip turned into longer. When they finally pulled up to a large iron gate, the sun was just setting.

"This is Hunt's Point," he said after checking in with security and then heading down the long private road.

Brook could see just make out the roofs of some of the houses on the private drive. Each one was twice the size of her dream home and had their own private gates.

Ryder stopped at another gate and punched in a code on the security pad.

"I let the staff know we were coming," Ryder said as he pulled into the driveway. They weaved around a private tennis court, through large trees and well-manicured greenery.

Nothing had prepared her for the stone French-style home that sat at the end of the twisted driveway. She couldn't help comparing the massive spread with the simple eighteen-hundred-square-foot ranch home that she'd been raised in. Her parents' home had always been filled with love and laughter. Still, she couldn't help thinking just how wide the differences

in their childhoods and their lives must have been. He may have been born and raised with a silver spoon in his mouth, but hearing him talk, she knew how lonely he'd been growing up.

“Wow,” she said under her breath while Ryder parked in the circular drive area that sat in front of a six-car garage.

“It sits on four and a half acres, has seventeen thousand square feet, five bedrooms, ten bathrooms, home gym, eight fireplaces, swimming pool with a two bedroom pool house, hot tub, steam room, movie theater, boathouse, four docks for boats, and...” He glanced at her. “Most importantly, I had the fridge stocked.”

She chuckled.

He slid out and rushed over to open the door for her and Willy. Willy jumped out and ran to sniff the green grass.

“Come on, I'll give you a tour.” Ryder took her hand and led her to the front doors.

They stepped up the stone stairs to a massive patio. There were stone columns on either side of the iron and glass doors.

To her surprise, the doors were unlocked, and as they stepped inside, her breath caught.

A massive iron chandelier hung over a warm wood circular table in the two-story entryway. An iron-rung staircase off to the right twisted around to climb to an open-railing walkway. The walls were done in a rich warm off-white, the floors a honey-colored wood with many large carpets in creams and a soft blue. To her left sat a high arched doorway that led into another room. Directly across from the doors sat the living space, with two-story windows that looked out to a patio area. Beyond that sat a green yard, and she could just see the sun setting over the waters beyond, drawing her across the space to appreciate the sparkling water.

“That's Fairweather Bay,” Ryder said, motioning as he moved beside her. “Come.” He moved over to unlatch the glass doorway.

When she stepped outside, she could see a rectangular swimming pool off to her left down a wide stone pathway.

The stone patio ran the entire length of the back of the house. Directly in front of her was a green yard. The pool house sat lower than the main house and further to the left than the dock area. She did a double take at a massive yacht sitting in one of the slips. Then she noticed the seaplane in another slip.

“Are those yours?” she asked with a frown.

Ryder nodded and sighed. “Yup.”

“You fly?” she asked, a little shocked. Okay, her knowledge of him was embarrassingly lacking.

He smiled. “I like that you don’t know.” He took her hand. “It’s nice. It feels like most everyone I know has stalked me my entire life, since they usually know everything there is to know about me before shaking my hand for the first time.”

She relaxed. “Okay, then I won’t feel bad when I don’t know something about you.”

“Please don’t. In this area, we are on common ground.” He lifted her face up by placing a finger under her chin and kissed her softly. “Come, I’ll show you around. Then we can eat. I had the chef cook us up something for tonight.”

“Of course you have a chef.” She rolled her eyes.

“Only for tonight,” he said smoothly as he took her hand again. “We can eat out here and watch the sunset or head in and do a tour.”

“Eat and sunset first, then tour,” she said after thinking about it. “Willy is enjoying running around.” The little dog was rushing around the green yard as if it was the best day of his life.

“Sit.” He motioned to one of the patio tables and chairs. “I’ll go let the staff know we’re ready for dinner.”

When he disappeared inside, she realized that, even though they hadn’t seen any staff when they passed through the house,

they probably had been watched from the moment they'd driven up.

Less than five minutes later, three staff members carried out warm plates and set them down in front of Ryder and her. The third plate was for Willy—small strips of steak in a bed of rice and eggs.

Their meals were uncovered to reveal white fish on a bed of rice and grilled vegetables covered in a butter cream sauce.

Glasses of wine were poured for each of them and then the staff quickly disappeared.

“Was this how you grew up?” she whispered.

Ryder shrugged slightly and for the first time since they'd arrived, she realized he looked annoyed. Or maybe scared. She didn't know which it was.

“Are you okay?” she asked, after a sip of her wine.

He took his own sip, downing half the glass in one gulp. “I hate this place. Hate what it stood for. Hated every moment growing up here. Since my father's death, it's been nothing more than a drain. On resources and time.”

“Why didn't you sell?” she asked, understanding his views. The place was gorgeous, but obviously far too big for just one person. She couldn't imagine why any single person would have purchased such a huge place other than to flaunt their wealth.

Ryder glanced around and shrugged. “I suppose I was too busy to bother with it.”

She could tell that he was keeping something from her and figured that he would tell her in his own time.

“You could sell now,” she suggested.

He nodded. “It's one of the things I've come back into town for.”

She felt her heart skip. “Then you plan on living at the place in Pride?”

He shrugged and looked off over the water as the last rays of light disappeared.

Suddenly, string lights flickered on overhead, lighting up the patio, pathways, and swimming pool and bathing them in soft romantic lighting.

Every single light in the house appeared to be on as well, making it seem like a beacon in the night. She wondered just how magnificent the place looked from the water and itched to see what the yacht was like. Had he taken it out himself?

He had told her he'd never gone sailing. A boat that big probably had a crew, she realized. She turned back to the view of the yard.

"Wow," she said after looking around. "It is pretty amazing." She turned back to him and noticed that he was watching her now.

"I haven't decided yet where I'll live. Whatever happens in my future, I like the place in Pride. I think it's a solid investment."

She covered her frown by taking another sip of wine. She hadn't wanted her dream home to be someone's investment. Especially not Ryder's.

"I've upset you," Ryder said after they ate in silence for a moment.

"No," she lied. "I'm just tired from the trip."

He nodded. "We can finish eating and then head inside. If you want, we can save the tour—"

"No," she interrupted. "Thanks. I'm not that tired. Just..." She sighed heavily and looked out over the water again as she shook her head. Then she turned back towards him. "Tell me something about yourself. About your childhood that was good. There must have been something."

He tilted his head as his eyes ran over her. Then he smiled.

"There was. I learned to cook from my aunt Trina. Trina Gallant. My father's older sister. He has a younger one, Lucinda, Lucy, that I hardly ever see. Rina died from cancer

when I was fourteen. She lived with us after she found out she was sick and during that time taught me everything I needed to know about cooking.”

Brook smiled as he continued to talk about his aunt. From what she could gather, his aunt was the only good thing that had happened to him in his youth.

She felt guilty for being jealous of the home he'd grown up in and comparing it to her own. No matter how small her home had been, it had been filled with love.

Both of their plates were empty now, and the two glasses of wine she'd had dulled her entire body. He was quiet for a moment and then said, “Come on, we'll have a quick tour and then get settled.”

Willy had fallen fast asleep at Ryder's feet, and he picked the dog up and carried him through the house as he gave her a tour.

Most of the furniture and décor appeared older and classically styled, matching the home perfectly. She doubted the chairs or sofas were very comfortable. The artwork on all the walls no doubt cost more than her car.

They passed through the large living room with its high ceilings and two-story windows and fireplace. There was a serious amount of crown molding everywhere. With the walls painted an off-white and all the delicate and detailed molding painted white, the place looked like one of the fancy cakes her mother often made for weddings.

It wasn't overdone, just... not her style.

“In here is the library or study. I had set up a home office in here before...” Ryder said, dropping off. “Nothing has changed actually.”

He stepped into the room to the left of the living room. The walls were covered in rich maple paneling and bookshelves with books of every shape and size. They all appeared to be legal books, however, so not very appealing.

The fireplace backed up to the one in the living room, but the dark wood was in complete contrast to the white paneled

one in the other room. It made the room warm, less formal. Even the black leather sofa and chair looked more inviting. The large wall-to-ceiling windows looked out over the pool area, which was all lit up.

“Back here is a bathroom,” Ryder said, opening a paneled door.

She glanced in, assuming it would be nothing spectacular. She was wrong. The bathroom was probably bigger than her cottage. There were marble floors and countertops, and a shower big enough to fit an elephant.

“Wow,” she said as Ryder shifted Willy in his arms.

“Yeah, my father never did anything less than grandiose.” He rolled his eyes. “Moving on.” He shut the door and they walked down a hallway and stepped into the formal dining room. There was a gleaming wood table with ten high-back chairs and two large marble-topped buffet tables on either wall. A window looked out over the front yard. In the hallway there had been a bar area, probably where staff members would set up.

They turned back to the main entry, and she followed Ryder down another long hallway.

“Closets, storage, powder rooms. Hidden stairs for staff members,” he said as he walked along. “The kitchen and a smaller, less-formal dining area.” He stepped into the rooms off the back of the home.

The kitchen wasn’t what she had expected. With the meal they had just eaten, she had thought it would be like a restaurant kitchen. Instead, the space was smaller, more like her aunt’s kitchen.

“This is the kitchen for us. The chef’s kitchen is downstairs,” Ryder pointed out. That explained it. “Feel free to make yourself at home here. If you want anything”—he walked over to the refrigerator and tapped the computer screen—“just put it here and the staff will get it stocked. The pantry is here.” He opened a door, and she was shocked at how big

the space was and even more shocked at how much food was in it. "I had them get some things before we arrived."

She swallowed and glanced around.

The smaller dining room that sat between the kitchen and the back windows was cozy. A table for four sat in front of yet another fireplace and windows overlooking the grassy yard. To the right was a wall of glass-front cabinets filled with dishes and glasses of muted colors. Bar refrigerators sat under the countertops, filled with beer, wine, and soda of every kind.

It all impressed her, but also intimidated her somehow.

"Moving on," Ryder said, pulling Willy up to his chest like one would a baby. The dog whined, lay his chin on Ryder's shoulder, and fell fast asleep again, snoring loudly next to Ryder's ear.

The man and dog looked so out of place walking through the massive mansion that she almost laughed.

Beyond the kitchen was a laundry room that Ryder again explained was for their use. The staff laundry facility was downstairs. He quickly told her they could tour the basement the next day. She was losing the rest of her energy, so she agreed.

Down another hallway was the home gym, which was filled with every type of exercise machine imaginable. Attached was a bathroom that rivaled a giant locker room, complete with a steam room and massage room.

They went back down the long hallway and passed another sitting room with another fireplace and more uncomfortable furniture.

She followed him back to the main entryway and up the grand staircase. She had seen two other staircases and was thankful he'd taken her back to the large one.

The view from the second story balcony was breathtaking. There was a short hallway immediately to the right and Ryder turned down it.

"Two bedrooms here," he said, opening the doors for her.

She walked inside one of the rooms.

It looked comfortable enough. A king-sized bed, an expensive furniture set, and a sitting area with a sofa or a chair. The bathroom was as large as the one off the office downstairs. The second bedroom was identical to this one.

“There are two more rooms down this hallway,” he said when she stepped back out of the last room. He’d motioned to another hallway directly across from them. “The main bedroom is this way.” He headed towards a longer hallway.

“Which one was yours growing up?” she asked absentmindedly as she followed him.

He stopped in the hallway, a frown on his lips. “I was usually put in one of those.” He motioned behind her. “Farthest away from...” He motioned to the double doors they were now standing outside of. “I took over this room after dad died. I had them bring our things up here for now.” He opened one of the double doors. Her bags were sitting at the foot of a king-sized bed.

“Why don’t we head in and shower off the day’s dust?” he suggested as he pulled her into his arms.

“That sounds wonderful,” she said with a sigh. “I may fall asleep standing up.”

“It’s almost midnight,” he said softly.

“It is?” She frowned and looked at her watch. How had it gotten so late? She’d enjoyed sitting out on the back patio talking to him and had lost track of time.

Ryder walked over and laid Willy down in his dog bed just inside his crate. The dog circled a few times and then laid down with a groan and fell back to sleep.

She rummaged through her bag for her toiletry items and took them into the adjoining bathroom, which was everything she’d imagined it would be. White marble, cream walls, and artwork, much like the rest of the house.

“Who decorated the home?” she asked as he turned on the spray in the massive glass shower.

“My dad had someone famous do it years ago.” He pulled off his clothes. If she weren’t so tired, she could have watched the show all night long. As it was, she was having to hold onto the countertop just to pull off her pants without falling over.

“Here.” Ryder’s hands moved to her hips to hold her steady. Then he lifted her and set her on the countertop and removed her shoes and jeans himself.

Instead of removing her top, he stepped between her legs and brushed his lips across hers. She melted as he took the kiss deeper. Her entire body was vibrating in his hold.

“I can tell you’re tired, but I just needed a moment,” he said after he stepped back from the kiss. “Come.” He pulled her off the counter. Then he quickly removed her top and she discarded her bra and followed him into the shower.

Standing under the hot spray, she groaned loudly as the day was washed away. Closing her eyes, she leaned back against Ryder’s chest and just enjoyed the moment.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Falling asleep with Brook in his arms should have been the best feeling in the world. But the fact of where they were, and what was to come in the days that followed, loomed over him. A couple of hours later, he slid out of bed, leaving Brook and Willy to sleep peacefully the rest of the night.

For over a year, he'd avoided logging into his emails, personal or business. He hadn't left totally unannounced. He had met with the board of directors and informed them he was taking a break. But he hadn't mentioned that the break would be so long or that he would be off-grid the entire time.

Sitting down to the laptop at the desk in the office downstairs, he logged in for the first time in a year and cringed at the number of unread emails.

A simple search to weed out the important ones narrowed the thousands to hundreds. Another search narrowed them even further until there were eighty-odd emails that seemed vital.

He worked until sunlight broke into the room and he had to stand and close the blinds so that he could see the screen. He didn't know who had set a tray of hot coffee and pastries on the edge of his desk, but when he looked up again, they were there.

Taking a brief break, he downed a cup and thought about heading upstairs to see if Brook was awake. Then his phone began to ring.

The first call was from Kelly Larchwood, his secretary. The woman had worked for his father, and, after his death, Ryder hadn't seen any reason not to keep the extremely proficient woman in the same position.

"So, it's true, you're back, Mr. Gallant?" Kelly asked when he answered the phone.

"I am." He leaned back in the chair and rolled his shoulders.

"Will you be coming into the office today? Should I schedule a board meeting?" Kelly seemed eager.

He thought about saying no, but then thought about it and sighed heavily. "Schedule it for mid-morning," he answered after checking the time.

"Ten?" Kelly replied.

"Perfect. I'll be there an hour before. Make sure my office —"

"Your office was taken over by Mark Lindgren a week after you left."

"Right." He rolled his eyes. Of course the man would have weaseled his way into his office. It was the biggest, with the best view. "For now, find a place for me. I'll be there in a little over an hour."

"Will do," Kelly said cheerfully. "May I say, we are all looking forward to your return."

He wanted to ask her why, but before he could respond, she hung up.

"You're going into the office?" Brook asked from the doorway. She was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and he could see the strings from her swimsuit falling out of the bottom of her shirt. Willy was sitting at her feet, looking bored.

Ryder walked over and wrapped his arms around her. What he wanted was to spend the day lying around the pool with her. Instead, he'd have to shower and see if the suits he had hanging in his closet still fit before dragging himself down to the office building in downtown Seattle.

“Yeah,” he finally answered into her hair. “Just for a couple of meetings. I should be back by dinner.”

“Okay,” she said easily as she looked up at him. “We were going to hunt some food down, then test out the temperature in the pool.”

He smiled. “I think there are some more pastries in the kitchen, possibly some hot coffee.” He ran his eyes over her and noticed that she looked very relaxed.

“Go, do what you need to do. I’m just here for the vacation and to support you. If you need me,” she replied with a smile.

He wanted to tell her how amazing she was. How generous it was for her to set aside her time to be there for him. But her chuckle stopped him.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a saint. I do have some selfish motives for being here.” Her arms wrapped around him a little tighter. “What you did to me last night in the shower being one of them,” she purred.

His smile was quick, and he thought about taking her back upstairs, but then his phone rang again, and he came crashing back to reality.

“Go, do what you came to do.” She kissed him. “Willy and I will be fine here.” Then she and his dog disappeared down the hallway towards the kitchen.

This call was from Mark Lindgren, which wasn’t really a surprise. Kelly had informed him that she’d been working with Mark for the past year, and he would no doubt want to talk to him before the meeting.

“So, you’re back,” Mark said firmly.

The man was about ten years older than Ryder and had been a staple in his father’s business since graduating from law school. For some reason, his father had taken Mark under his wing, and the guy had climbed the corporate ladder quickly under his father’s tutelage.

He, along with everyone else in the business, knew that Mark had his eye on the CEO position. Especially after

Ryder's father's death.

It was also one of the reasons Ryder had stepped aside last year. The man had been relentless in his criticism of how Ryder had been running the business.

From his brief conversation with Kelly, it appeared that the man hadn't been doing such a bang-up job in Ryder's absence. Ryder had wanted to know more, but Kelly had been very vague. She'd almost sounded scared.

"I am," Ryder answered Mark as he headed up the stairs.

"Why now? Did Harry call you?" Mark asked.

Ryder stopped at the base of the stairs with a frown.

Harry Trillian had been his old man's best friend. He was on the board of directors and, out of all of his father's friends, the only one that Ryder felt he could trust.

"No, is there a reason he should have?" Ryder asked.

Mark was silent for a while. "The board is voting later this week on making my position as CEO more... permanent."

And there it was, Ryder thought. The reason his gut had drawn him back home. He knew it was bound to happen. Feared it. This was why he was here. To stop that. But the fact was, Ryder didn't want the position either. It wasn't for him. But then why did it eat at him so much if Mark took over?

He climbed the stairs, no longer having the patience for the games Mark was playing.

"I'll be in the office in half an hour," he said. "We can talk then." He hung up before giving the man a chance to respond.

When his phone rang again, he set it on the counter and climbed into the shower, knowing Mark's calls would go to voicemail.

The man was persistent. Which is why he'd left his cell phones at home when he'd taken off a year ago. He'd purchased a new one for emergencies on the road, but he hadn't given out the number to anyone except Harry. The man had called him only twice over the past year.

The fact that he hadn't called to inform Ryder about the board voting on Mark weighed heavy on his mind.

After dressing in one of his old suits, he looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was a lot longer than it had been last year, as was his beard. He'd thought of shaving it off and cutting his hair, but then quickly dismissed those ideas. This was who he was now.

He slicked his hair back and tied it with one of Brook's black hair bands, then trimmed his beard a little shorter.

He was tan, toned, a lot thinner, and had far more muscles than he had the last time he'd worn the suit. The shirt stretched over his arms and chest and yet was baggy around his narrow waist.

He looked... completely out of his element. Like a hobo at a black-tie event. Yet, underneath the exterior, he knew this business was in his blood.

He could probably buy and sell investments in his sleep. It was as ingrained in him as breathing.

Taking a deep breath, he headed back downstairs. Brook and Willy were standing at the base of the stairs, waiting for him. The pair of them looked at him as if he'd gone mad. Willy even let out a low whine.

"I know, buddy." He knelt and gave his dog a scratch between the ears. "I feel as stupid as I look."

"You look great," Brook said with a smile. "Sexy." She ran her eyes over him.

He straightened. "Thanks. There are cars in the garage if you want to go anywhere. The keys are in a box hanging on the wall. There is a gate fob in each one. Feel free to use them. I told security that you were a guest so you shouldn't have any problems coming or going."

"Thanks," she said, and kissed him. "If you need me." She wiggled her cell phone. "I'm only a call away."

He kissed her back. "See you for dinner."

She nodded as he headed toward the garage. Inside sat the four cars that his father had purchased and babied in the years before his death. His father had treated his cars better than he'd treated his son. Still, Ryder had always enjoyed driving the four luxury vehicles, which included a blue and silver Lamborghini Veneno, a black Rolls-Royce, a Mercedes-Benz sedan, and Ryder's favorite, a black and silver Bugatti Chiron.

He knew that the staff that he'd continued to pay for over the last year would have seen to their maintenance. Much like everything else around the massive home.

He grabbed the keys to the Bugatti and headed into the city.

The drive to the Gallant building took him less than fifteen minutes, even in the Seattle traffic. The twenty-story glass building wasn't the tallest and didn't stand out in the skyline, but it was the only one that Ryder owned outright. He'd known the building his entire life.

He could even remember the first time he'd visited it at the tender age of eight, when his father had decided that his son should start training to take over the business one day. There were even pictures of him dressed in a miniature version of his father's suit and standing next to the man in front of the massive silver Gallant Corporation sign in the lobby. One such picture had sat on his father's desk for years. Ryder had removed it shortly after his father's death, when Ryder could stop pretending as if everything in Johnathan Gallant's life was perfect.

The first thing Ryder noticed was that his parking spot was taken by a shiny new BMW. No doubt Mark's, he thought as he found another parking spot.

The second thing was that when he walked through the doors, the secretary who greeted him had no clue who he was and it took several moments of frustration to finally get through to the young woman that he owned not only the building, but the business. The woman even went as far as explaining to him that Mark Lindgren owned both.

She became flustered and red faced when he pointed out that his last name matched that of both the building and business. By then, Kelly was rushing towards him, and he left the receptionist behind, no doubt in a bundle of nerves.

“That was fun,” he said under his breath as he and Kelly stepped into the elevator.

“Clare is new,” Kelly explained.

He glanced at her and realized the woman hadn’t changed a bit. Was she wearing the same outfit she’d worn the day he’d left? Even her hair was styled the same as before.

“You haven’t changed,” he said with a smile.

She glanced at him, her eyes running up and down, and then she laughed. “You have.”

He shrugged. “You could say I needed the walkabout.” He nudged her shoulder. “Thanks, by the way, for the idea.”

She smiled. “It worked for my cousin. I figured the way things were going, you needed the break. I would have never guessed that you’d be gone for so long. If I’d had a clue, I wouldn’t have put the idea in your head,” she said, just as the doors opened on the top floor. “I’ll warn you,” she said under her breath as they stepped out, “Mark is on a warpath. But something tells me you might have already guessed that.”

He nodded and followed her past the reception area, noting that every eye followed him until he stepped into the corner office that used to be Mark’s.

“You’re in here for now.” Kelly sighed. “Until you can wrestle your old office back from Mark.”

“This will do,” he said, setting his laptop case down.

“For this week, you’ll have to make do with Megan helping you out.” Kelly motioned to a young brunette standing behind her just outside the office door. “After that, I’ve arranged to resume working with you.”

He smiled. “Thanks.” He watched as Kelly disappeared, but not before giving the younger woman, Megan, a quick nod of her head.

Megan, a short, stylishly dressed brunette, moved further into the room. “My desk is just across from the door. I’ve programmed my number into your office phone,” she rattled off. “Kelly has arranged the board meeting for ten in the main conference room at the end of the hall. Is there anything you need before then?”

He thought about asking for a cup of coffee, but instantly hated being so shallow. He could walk down the damn hall and get a cup for himself.

“No,” he answered. He moved to sit down but stopped. “Actually, yes. I’ll need access. Have someone from IT come up and set up this system with the new security.” He motioned to his laptop. “I believe it’s a year out of date.”

Megan wrote something down in her notepad and nodded. “For now, the desktop system here is available. I believe your login is still active.”

“Thanks.” He sat down. When Megan turned to go, he stopped her.

He’d read some of the emails he’d received from employees, some who had been let go and some who still worked for the business. One thing was clear to him—everyone who had emailed him had one complaint, and he was determined to get the real scoop before the meeting.

“Actually…” He waved her back into the room. “Shut the door, if you would.” She did and moved to sit across from him when he motioned to the chair. He tilted his head as he narrowed his eyes. “Kelly wouldn’t have assigned you to me if she didn’t trust you.”

Megan nodded quickly. “I was an intern when you were here last year.” She smiled.

“Good, then you have an idea of what things were like.” He leaned forward. “Give me your take on how Mark Lindgren has run the business.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brook was stretched out on the lounge chair, Willy happily sleeping on the towel she'd laid out on the chair next to her. The energy from the sugary pastry and cup of coffee she'd had for breakfast had been dissipated by the laps she'd swum.

She'd even enjoyed a turkey sandwich that had magically appeared on the kitchen table when she'd gone inside for a drink. A full dog bowl and water bowl had appeared for Willy.

They had taken a walk after lunch, but since all the homes were behind tall iron fences, the walk was short and pretty boring.

When they'd returned, she decided the pool was the best place to enjoy the rest of her day.

Now, as the warm sun washed over her, she allowed herself to drift in and out as she dreamed about what life could be like with Ryder.

Willy's low growl shook her from the daze and she sat up.

She watched in both horror and amazement as Edith Montague strolled across the patio towards her.

That's who Ryder had been engaged to. Her mind snapped and, suddenly, she felt stupid for not remembering it sooner.

The scowl on the socialite's face was a look Brook had never seen in all the glammed photos and videos of the beautiful woman.

Edith was, according to all the magazines, a natural beauty. Her flawless pale skin and her long golden locks were the

envy of all. Including Brook.

Why hadn't Brook at least put on a touch of makeup or brushed her hair before heading downstairs that morning?

"Who are you?" Edith asked with a jab of a perfectly manicured, pink-tipped finger towards Brook.

Brook sat up a little more and tried to paste on a pleasant smile.

"I'm Brook Masters and this is Willy." She motioned to the dog who was watching the newcomer with caution.

Edith didn't even spare the little dog a glance.

People who didn't acknowledge dogs were, in Brook's mind, walking on the pathway to hell.

"I'm sorry." Edith's full lips curved up. "What I meant to ask was, what in the hell do you think you are doing here?"

Brook swallowed and tried to figure out how to tell the woman that she and Ryder were... involved. But before she could open her mouth, Edith waved her hand and looked bored.

"You and your mutt can leave. You are no longer wanted. Leave, before I call the police and have you removed." Edith turned suddenly and marched back into the house.

Brook glanced down at Willy, who let out a huff and lay down again.

"Yeah, I can't believe the gall of her either. She actually thinks you're my mutt." Brook chuckled.

Willy groaned and closed his eyes, no longer entertained.

Deciding the best way to handle Edith Montague was head-on, she pulled her clothes on over her swimsuit and made her way into the house.

She walked in to hear Edith making demands to more than a half dozen staff members. It was the first Brook had seen of them that day. Since Ryder had left, there hadn't been a soul around, though she knew they were there. The sandwich hadn't made itself.

Still, she didn't know why there were suddenly more than six people rushing around to do Edith's bidding.

"And when Mr. Gallant returns from the office, I expect dinner to be ready for us," Edith said sharply.

Brook froze. Mr. Gallant? Ryder's father? But he was dead... then it dawned on her. Edith was talking about Ryder.

Brook relaxed and stood just inside the doorway as Edith continued to boss the staff members around. She listened as Edith demanded fresh flowers to be placed in each of the rooms as well as fresh linens on all of the beds in the house.

As if Ryder was going to personally be sleeping in each bed himself. The thought flashed in her mind of her and him enjoying themselves in each room, going from bed to bed, pleasing one another.

Brook held in a chuckle and when Edith stopped talking and everyone in the room glanced towards her, she realized that she must have chuckled out loud.

"Sorry, it's just..." She wanted to stop herself from talking but couldn't. "We're only staying in the main bedroom and the sheets we slept on last night were perfectly fine," she said to the staff, locking eyes with a very tall middle-aged gentleman.

Brook turned slightly and saw Edith's eyes narrow even further. But instead of addressing her, Edith turned back to the staff and clapped her hands briskly.

"Go." Edith waved them off and at least two of the staff members glanced at her first before shuffling away. Edith turned slowly towards her when they were alone. "I know you think that whatever was between you and James was special, but it's over. This is your wake-up call." She lowered her voice. "Pack your bag, take your mangy mutt and that tacky van that's parked out front, and go back to whatever backwater town you came from."

Brook smiled. She couldn't help it. The entire situation was laughable. This apparently only pissed Edith off more.

Brook was used to dealing with the rich and famous. After all, several of Pride's residents were world-renowned artists of

some sort. None of them were stuck up like Edith was being.

“I believe you have things a little skewed,” Brook said, crossing her arms over her chest. “First and foremost, Willy isn’t my dog.” When Edith opened her mouth to talk, Brook held up her hand. “Second, that’s not my van out front. Third, I’m here because Ryder asked me to be. I will not be pushed out, even by someone like you. The only way I’d leave,” she said more slowly, “is if Ryder asked me to go himself.”

Brook noticed that every time she said Ryder’s name, Edith’s eyes squinted as if she’d heard a foul word. Edith had called him James instead of Ryder. Even Eva had called him that. She wondered just how many people in his life called him by the name he preferred?

“Last,” she continued, “and foremost, I believe it is you who are the uninvited guest. I’m sure Ryder doesn’t even know you’re here, bossing his employees around.” When Brook noticed Edith’s chin rise and a flush grow on her cheeks, she smiled. “So, until he invites you into his home, I’d request that you refrain from barging in here and making demands. I think you know where the door is and, unlike you, I don’t threaten to call the police.” She turned back towards the patio doors and threw over her shoulder, “I just call them.”

When she sat back down by Willy, the dog glanced up at her and smiled, as if he knew what she had just done inside.

“That nasty woman won’t be bothering us again.” She reached over and scratched the dog’s chin. “Go back to sleep. I know I’m going to enjoy another nap in the sun. I’ve earned it.” She stretched and tried to relax, but moments later, she returned inside. Edith was gone, but every staff member that had been ordered about by her was now rushing around the house doing as the woman had requested.

“Stop,” she said, gaining the attention of several of them. “Edith has no say here. Trust me when I say, Ryder wouldn’t want all this fuss.”

The man she’d locked eyes with earlier stepped forward.

“Miss, I’m Benjamin, head housekeeper.”

“Hello.” She gave the man a smile. “I’m Brook.”

He nodded. “Yes, Mr. Gallant informed us of your stay and that we were to give you anything you wish. What he failed to mention was Miss Montague’s status. Before he...left, it was Miss Montague we answered to. That status has yet to be withdrawn by Mr. Gallant,” he finished.

“I see.” Brook sighed and glanced around. Every staff member’s eyes were on her. Then her smile grew. “Fine, but let’s focus on one task first. Dinner.”

Benjamin smiled and nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

Two hours later, Brook descended the stairs in the little black dress she’d hastily packed. It wasn’t fancy, it wasn’t expensive, and she was pretty sure she’d purchased it sometime back in high school. Still, the dress fit like a glove.

Ryder was just walking in the front door and paused to look up at her.

“Wow,” he said with a smile. Then he noticed Willy at her feet and laughed.

She’d put one of Ryder’s bow ties around the dog’s neck and had fashioned a little tuxedo shirt and vest out of old clothes.

“What have you done to my dog?” Ryder asked, setting his laptop bag down on the table in the hallway.

“I made him into a gentleman.” She wrapped her arms around Ryder. “You’d do good to learn some style from him.” She smiled up at Ryder.

Ryder kissed her and held onto her. He took in a deep breath and released it.

“Rough day?” she asked.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he said into her hair.

“Oh?” She leaned back. “I met your ex-fiancée today.” She watched his response, which was a wince. She nodded. “It was as much fun as you can imagine.”

“Sorry,” he said softly.

“Don’t be.” She took his hand. “We have dinner waiting.”

She led him through the house, and they stepped out on the patio together. Much like the night before, the string lights overhead were on and sparkling, and the sunset had the entire backyard glowing in hues of reds and orange.

On the table were several lit candles and a chilled bottle of champagne.

“What’s all this?” he asked as he pulled out the patio chair for her.

As she sat down, she chuckled. “You could say tonight is all thanks to your ex. She demanded a proper dinner when you returned home.” She shrugged. “Benjamin’s standing orders were to make sure Edith had what she wanted. Until he hears different from you...”

Ryder let out a low growl and turned back to the house. Brook took his hand and stopped him.

“For now, let’s eat. You can talk to him later.”

Ryder sighed and then nodded before sitting down. She could visibly see him relax and shake off the stress of his day.

“Was it that bad today?” she asked.

He took another deep breath. “Later. For now, let’s enjoy the evening.” He leaned forward and took her hand in his. “Outside of running into my ex, how was your day?”

She smiled and then told him everything she and Willy did that day. By the time their food was set in front of them, she could tell that her rattling on had relaxed him even more.

They were laughing and sipping their second glass of champagne when she saw Ryder tense. She heard a low curse as he stood up.

“Sorry about this,” he told her, touching her shoulder.

She knew who was behind her before she even turned around. Taking a deep breath, she turned and pasted on one of her best smiles.

“Good evening, Edith,” Ryder said. Brook could hear the stress in his voice.

Brook decided to remain seated only after she noticed that Edith had changed into a very seductive evening gown. Diamonds bigger than any fake ones that Brook owned caught and sparkled in the evening lights.

“I’m so happy you’re home.” Edith leaned up and tried to kiss Ryder, only to get his cheek before he took a giant step back from her. “What have you done to your hair and face?” she asked with a tsking noise. “You need an appointment with my barber,” she added with a chuckle.

“No, I don’t. I was going to call you tomorrow,” Ryder said as he moved back over to stand beside Brook, resting his hand on her shoulder lightly. “Brook informed me you stopped by today.”

“Yes, I met your... friend earlier,” Edith said with a frown. “I had hoped that we could have some time... alone, to discuss our future.” Edith reached up and brushed her fingers over his tie.

Ryder reached up and removed Edith’s hand. “I think I made myself perfectly clear over a year ago.”

Edith visibly pouted, a look Brook remembered seeing on a few magazine covers. “Oh boo.” She waved her hand. “I had no idea you were serious.” She practically purred as she tried to move closer. “Send your friend away so we can talk.”

“No,” Ryder said firmly. “I’m tired and just don’t have the energy to deal with you tonight. I want to enjoy my dinner with Brook, who is far more than just my friend.” Ryder’s hand returned to her shoulder. “We’ll talk tomorrow.” Ryder waved to someone by the back door. “For now, Benjamin will show you out.”

Suddenly, Benjamin appeared by Edith’s side and motioned towards the doors.

Edith’s eyes narrowed and turned to Brook before she turned around and stormed out.

“That was fun,” Brook said as Ryder sat back down and poured them some more champagne.

He glanced up at her and then smiled. “If you thought that was fun, then maybe *you* can handle her tomorrow.”

Brook laughed and shook her head. “Nope, she’s all yours.” She held up the glass and Ryder tapped his glass to hers. “Welcome home.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ryder wrapped his arm around Brook as he walked with her up the stairs. He wanted to carry her up, but he was too exhausted. Mentally and physically.

Brook continued to talk to him as they moved back up to their room. Her soothing voice helped relax him more than the two glasses of champagne had.

“Here,” she said as they stepped into the bedroom, “let me help you.” Brook started pulling off his tie. He stood there, allowing her to remove it and his jacket and hang them over the back of the chair by the bed. Then she was back in front of him, her eyes locked with his as she slowly unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders.

Suddenly, he felt a surge of energy pulse through him. When he reached to pull the skinny straps of her dress off her shoulders, she arched into his hands. The soft material swiftly flowed down her body to pool at her feet. Beneath, she’d worn nothing.

His entire body jumped as his eyes ran over her silky skin.

“Had I known you weren’t wearing anything under your dress, we wouldn’t have eaten dinner first.” He took a step back from her to quickly toe off his shoes. When he reached for his belt, however, Brook stepped forward and placed her hands over his.

He stilled while she removed the rest of his layers until they stood completely bared to one another.

“Did you mean it?” she asked softly.

“Hm?” he said, lifting his hand to brush his fingertips across her bare skin.

She sighed and arched into his touch.

“That I’m more than just a friend?”

His eyes snapped to hers. “Yes,” he answered quickly. “This...” He took a step towards her and pressed their bodies against one another. “And this.” He leaned his head down to brush his lips across hers, making the brief kiss passionate. “And this,” he said, laying his hand over her heart, “mean more to me than anything that came before.”

She smiled. “I feel the same.” She kissed him.

With his new energy, he easily lifted her from the ground and carried her to the edge of the bed. There, he laid her down gently and covered her with his own body.

He wanted to take his time. To show Brook exactly what he felt for her. But the drive he felt for her consumed him and drove him to take what he wanted, what he needed after the day he’d had.

So much meaning was behind each kiss. So much passion.

He ran his hands and mouth over every inch of her until he felt on the verge of bursting. Only after watching her sexy release and tasting her on his tongue did he finally return and slip inside her, allowing his own desires to build and fall when, once more, she convulsed around him.

They lay in bed, their bodies cooling, their breathing slowing, until he thought she was asleep. But when he moved to cover her with a blanket, she reached for him. She sat up and looked down at him, comfortably naked.

“Want to talk about today?” she asked.

He shifted until he was sitting with his back against the headboard, then he pulled her to his side and held on to her as he filled her in.

“Mark claimed that the board wanted to vote me out. I think he wants to be voted into the position permanently.” His

eyes zeroed in on a spot across the room as his fingers lazily played with Brook's hair.

"He currently is the CEO?" she asked.

"He was, temporarily, while I was gone. It was agreed that he would play the role until I returned," he answered. "It was a risky move, but since I hold the majority of shares, the board was willing to gamble. For a while."

"And now that you're back?" she asked.

"Now, the board has made it clear, they want Mark out." He remembered the urgency in some of the board members' pleas.

"Were things that bad this last year?" she asked.

"No, profits were steady. Not higher, just... steady. Work ethics and overall morale around the company took a huge dive, though. I plan to speak with some of the staff directly tomorrow. If some of the rumors are true, I may even have to let Mark go."

She sat up and leaned back so she could look at him. "That bad?"

He nodded. "Yeah, apparently there have been more than half a dozen HR complaints filed against him since I took my leave."

"What kinds of complaints?"

He shrugged. "I plan on finding out tomorrow." He sighed and pulled her back down to lay across his chest.

"What about Edith?" she asked. "How do you plan on handling her?"

He held in a groan. "Do you have any thoughts on how I can smooth things over there?" She glanced up at him. "Make no mistake, it's over between us. It was over when I ended things and she easily walked away. Actually, it was over long before then, if it was ever really on." He shrugged.

"You loved her at one point. Enough to propose," she pointed out.

He held in a burst of laughter. “No, I don’t think I ever did. It wasn’t my idea to marry her.”

She sat up again. “It wasn’t?”

“No, it was in my father’s plans, not mine. I hadn’t even met Edith before it was leaked that we were an item. We’d been pictured together at some social event, but I couldn’t even remember meeting her that night. Apparently, our fathers decided it would be good business if we were together.”

“Seriously?” Brook shook her head as she frowned at him. “Sort of like an arranged marriage?”

He nodded and pulled her back down next to him. He wanted—no, needed—to feel her against him. Her soft skin, her soft body pressed next to his own. She somehow balanced him. He’d never felt this way about anyone in his entire life. Had never dreamed he could feel so much for someone he had known for less than a week.

“Then why is she acting like a scorned lover? Someone who would fight for the love of her life?” Brook asked. She held in a yawn.

“I’m not sure.” He pulled her back down and shuffled until they were lying down. “Let’s shut off. I have an early morning meeting. And it appears a very busy day ahead of me.” He sighed.

“Willy and I were going to go exploring tomorrow,” she said with a yawn. “Ryder?”

“Hm?” he asked, resting his head next to hers and enjoying the smell of her. His entire body was lax, on the verge of falling asleep.

“I’m glad you invited me along,” she said before he drifted off to sleep.

He woke to the smell of coffee. Opening his eyes, he saw Brook standing over him, holding out a mug.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile as she sat on the edge of the bed. He must have been sleeping deeply since he hadn’t even heard her leave the bed.

“Morning,” he said, sitting up.

She was dressed in shorts and a blouse. Even her hair and makeup were done, and he wondered what time it was.

Worrying, he glanced at his phone by the bed.

“It’s still early,” she assured him. “I’m used to waking up before dawn, thanks to all those years working at the bakery.” She chuckled.

He still had an hour and a half before he was due in the office.

“Willy and I made you breakfast,” she said, “If you want to shower, we can enjoy it outside?”

He took the cup from her and sipped the hot coffee. It was so good he took another sip.

“Eva sent over a case of the coffee you liked yesterday,” Brook supplied. “Benjamin saw to stocking it in the kitchen.”

“Why is this so good?” he groaned after taking another sip.

“Because Eva knows her business.” She laughed and stood up. “Now, shower and get dressed. I have a few finishing touches to add to breakfast.” She leaned in and kissed him quickly. “And Willy is still outside doing his business.”

He watched her leave before crawling out of bed. When he noticed that she’d hung up the suit that he’d worn yesterday, his heart did a little leap in his chest.

He showered and dressed in another suit that hung on him in all the wrong places and thought about having Benjamin send them out to be tailored. Then he realized, he didn’t really want to be stuck wearing suits for the rest of his life.

Everything in his future was so up in the air. But with this one thing, he knew he wanted to make a change. The business suit attire was his father’s doing.

Ryder couldn’t even remember the first time he’d gone for a fitting for a suit.

He yanked off the tie, tossed off the jacket, and rolled up his sleeves. There, that was more comfortable. It wasn’t board

shorts and a pair of flip-flops, but it was a start.

When he stepped into the kitchen, Brook was just setting plates down on the smaller kitchen table.

“It started to sprinkle, so we’ll have to eat in here.” She looked up. Seeing his attire, her eyebrows drew up.

“I plan on making some dress code changes today.”

“I like that idea. I think a lot of others will too. I know that with the number of at-home workers on the rise, most offices have made the change.” She sat down.

Willy was chowing down on his breakfast but stopped long enough to glance up at him.

He instantly felt guilty that he hadn’t spent much time with his dog the day before. For the past year, it had been him and Willy. The duo had been inseparable. Now, with the way things were going, he’d be lucky to take his dog on a walk once a week. This wasn’t his idea of life. Which is why he’d left last year.

As they ate, his mind played over his options.

“Plotting your day?” Brook asked with a smile.

“Something like that.” He shoved another piece of bacon in his mouth. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“Anytime. Willy and I are going to hit the town. Maybe do some sight-seeing?” She shrugged. “Shopping?” She shrugged again. “Whatever we fancy.”

He smiled and looked down at his dog, who was now lying on the tile floor, snoring. “If you can get him up again.” He laughed.

Somehow, just spending half an hour that morning with Brook had Ryder in a better mood than he’d been in the day before. Maybe it was because he knew that he didn’t have to face another board meeting that day. Or it could be because he’d made up his mind to make some drastic changes. Regardless of the consequences.

When he walked into his office, he was surprised to see Edith standing by his windows, looking out over the city.

He held in a groan and tried to greet her cheerfully.

“To what do I owe this visit?” he asked, setting down his laptop case.

She turned towards him, her eyes running over his more relaxed attire briefly before answering.

“James, I think this game has gone on long enough. I had hoped that you would sow your wild oats before returning home to finally settle down.” Edith moved over to sit on his desk.

Ryder remained standing. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Edith took a deep breath. “You had a year to engage in whatever flings you wanted. I didn’t ask, didn’t even try finding you, but that year is over. Now, it’s time we settled on a wedding date and returned things to how they were.” She motioned to his shirt. “Starting with this. What are you wearing?”

He wanted to laugh. Instead, he sat down slowly and tried to find the best words. In the end, he blurted out, “Edith, there is no way in hell I’m going to marry you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brook laughed as Willy rolled in the wet sand. So far that day, they had stopped by a city park, where Willy had sniffed and peed on every bush and had had a few “meet and greets” with some local dogs. Then they had enjoyed lunch under a large awning at an outdoor café overlooking the bay.

It was a short walk to the beach from there, where Willy was enjoying rolling around in the surf and sand. At first, she’d sat and watched him, but he’d looked lonely, so she’d joined him in the shallow water.

The small dog had more spunk than any dog she’d ever known. Her parents’ dogs spent most of their time lying around the house. They enjoyed a walk or run on the beach, but there was something special about the French bulldog.

Willy’s intellect was far superior, and his character was easily ten times the size he was.

“Cute dog,” a man in gray sweatpants and a T-shirt said when she was drying Willy off to get back in the car.

She’d borrowed the Mercedes she’d found in the garage earlier. The fact that it was the least conspicuous car there was some sort of ironic joke.

“Thanks,” she’d said quickly and, feeling a little uneasy, tried to hurry up and put Willy in the passenger seat as the man moved closer to them.

Instantly, she could tell he was either high or running off adrenaline. Either way, something bad was about to go down and she was for sure in the wrong place.

Shit. She should have known better than to park in the small parking lot. She should have chosen someplace more public.

“What do you say, you and I...” the man started to say as he moved to pin her between the cars.

“No,” she said firmly, switching her stance. “And I think you need to back off right now,” she added in a much louder voice.

The man’s eyes drew up as his smile grew. Both of his front teeth were capped. Their dark silver appeared like holes in his teeth until the light hit them.

“Oh?” He shifted slightly, placing one hand on the driver’s door and another on her shoulder, stopping her from moving away. That was when the smell of him hit her. It was obvious he hadn’t showered in days, if not weeks.

It took one quick jab to his throat, a move her father had taught her in tenth grade, for his arm to drop away from her shoulder. The kick to the shins made him drop his hold on her, and she quickly slipped in the car and locked the door before he could recover.

His fist hit the car window just before she pulled quickly out of the parking spot, leaving a smear of blood dripping down it.

She was still shaking when she pulled into the garage fifteen minutes later. She shut the car off and rested her head on the steering wheel, allowing the tears to flow.

She lost track of time. She could have been sitting there mere minutes or several hours. When the car door yanked open, she screamed.

“What the hell?” Ryder said as he pulled her into his arms. “What happened?” he asked as she held onto him.

“I’m being stupid,” she said into his chest. “I... It’s nothing.” She tried desperately to get herself under control.

Willy was happily barking and trying to get Ryder’s attention.

“Down,” Ryder said softly, and she heard Willy jump out of the car. Then Ryder was pulling her up into his arms and carrying her into the house while Willy followed them. “Why are you crying and why is Willy wet?”

He sat down on the sofa, making sure to keep his arms around her as she sat on his lap.

“We went for a walk on the beach. I thought... I should have parked...” She stopped when she felt Ryder’s entire body tense. “I can take care of myself, but still...” She took a deep breath and got herself back under control. Looking up into his eyes, she allowed everything that had happened to spill out.

By the time she was done talking, Ryder’s eyes were dark, and he was frowning.

“We need to call the police.” He started to get up.

“No, I...” She shook her head.

“Brook.” Ryder cupped her face in his hands. “I’m very thankful your dad taught you self-defense, but not all women out there are lucky enough to have a father who works for the coast guard and is ex-military. How would you feel if tomorrow morning you woke up and heard on the news that, because you didn’t call the police and spend the time to report this, another woman wasn’t as lucky as you just were?”

She sighed and then nodded. “You’re right. I... should have called them right away. I... guess I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

He smiled at her and then kissed her lips. “I’ll call them.”

She listened to his phone call and wondered why he was home so early. Then she looked at her watch and realized it was past six. Somehow, she had lost track of time.

They spent over an hour waiting for the police to show up and another hour talking to them and working with a sketch artist.

Brook stood under the hot spray in the shower and once again cried. Only this time, the tears weren’t for her. They were for the thirty-two-year-old mother of two who hadn’t

been as lucky as she had. The woman—the police hadn't given them her name—was currently in stable condition after a quick surgery to repair her fractured eye socket and broken nose.

She'd been found sexually assaulted and beaten, mere feet from where Brook had encountered the man. Had he attacked the other woman first or had the attack been in retaliation of the humiliation Brook had handed him?

When Ryder's strong arms wrapped around her, she jumped for just a split second before relaxing back into his chest.

"Hey," he said softly. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"I am," she finally said as she rested her head back against his shoulder.

He turned her around, and she wrapped her arms around his naked body.

"Brook, you know..." he started. But she jerked back.

"Don't you dare say that there was nothing I could have done." She eyed him. For a moment, he appeared as if he was going to argue, but then he nodded. "I should have thought. If I had called the police sooner..."

"It probably wouldn't have changed much. Maybe they'd catch the guy sooner? Their best estimate is he attacked the other woman before hunting you down or moments after you left. Even if it was the latter, the police couldn't have gotten there soon enough to stop the attack. Now, thanks to your detailed description, they have a better chance at catching this guy. The other woman is still unconscious." Ryder sighed and rested his head on top of hers. "I'm so sorry this happened." She felt him take another deep breath. "My god, I should have..."

"What?" She leaned back and looked up into his eyes. "Not let me out of your sight?" She shook her head. "I guess neither of us should be beating ourselves up. I shouldn't have lost my shit and should have called the police sooner. I credit being in shock for my momentary stupidity." She tried to smile

but then just ended up resting her head against his shoulder again.

They stood under the hot spray for a few moments. She'd wanted a shower to wash off the memories of the man's hand on her. The rank smell of him that was stuck in her nostrils.

"Tell me you have some chocolate or a tub of ice cream in the house."

She felt him relax. "I'm sure there's something."

She leaned back and looked up into his face. "Thank you. For... being here."

The small crease between his eyebrows was back, and she could tell he was holding in his thoughts.

"Why don't you dry off and pull on those cute fuzzy pajamas you brought along. You can rent us a movie if you want?" He brushed his fingertips down her cheek. Then he placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "I'll go hunt us up some comfort food."

This time, her smile was genuine. "Sounds wonderful."

By the time Ryder came back upstairs with a tray full of sweets, she and Willy were tucked into the bed, scrolling through the list of movies available.

Ryder set the tray down and looked at the pair of them. "I'm only going to allow this once," he said with a chuckle as he motioned towards Willy.

The dog looked at Ryder and then laid his head on Brook's lap and sighed. Ryder laughed.

"Once," he repeated. Willy groaned in response, causing her to laugh along. "Did you find something for us to watch?" he asked, sitting down, and pulling the tray up between them on the bed.

She shifted Willy so that he wouldn't be in the way.

"I think so. It's between *Maleficent* or *The Avengers*."

"Your choice." He shifted until his arm was wrapped around her shoulders.

“I haven’t seen *Maleficent* yet. I’ve watched *The Avengers* like a dozen times.” She hit the button on the remote and the movie started as she picked up the bowl of chocolate chip ice cream that he’d made for her.

They snacked on junk food and watched what her cousin Nick would have deemed a kid’s movie. When they were done snacking, he set the tray down and pulled her into his arms, settling Willy on her other side.

When the movie ended, she could tell Ryder was fast asleep and still holding her tight against his chest. She lowered the volume on the television and started another movie, knowing full well she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep for hours yet. Thankfully, the movie relaxed her, and eventually she fell fast asleep.

When she woke, Ryder was gone. A note lay on the pillow next to her.

Morning,

I didn’t want to wake you. I have to go into the office for a few hours but hope to be back sometime after lunch. If you need me, I’m only a call away.

-R

Brook read the note a few times before climbing out of bed. She noticed that Willy was gone and wondered if the little dog was downstairs already.

After pulling on a swimsuit, shorts, and a shirt, she went downstairs and found the little dog lying in a sunbeam by the back door.

After giving Willy some love and opening the door for him to go out, she turned to see Benjamin stepping into the kitchen holding a tray.

“Morning, ma’am.” He handed her a hot cup of coffee. “I’ll have breakfast ready for you soon.”

“Thank you. It’s nice outside, I think I’ll enjoy it out there,” she said. He nodded and then disappeared again.

Stepping out into the sunlight, she realized she had no idea what time it was. Almost every single day of her life, she'd woken long before sunrise or shortly after. Being a baker's daughter, she'd never had the ability to sleep in, even after a late night. Her mother and aunt had agreed once she'd moved out on her own that she didn't have to be at work when they arrived around four each morning, but the damage was done.

She pulled out her phone and held in a gasp when she realized it was almost noon. She'd never slept in so late.

She watched Willy rush happily around the yard before sitting at the table and enjoying her coffee and the breakfast Benjamin brought out to her. The blueberry pancakes were delicious. After, she enjoyed a dip in the pool, a phone call to her mother and cousin, then a few more laps in the pool. Even Willy jumped in and paddled around for a bit.

She'd never expected that a French bulldog would enjoy the water so much.

After they dried off in the sun, she went inside to collect her iPad, but ended up turning on the massive flat-screen television in the living room and watching the news.

There were a few reports on the attack the day before, but none mentioned the woman's name and, so far, the police hadn't caught the man.

Brook thought of calling down to the station to see if she could at least find out which hospital the woman was in, thinking that she could have flowers delivered. But then she realized there were no words of comfort that she could say on any card.

When Willy jumped up and snuggled on her lap, she switched the station over to an old television show and, after a few moments, felt herself drifting off.

The night before, she hadn't dreamed. But that morning, with the sunlight warming her through the large windows and the sound of *I Love Lucy* playing on the TV, the nightmares finally found her.

Instead of a public parking lot during daylight, it was night, and she was on a dark, narrow pathway. Willy had run off, and she was desperately searching for the little dog. She kept calling out for him as she raced even further into the darkness.

When she heard a branch snap behind her, she jumped and the sound of her breathing and her heartbeat kept all other noises from reaching her ears. She was blind due to the darkness and now, thanks to the loud sound of her body reacting to fear, deaf to everything except her own horror.

Turning in circles, she held her hands out as if trying to block what was coming. She was shoved from behind by a big hand on her shoulder, where the man had held on to her, only now, he was pinning her to the ground.

Suddenly, her face was wet as a rough tongue ran over her cheeks and eyes.

She jerked awake and looked up into Willy's worried eyes. The little dog had woken her from the dream.

She wrapped her arms around him and held on, trying to convince him that she was okay as tears rolled down her cheeks.

By the time Ryder returned home, she was back under control.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ryder stood back in the elevator as a group of workers stepped inside. He only went up another two floors, but in that short time he heard a conversation between two employees that shocked him.

It had been a week since he'd returned and, in that time, he didn't like what he'd been hearing. Most of the employees treated him like he already had one foot out the door. In his mind, he did. But he wasn't going to leave everything behind like last year. Changes were coming and he hoped to make them all good ones.

"I hear the guy is back," a tall balding man said.

Ryder was leaning against the back corner of the elevator wall. He'd been looking down at his phone when eight employees had stepped in.

"Who? James Gallant?" the shorter dark-haired man asked.

"Yeah, finally. The guy takes off for a year doing god knows what. Probably jet-setting around the world or shacking up with some movie star. Anyway, a year later and he expects to waltz back in here and take over like he never left us to fend for ourselves against that shark."

"Now there we can all agree," a dark-haired man said loudly. He glanced around quickly, most likely to see if said shark was in the elevator with them.

There were a couple people between him and the men, so he was sure they hadn't seen him. When the doors opened on

the fifth floor, he waited until the elevator emptied before stepping out.

He'd scheduled a meeting with each department that week. He was due to speak with the accounting team and assumed that the two men worked in that department. Instead of heading to the meeting room on that floor, he disappeared into the bathroom and gave everyone time to assemble.

When he stepped into the full meeting room, he noticed both men standing against the back wall. The room grew quiet as he took his place at the front of the table.

Since the second day, he'd made a point to dress more casually. Today, he had on a gray short-sleeved button-up shirt and dark gray slacks. Every single man in the room had on a full suit, while the women were all dressed in skirts or slacks and blouses. They all looked as uncomfortable as he'd felt wearing those clothes. What he'd wanted to see were happy faces. People who loved where they worked and wanted to be there.

The changes he had in mind would hopefully make that come true.

“Thank you, everyone, for gathering on such short notice,” he said, getting everyone's attention. He had planned on making the standard speech that he'd given the other departments, but instead paused. His eyes ran over everyone in the room. “Instead of plowing through my planned speech, I'd like to take this time to hear from each of you what you think we can do differently to make Gallant a better workplace.”

He waited, but the room remained silent for almost a full minute. Then, finally, a woman sitting near the back of the room raised her hand.

“Yes.” He motioned towards her. “Please tell me your name first, then proceed.”

She cleared her throat as she stood up and straightened her blouse. “I'm Missy Williams. I'm a new mother, Jacob is two months now...” Several people clapped and the woman's smile grew. “It would be helpful to have at least one lactation

station in the building. I know there are several new mothers in the building who pump. We have to either sit at our desks where we can be interrupted or try and stuff ourselves into a bathroom stall for more privacy.”

He nodded as he wrote down the idea. “Done,” he said absently. “Next?” He glanced up and saw that everyone in the room was looking at him, surprised.

“Seriously?” Missy asked. “You’re going to give us a space?”

“Yes.” He turned Lindsey Jackson, the head of the accounting department, whom Ryder had hired himself a little over two years before. “Do you have an empty office? One with a door and a window to the outside?” Lindsey frowned at him as if she was thinking, but then nodded slowly. “Until something more permanent can be arranged, for now, make it available to all new mothers. Can we have a small refrigerator put in there as well? Maybe some bottled water?”

“Yes,” Lindsey said with a smile as she made notes.

“Next?” he asked and several hands went up.

An hour later, he sat at his desk. Now that he was back in his old office and Mark was back in his, he felt more at home.

He sent a companywide email about the changes and mentioned that, if anyone else had thoughts or ideas, they should respond to him or talk to Karen Leif, the HR director.

Half an hour after this, Mark Lindgren stormed into his office, making a point to slam his office door behind him.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Mark barked loud enough for the entire floor to hear him.

Ryder glanced up from his laptop screen and raised his eyebrows. He would have wagered everything he had that Mark was going to visit him after the email. It had taken him fifteen minutes longer than Ryder had expected.

“My job,” he answered, turning back to his screen. He’d run through many scenarios about how to handle Mark’s temper. Faking indifference was the best option.

“Your...” Mark sputtered a few times. “You can’t just go around making changes. The office on the fifth floor was earmarked for Roy Gusset, the new head of accounting that I hired. The man is supposed to start on Monday.”

“What’s wrong with Lindsey?” he asked Mark.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “We’ve been having... issues with her.”

“Such as?” He waited.

Mark’s face grew beet red. “None of your damn business. I don’t need to justify replacing someone. I am acting CEO.”

“You were, for the past year. Now that I’m back, you are no longer in that position. It’s the reason you moved out of this office. Besides, if you were planning on replacing Lindsey, whoever you hired should be taking over her current office. But more importantly, I’d like to hear what your reasons are for firing an employee that has no marks against her in the two years she’s worked here. One whose employees all rave about her leadership.”

Mark’s eyes narrowed as he thought for a moment. “She has threatened to sue the company.”

“Over?” Ryder asked easily, wanting to play along with the man’s game.

After his meeting with the accounting department, Ryder had had a quick private chat with Lindsey. The woman wasn’t threatening to sue Gallant but rather Mark directly, for physical assault and harassment.

It appeared that about a month back, things had taken a nasty turn between her and Mark. Lindsey had even shown Ryder some photos of a few bruises and scratches on her arms and hands to back her claims against Mark.

She’d told Ryder how Mark had stormed into her office and had picked up and thrown a wooden pencil holder directly at Lindsey’s head.

Apparently, Mark had been fuming after the accounting department’s end-of-month reports to the board had shown

more than ten thousand dollars missing from one of Mark's accounts.

The missing money was what Ryder was currently looking into on his computer.

Ryder didn't condone violence of any kind, even if it was Lindsey's word against Mark's. No one else had witnessed the incident. All they had were Lindsey's photos, which she claimed the police and lawyers had copies of.

The assault was just one more thing he could use in the case to fire Mark. He was hoping he'd have enough ammunition to persuade the board that it was the best move. Most of the members were already leaning towards that move, but this would convince the others that were still on the fence. He had arranged for a private meeting with the board in less than an hour to discuss their next move. He hated to fire the guy without notifying them. After all, he was the one who had suggested leaving the man in charge while he was gone.

Ryder also wanted to find out why it appeared that Mark had gone unpunished by the board after the incident, but Lindsey apparently had been punished. When he'd left a year ago, she'd been in the larger corner office. Now, she was in the middle of the fifth floor. Her office was a small cubicle, and most of the employees under her had much larger stations. There were no doors, no privacy for the phone calls or meetings that the position required.

The move had been made to humiliate the woman and, by the looks of it, it had succeeded. She'd confided in him that she was looking for another job. Mark hadn't fired her yet, but she'd suspected it was coming. She still had favor with a lot of the board members, which was probably why Mark had waited.

This was something he planned on fixing in the coming days, just as soon as he could find another empty office for the new mothers to utilize.

"A private matter," Mark answered finally.

Ryder drew his eyebrows up slowly. “Since that matter took place on company grounds, it is not private.”

Mark’s eyes narrowed. “She’s lying.”

“Maybe about the pencils,” he said smoothly. He turned back to his computer. “But the missing ten grand”—he waved his hand—“is still indeed missing from one of your accounts.”

Mark’s face grew a deeper shade of red. “She probably pocketed the money herself to make me look bad.”

Ryder glared at him, not saying another word. His eyes bore into Mark’s until the man started to fidget.

I moved her out of the bigger office so she had some accountability. I hired Roy Gusset to replace her because I could no longer trust her.” Mark waved his hands as if he was shooing a fly away.

“And what did the board think of your decisions?” Ryder asked. Mark’s face grew brighter.

“I didn’t need to ask the board. I was acting CEO,” he practically shouted.

“Lindsey is the head of a department. Our bylaws clearly state that it takes a vote from the board for you to replace anyone, including her,” Ryder said. He continued to remain quiet but did a quick employee search on Roy Gusset in the system. The man’s name and data were already in the company database.

When he saw the connection, Ryder’s anger grew, and he shut his laptop and stood up. He moved around until he was standing directly in front of Mark.

“The man is your brother-in-law,” he growled out.

“So? He’s more than qualified,” Mark shot back. “More so than that bitch you hired two years ago.”

Ryder slowly fisted his hands and had to take three deep breaths before he got his anger under control.

Lindsey Jackson was fifty-something years old and had more degrees than Mark and a far better job history. The

woman had worked for some of the top business in the area. He'd lucked out when she'd applied for the job a few years back after the man his father had hired had retired a year after Ryder had taken over.

She was one of a handful of employees at Gallant that Ryder had hired personally. Regardless of her actions, it was obvious from talking to a handful of other employees in the last week that Mark rubbed more employees wrong than Lindsey did. Actually, after talking with her team, he hadn't heard one negative thing about her. He couldn't say the same thing about Mark.

"Mark, I was going to wait for the board's opinion on this, but the truth is, I don't need their permission or thoughts on the matter. You're fired."

Anger flashed in the man's eyes, and his face turned an even darker shade of red.

"You can't fire me!" he screamed as he moved forward.

"Actually, I can. Even without the boards say so." He said and instantly tensed, seeing Mark's next move coming. Watching Mark's arm pull back and his fist head towards his chin, Ryder decided to let it play out. After all, he'd been punched before. This move just sealed his decision.

He could have easily stopped the man's blow by either catching his fist or ducking it. But then he wouldn't have the satisfaction of watching the man be hauled away in cuffs fifteen minutes later.

After Mark's first swing, Ryder had easily gained control of the man and held him while Leslie had called the police and gotten him an ice pack for his eye.

When he stepped into the boardroom, five minutes late with an ice pack held to his left eye, the news of what had happened had already spread.

"Was it worth the black eye?" Harry Trillian asked with a chuckle.

"Totally. First things first," he said to the room. "If anyone here disagrees with my move, say so now." He waited and

when no one said anything, he moved on. “Second, I’m recanting the offer for Roy Gusset to take the accounting department from Lindsey. I’ve also given Lindsey back her old office. For now, I’m letting the new mothers use Mark’s office.” He smiled when several board members chuckled.

“I’m having the IT department remove Mark from the system.” He shrugged. “Now that all the fun topics are done, let’s discuss the missing ten grand.” He opened his laptop.

By the time Ryder walked into the house a few hours later, his left eye was swollen shut and a dark shade of purple. He was getting used to coming home to Brook and Willy. The last couple evenings they had spent taking walks or swimming until the stars had come out.

Since it was the weekend, he figured they would take the boat out for a short weekend trip. She’d hinted several times about wanting to go out on it.

He’d had Benjamin arrange for the crew that was always on stand-by to prep the yacht for the weekend trip. Since his father’s death, he’d only taken the boat out three times, looking to escape the pressures of the job.

This would be the first time he’d taken someone with him and the first time that the trip didn’t feel like an escape.

He’d spent the last year of his life trying to escape. After meeting Brook, everything had changed. No matter where he was, what was going on, escape wasn’t running to the beach or hitting the waves. Instead, he found his reprieve by simply being with her. Looking into her hazel eyes somehow made all the bad things seem not so terrible.

He knew that she’d been relieved when the police had caught the man who had attacked her and the other woman. He’d been homeless and was now locked away where he couldn’t hurt anyone else. The blood on Brook’s car window had matched that of the man’s other victim, so they knew that he’d attacked her first.

Still, he understood Brook’s anger at herself for not holding it together after the attack. Each day, she spent time in

the yard doing yoga or Tae Kwon Do. Sometimes at night, he would join her, and she'd show him a few basic moves.

When he parked in the garage, Willy and Brook were out there to greet him. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her until he felt all of the stress of the day slip away.

“What happened?” she asked, pulling back and touching his face gently.

“I ran into a work hazard,” he joked. He bent down to give Willy his attention.

“Are you okay?” she asked when he stood back up.

“Yeah, it's just a black eye.” He shrugged. “Are you ready for our weekend plans?”

She smiled. “Yes, I'm so thankful you thought of it.” She hugged him again. “I'm all packed. Willy was so excited today that he barfed up his lunch.”

“Is he okay?” he asked, frowning down at his dog, who currently looked happy and tired.

“Yes. Benjamin thinks he's adjusting to the new food.” She bent down to pick up the dog. “When do we leave?” she asked eagerly.

“First thing in the morning.” he answered, setting his laptop down on the desk in his office as he passed by. But then he pulled his laptop out of the heavy case and carried it with him into the kitchen.

He'd had a conversation with Parker Clark the previous week about some ideas for the house on Ocean View. He was set to close on the place on Monday and wanted some of the work to start immediately.

Parker had visited the home and had come up with a list of structural or mechanical items that would need to be dealt with first. He'd also emailed Ryder several design drawings earlier that day that he wanted to share with Brook over dinner.

He knew that she'd be excited to see what Parker had come up with. No doubt, she'd have her own ideas or changes.

He was looking forward to seeing what she thought would be best for the old home.

“How about we make some sandwiches and head outside? You can tell me all about the hazard.” She motioned to his eye.

While he made them turkey sandwiches, he filled her in on what had happened that day. She was concerned until he told her that he’d pressed charges, and Mark had been taken away by the police.

He had to draw the line and one thing he wanted his employees to understand was that there was zero tolerance towards violence at Gallant.

Wanting a change of subject, he balanced the food on his laptop and headed outside.

While they started to eat, he opened up the email with the plans that Parker had sent over.

The man had some really great ideas about how to update the home and make it cozier.

They had just started scanning through the ideas when the rain started. He grabbed his laptop while she grabbed the rest of the food, and they both dashed inside, laughing.

“I hope the weather is better tomorrow,” Brook said as Willy ran in the back door behind them and shook off.

He set his laptop down on the counter as she set the soaked food on the table.

“The weather app says it will be clear for the rest of the weekend,” he said. She moved to sit down, but he stopped her by pulling her into his arms and kissing her.

Her fingers brushed his swollen eye. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He rested his forehead against hers. “This somehow makes everything better. Even a black eye.” He looked into her eyes and cupped her face. “You balance me. I searched for an entire year and traveled thousands of miles up and down the coast looking for an ounce of what you do for me with just a simple

smile.” He kissed her again and was surprised to see tears slipping down her cheeks when he looked at her face again.

He brushed them away with his thumb, thinking at first that he’d said something wrong, but then her smile brightened, and she hugged him.

“Now you’ve done it.” She started to pull him toward the stairs.

“I have?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Yeah,” she said, but then she stopped and grabbed his laptop. “I’ll want to finish going over those plans. After.” She smiled and he followed her up the stairs. When they were in the bedroom, she set his laptop down on the nightstand and turned to him.

“Ryder, I...” She wrapped her arms around him. “I’ve never felt this much for someone before.”

His heart did a little jump in his chest.

“You haven’t?” he asked, his voice sounding distant. She shook her head slowly. “I haven’t either.” His hands moved to her hips. “What are we going to do about it?”

Her smile grew and she started tugging his shirt off. “I have a few good ideas.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The moment Brook's body cooled from what they had just done, from what Ryder had just done to her, she opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling. Ryder was still pinning her to the mattress as he brushed his hands gently through her hair and his breathing slowed.

"I wasn't going to fall for you," he said softly next to her ear.

"You weren't?" she asked, trying desperately not to sound too excited.

The truth was, she had fallen for him. Hard. Already, she was trying to figure out how to convince him to spend the rest of his life with her.

Sure, she knew there were a lot of things they would have to work out. Mainly, where they were going to live their happily-ever-after life together.

Her thoughts jumped to them living in Pride, in her dream home. She tried desperately to push away those thoughts because she realized his position and his responsibilities would keep him here in Seattle.

"No," he said, leaning up on his elbows until he was looking down at her. Her eyes ran over his face. Even with a black eye, he was so very handsome. So very much... everything she'd never dreamed she could have.

His longer hair fell around his face and even though he'd spent the last few weeks indoors, far away from the sun, he was still very tan.

“Brook.” He cupped her face in his hands as his eyes locked with her own. “I love you,” he said.

Her breath caught and her stomach did little flips. “I love you,” she said almost too eagerly. Her voice practically echoed through the entire house.

He flashed a smile and then rolled over, taking her with him until they almost fell off the bed.

“Enough,” she said, laughing, “or you’re going to end up with more bruises.”

He stilled and kissed her one more time. “I’m still hungry. I’m going to grab that bag of chips.” He climbed out of bed and pulled on his boxers. “Want anything?”

She shook her head. “No, I want another look at those plans Parker sent over.” She pulled his laptop onto her lap as he left the room.

She opened the plans and her body warmed at the images Parker had come up with.

Most of the ideas fell in line with what she’d always imagined for the place. The walls would be changed from the stark white to more warm neutral tones. The honey-colored wood floors would be sanded and stained a softer tone. They would remove the dirty and broken tiles and replace them with soft wood-grain tiles or lighter colored silver or gray ones. They could decide on the exact color later.

The tiles around the fireplace would be removed and replaced with a wall of refurbished wood. Parker had done something like it in his and Sara’s place, which is where Brook had come up with the idea.

All of the light fixtures and appliances would be upgraded. The main bathroom would need a complete overhaul, as would the other bathrooms. She approved of all of the plans Parker had drawn up.

There were so many things to discuss when Ryder returned with a bag of popcorn, the potato chips, and a soda, and they sat up in bed going over each image.

They were just shutting down the laptop when Ryder's phone rang from somewhere in the house.

"Shit," he groaned.

"I think it's in your pants in the hallway," she called after him as he strolled out of the bedroom naked to search for the phone.

When he came back, he was frowning. "It's the security firm. They want us to head into the safe room." He grabbed a handful of their clothes, then scooped up a sleeping Willy and his laptop in his arms. "Come on."

She had frozen. For some reason, his words weren't registering. Her body wouldn't move.

"What?" She shook her head.

"Brook." He moved back to the side of the bed and looked down at her. "It's probably nothing, but we're better off heading in until they give us a call back. The officers are almost here."

"I..." She looked around for her clothes but for some reason, her brain just wouldn't function.

"Hey." He tossed down the clothes he was holding so that he could touch her face. That simple contact broke the trance, and she grabbed the comforter and rushed behind him as he led her past their bathroom and into their closet. He stopped at the back wall. Then he handed her Willy as he flipped open a hidden keypad behind a row of ties. The back wall slid open silently, and he motioned for her to step inside before following her in himself. The wall shut behind them and low lights flickered on.

Black television screens filled a wall. There was also a sofa, a small refrigerator, and a computer desk.

"Sit." Ryder motioned towards the sofa.

She set down his laptop, and Willy snuggled in her lap and instantly fell back to sleep.

Ryder turned on the screens with the push of a single button. Instantly, scenes from all over the house flashed on

them.

“Son of a...” Ryder said, getting her attention.

Then she noticed the dark figure moving quickly on one of the televisions. It took her a moment to figure out where the scene was. The person had crossed the backyard and was sliding open the glass door in the dining room. They watched as they moved in the darkness.

The figure raced across the small dining room and quickly moved into the office, where he grabbed something off Ryder’s desk. Then they raced back through the house and out the open glass doors.

The entire time she’d watched, she’d held her breath. It had taken less than a minute before the figure disappeared out of sight on the back lawn.

“Shit.” Ryder groaned. “That was my laptop case.” He sat down on the desk.

“Who?” she asked, realizing her throat was dry.

“I didn’t get a good look. Maybe the security firm has a better view,” he suggested. “How the hell did he get in the back door?” he growled and to her horror, he moved over and opened the secret door. She must have made a sound of distress because Ryder turned to her.

“It’s okay,” he said. “He’s obviously gone.” He motioned to the screens.

She noticed then the screen that showed that there were two uniformed police officers standing just inside their front door.

“But what if he comes back? Your laptop is here.” She held it up.

Just then, Ryder’s phone rang, and he answered it as he stepped out into their closet and started to pull on a pair of pants.

Brook didn’t want to talk to the police with just the comforter wrapped around her, so she quickly pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a sweatshirt and followed Ryder and Willy

downstairs. She left the laptop in the safe room, concerned that whoever had just broken in would come back.

“Whoever it was, they knew exactly where to look for what they wanted. They knew the layout of the house. Knew where my office was,” Ryder said almost ten minutes later. All of the lights in the house were on and the officers had checked every room and closet.

Even though Ryder had assured them the intruder was long gone, they insisted on making sure the residence was secure.

“Do you always leave your laptop on the desk?” one of the officer’s asked.

Ryder was silent for a moment, then shook his head. “No. A lot of the time it’s there, but not always.”

“Anything on there that’s important or that you can’t recover?” one of the men asked.

Brook remained silent but wondered why Ryder wasn’t telling them that his laptop was safe and sound upstairs in the safe room.

Ryder shook his head slowly. “I have backups.” His gaze landed on her, and she understood that he wanted to keep it a secret that it hadn’t been taken. “Back at the office.”

“You should keep everything up on the cloud,” the younger officer suggested.

“Thanks,” Ryder said firmly. “If you’re done...” He motioned to the front door.

“We’ve got security watching out. There’s only one road in and out of this place,” the officer said. “We’ll let you know when we catch them.”

“Right,” Ryder said, opening the front door and waiting until they both left.

“Who do you think it was?” Brook asked when they were alone.

Instead of answering, Ryder walked over and shut off a couple lights. She followed him into the kitchen where he

poured them each a glass of orange juice.

“My first thought was Mark. But I’m not sure he’s out of jail yet from earlier today. You can bet first thing in the morning I’ll be checking on it.” He leaned against the counter.

The two uniformed men had checked the back door when they’d arrived. Unfortunately, when she and Ryder had rushed inside to avoid the rain earlier, she wasn’t sure she had locked it. She couldn’t even remember who had shut the glass doors, Ryder or herself.

What she could remember was why their wet dinner was still sitting on the table, half eaten. They’d been so busy thinking of their pleasures, that they hadn’t ensured their own safety. In Pride, she doubted that this would have been an issue. But after being attacked last week, she should have known better.

Which meant, whoever had broken in had been watching them.

They had known that they had left the back door unlocked. Somehow, they even knew how to get in to the fenced-off secure neighborhood and, most importantly, how to get out again.

“I doubt they’ll catch the guy,” Ryder said after taking a sip of the juice.

She sat down on the barstool and listened as he tried to figure everything out. He believed the same thing she did— whoever had broken in had been watching them. Maybe even watching the house before Ryder had returned home.

She felt a shiver race down her back and wrapped her arms around herself.

That removed Mark from the suspect list. At least according to Ryder.

“Then who?” she asked.

Ryder shrugged and glanced around. “I’m too tired to think. Let’s head back up and pick this up in the morning.”

“What about your laptop?” she asked.

“The good news is that it’s upstairs locked away. The bad news is that whoever stole the case may try to get their hands on it again. But why?” He sighed, then added, “We may need to postpone our trip.”

She walked over and wrapped her arms around him. “Do what you need to. I’m not going anywhere, and neither is the boat. We can go when things are settled.” She kissed him.

She felt him relax and watched him smile. “I love you.”

Her smile flashed and she kissed him. “I love you too.”

He lifted her up into his arms and started carrying her back upstairs, shutting off lights as they went.

“The police sure left a lot of lights on,” she said holding onto him.

“Those weren’t cops. They were from the security company that oversees the neighborhood.”

She frowned. “They weren’t the police? They had guns.”

“Tasers. They just look like guns. Sort of.” He shrugged. “They had yellow handles.”

“I guess I’m more tired than I thought.” She yawned. Plus, she’d been so worked up over the break-in that she hadn’t been really thinking clearly. “Shouldn’t we call the police? The real ones, I mean?”

He shook his head. “Nothing was really taken. A laptop case.” He shrugged. “The security company will handle it. It’s what everyone on the street pays them for.” He shut the bedroom door behind them.

Willy was back in his bed, fast asleep. Ryder set her down on the bed.

“As much as I’d like a repeat of earlier, I’m beat.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled off his pants and shirt. He sat beside her in just his boxers.

“Me too.” She realized that the comforter was still back in the closet. She went to go gather it, then slipped out of her

jeans and sweatshirt and put on her sleeping shorts and tank top.

By the time she returned to the bed, Ryder was lying down almost fast asleep. She put the bedspread over him and crawled under it, straight into his waiting arms.

“I love you,” he said into her hair. “Get used to hearing me say that since I’ve spent my entire life not saying it to anyone else.”

She smiled. “I love hearing it,” she said softly, then she drifted off in his arms.

When she woke, she was alone in the bed. After showering and dressing, she went down to find Ryder at his office desk on his laptop.

“Morning,” she said, leaning in and placing a kiss on his lips.

“Morning.” He smiled up at her.

“Find anything?” she asked with a frown.

“No, I’m backing up my laptop and trying to figure out what exactly they wanted off it.” He turned back to the screen.

“Backing it up online?” she asked, sitting on the edge of the desk.

“Yeah. About the only things I have on here that I don’t have on my office system are a few files from the accounting department. But I pulled them from the network drive at work...” He stopped talking when he realized that she had no idea what he was saying. Chuckling, he stood up. “How about we eat something? I had the staff make us something since I planned to be busy this morning.”

While they ate the omelets and breakfast quiches made for them, they speculated about why someone would want his laptop. Especially when there were so many more valuable items in the house.

“That painting is worth tens of thousands of dollars.” He motioned to the painting the dark figure had passed last night.

“Did you find out anything about Mark?” she asked. “Was he still behind bars last night?”

“Yes, apparently, he still is. He can’t post bail.” Ryder shook his head. “It was set at fifteen grand.”

Brook frowned. “I thought he was acting CEO of the company for the last year. He must have had a pretty big salary.”

Ryder nodded. “He did. Plus, an expensive apartment in Auburn, a shiny new BMW, and I’m told several”—Ryder air quoted—“women he’s been wining and dining the past year. Even though he’s married.”

“Okay, so why can’t he post bail?”

Ryder shrugged. “I’m having someone look into that. But for now, my priority is finding out who broke in and why they went after my laptop.”

“Did you have it when we met?” she asked. When he frowned, she clarified, “Did you have it with you when you were living in your van and on the road? Or was it given to you when you returned?”

He frowned. “I didn’t have it with me this last year. It was here.” He motioned towards the office. “I used it to work on things from home before I left, but I left it behind.”

“Okay, so you left it here while you were gone. It wasn’t locked up or...”

“No.” He shook his head. “I believe it was still sitting on my desk in there when I returned.”

“Okay, then...” She rolled her shoulders and took another sip of coffee. “Maybe we’re going at this all wrong. Maybe it isn’t about Mark.”

“If not, then who? I had one of the guys in the IT department update the thing when I returned. It needed a lot of updates and security patches. They installed some new virus protection and connected it to the new network at the office.”

“Right, but...” She shrugged and laughed. “I have no clue. This sort of thing is really Nick’s field. I can call him if you

want. See what he thinks?”

Ryder thought for a moment then shrugged. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt.

After breakfast, Ryder returned to his office while she stepped outside with Willy to make the call to her cousin.

Nick answered on the second ring.

“What’s up, cuz?” Nick asked, sounding a little breathless.

“Am I interrupting you?” she asked jokingly.

“Just taking a run on the beach.” She heard him stop running. “How’s the big city? You aren’t calling me to tell me you’ve decided the city life is for you, are you?”

She chuckled. “Nope, I am calling you because we need your help. Or at least your twisted mind,” she said with a smile in her voice.

“On?” Nick asked.

“How much time do you have?”

Nick was silent for a moment. “Plenty. What’s up?”

By the time she was done giving him the basics of what had happened, Ryder had come out and sat next to her. She switched her phone to speaker, and they both answered a handful of questions.

For the next half hour, they gave her cousin basic information on who the suspects were and the layout of the house and the neighborhood. Ryder described his office dynamics.

“Of course, it would help if I was there, but something tells me this isn’t about your work. It seems more... personal. Are you sure it was a man last night? Do you know the whereabouts of Edith?” Nick asked.

“Yes, pretty sure,” Ryder answered. “Gauging from when he passed in front of the artwork, I’d wager he was about my height, roughly six foot two inches tall. Edith is five foot five, at best.”

“Right,” Nick sighed. “I have the weekend off. I can head up there if you want?”

Ryder glanced at her, and she nodded. “We have plenty of room,” she said with a smile.

When they hung up, Ryder took her hand. “I hate that we have to postpone our little boat trip. I hope that’s okay?”

She nodded as he lifted her hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles.

“I like a good mystery just like my cousin, even though he’s far better at spotting the clues. I don’t like being stuck in the middle of one, especially one that has me hiding in a safe room wrapped in a comforter.”

Ryder pulled her into his arms. “I’m so sorry about that.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m pretty sure it was me who left the back door open. I never think about locking up at my place. In Pride... you don’t really have to.”

Ryder glanced out over the water. “I close on the Ocean View house on Monday.” He turned back to her. “I am hoping Parker will start on the repairs the next day.”

She felt her heart skip as she held her breath and asked. “Will you be living there?”

Ryder’s eyes met hers. “I guess that all depends on you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ryder's heart was pounding in his chest while he waited for Brook to respond.

In the weeks that they'd been in Seattle, he'd fallen hard and fast for her. Hell, he was pretty sure he'd been in love with her from the moment he'd opened his eyes on the beach and had seen her standing over him.

But since they'd been there, he was sinking deeper and deeper. At this point, there was no way he would come out of it unscathed if she decided to leave him. No amount of time or surfing would be able to heal his heart.

"Me?" she finally asked. "Why is it up to me?"

He swallowed the lump in his throat before answering.

"It's your dream house. Your castle. I can't imagine living there without you."

He watched her lips curve up and relaxed a little.

"You want me... to live there with you?"

"More than that. I want..." He shook his head. "No, I need you to help with the remodel. I can envision a few updates, but outside of some paint, I have no clue what I'm doing."

She chuckled. "I have a few more ideas I could help you with."

"I was counting on it." He pulled her closer. "So?"

"So?" she asked with a smile.

“Will you move in with me?” He felt as if his world was turning on an axis that was Brook.

“Yes, I will.” She kissed him.

He wanted to spend his Saturday with her, but because of the break-in the night before, his phone kept ringing, and several times he was pulled back into his office.

He spent most of his day scanning through his laptop, looking at every folder. As far as he could tell, there wasn't anything on here that would warrant the break-in.

Shortly after lunch, he finally shut down and pulled on his swim shorts and spent the rest of his Saturday with Brook out by the pool.

Nick showed up just before dinner, and they spent the entire meal on the back patio filling him in on everything new that they had found. After they were done eating, he showed Nick the video from the security system and even walked around the yard to show him where the figure had come from and disappeared to.

“They had a boat,” Nick surprised them by saying.

“What?” He frowned.

“They must have used your neighbor's dock.” He motioned to the dock not far from where his fence stopped. “They tied off the boat and jumped the fence,” Nick said, pointing and turning. “Then they rushed through the yard, setting off your security system. Which is when the team notified you of the motion and had you get into the safe room. Then they opened the unlocked door.” He turned to Brook. “Smooth move there, cuz.” Brook groaned, so Ryder took her hand and squeezed it. “They raced through the house and snagged the laptop case and returned the way they came.” Nick turned back to the house and frowned. “They were probably watching you before. You said you had your laptop out here during dinner?”

They both nodded. “Yes,” Ryder answered.

“Did you open it or just have it sitting here?” Nick asked.

Ryder glanced at her. “I think we opened it for a second, but then the rain started.”

“He could have missed that. Maybe looked away or had to duck out of sight for a moment.” Ryder and Brook followed his gaze around the yard. “Your neighbors live there?”

“Yes, full time,” Ryder replied.

Then Nick turned back to the house. “You also have staff working here. There are so many other possibilities.”

Ryder nodded again. “At least half a dozen, normally.” Then he realized where Nick was going with this new thought. “They’ve all been screened by the private security firm I hire.”

“Right, but sometimes things get missed.” Nick walked towards the house.

After giving Nick access to his laptop and the security footage, he and Brook headed into their room while Nick worked in his office downstairs.

Brook had set her cousin up to sleep in one of the guest rooms on the other side of the house. It was interesting to see Nick’s reaction to the massive place. At first, he’d been shocked, then impressed, then he’d seemed almost proud of Ryder. As if he’d been happy Ryder wasn’t just some beach bum with only a van and a French bulldog to his name.

“Nick has always been extremely scrupulous. Trust me, he’ll get answers,” Brook assured him as they lay in bed.

Sunday morning, the three of them sat out on the patio and ate breakfast in the warm summer sunlight.

Nick ran through a handful of his theories, each with their own proof to back them up. But most of the evidence was weak and didn’t really explain why someone would break in and try and steal his laptop.

“There was this,” Nick finally said after they’d run through all of the ideas. He turned Ryder’s laptop screen towards them. “I found it in an obscure file buried deep in your system files.”

In the middle of a screen was a file labeled Basement.

“What is it?” Ryder asked. Had it been on his laptop? He couldn’t ever remember seeing the file before. Maybe it was something the IT department knew about?

“It’s an encryption file,” Nick answered. “This isn’t really my area of expertise, more Josh’s. If you want, I can shoot him over a copy and see if he can break into it.”

Ryder remembered meeting Josh Williams, founder and owner of Internal Security, on the beach when Brook had taken him out sailing. He had liked the guy and if Nick and Brook trusted him, then there was no reason for Ryder not to.

“Sure, send it.” Ryder nodded, then took Brook’s hand. “My crew has everything ready”—he motioned towards the boat—“and Brook and I were going to head out for a few hours. Care to join us?” he asked Nick.

Nick glanced over the yard at the large boat and then sighed. “I have to be at work at five tomorrow morning and should really be heading back home. I’ll take a raincheck, though.”

“Sounds good,” Ryder agreed.

Nick sent Josh the file, then stood up and hugged Brook and shook Ryder’s hand.

“We’ve all heard you’re closing on the old place on Ocean View tomorrow. How soon are you planning on moving in?” Nick asked.

“We’re going to be heading back soon. We have a meeting with Parker to go over some design ideas he’s sent us before he starts the work,” Ryder answered.

They had discussed the need for them to be there to oversee the work. Brook had been going back and forth with Parker about ideas. He supposed since she’d spent all her life dreaming about living there, she’d been saving them up for years. Every idea that she had shown him, he liked. Then again, interior decorating wasn’t his strong suit.

“As soon as I wrap up a few things here, we’ll head back down there,” he added.

“Good, it’ll be nice to see some love put into that old place.” Nick locked eyes with Ryder. Instantly, Ryder understood what the man was hinting at.

Was it that obvious how he felt about Brook, how they felt about each other? Either way, it was nice getting approval from one member of her family. Nick coming all this way to lend a hand certainly indicated that approval.

“I’ll get out of your way so you can go enjoy the rest of the weekend,” Nick added. “Thanks for the mini vacation.”

After walking Nick out to his car and saying their goodbyes, they made their way towards the water.

He helped Brook onto his father’s yacht and gave her a tour of the massive vessel. He’d thought of selling it many times, but each time, something had come up to distract him. Now he was thankful it was still parked there.

“Tell me about her name,” Brook asked, settling in as the captain slowly steered them away from the dock. “*Missing Grace?*”

His father had never named the yacht, so Ryder had given it a name after his father’s death. He took a deep breath. “My mother’s name is Grace. She left the picture when I was two. I’ve thought to look for her for years.”

“Why haven’t you?” Brook asked, settling further against his chest.

He shrugged. “I always thought that if she wanted anything to do with me, she would come knocking on my door. After my father’s death was televised around the country, I figured if she came knocking then, it would only be because she wanted another handout. And that was something I couldn’t bear.”

Brook was quiet for a moment before saying, “What do you know about her?”

“Not much. She was more than ten years younger than my father when they married. She’d come from a wealthy family who, according to my father, had stumbled on hard times. Their marriage had been one of... convenience for them.

Shortly after my birth, my father pulled away from her for some reason. The divorce didn't take long to settle. He claimed he gave her and her family everything they wanted to guarantee they would never bother him or me again."

"And she hasn't," Brook said, and he could hear the sadness in her tone.

"I think it's better this way," he said with a shrug. "My father wasn't the kind of man to show affection. Hell, being shuffled off to boarding schools and then to college, I hardly ever saw him. But he never once raised his voice or a hand to me. When I was around, he tried to teach me everything he could. Looking back at it, I was very unruly. I was spoiled. Yes, he set the bar high. From a young age I learned that when he said jump, I had to do as I was told." He looked out over the water. They had finally hit the open waters of Lake Washington. Since they only had a few hours, he'd instructed the captain to circle the lake, with a stop for lunch at one of his favorite waterfront restaurants at Leschi Marina.

"But didn't he force your engagement with Edith?" she asked.

Ryder shrugged. "Force? Not so much. Suggested?" He shrugged again. "He had his people book the romantic resort stay and arranged for us to fly to Colorado. He even packed my grandmother's ring in my bags. When I saw the ring was out of the safe, I got the hint well enough. It was time for me to settle down."

"So you fell in line?" Brook asked.

"I did."

"What changed?" Her eyes scanned his face.

"He died. I was in California, doing a movie shoot. Edith was..." He took a deep breath and tried to remember the details. "Somewhere." He shook his head. "When I returned, Edith demanded we move up the wedding date. From there, nothing seemed right. I felt as if I needed time to grieve. I was thrust into running the family business, and there were times I didn't even get a full hour of sleep before heading back into

the office. Days went by, weeks, months.” He shook his head. “All the while, Edith planned and arranged our wedding. I was drained. Exhausted. We had a fight over...” He closed his eyes, trying to remember what it had been that day. “Flowers, I think. I picked the wrong color or something, and she went off. I pulled back even farther. Then she started demanding that she move into the house with me. She figured it would make us closer. Instead, I called the whole thing off. I went back to work she returned my grandmother’s ring. The odd thing was, I felt stronger about my father dying than I did about breaking things off with her.” He turned and looked down at Brook.

Her long hair was tied back, her face turned towards his. Just seeing her hazel eyes watching him made him smile and relax.

Cupping her face, he realized the reason she meant so much to him. For the first time in his life, he’d found what he had wanted, what he’d been searching for. Love. Pure. Simple. Real. He loved her and it was so obvious that she felt the same way about him.

Edith had never felt anything for him. He was just a means to gain more wealth, popularity, and power.

He ran his lips over Brook’s and felt her melt into his arms.

“What happens now?” she asked with a sigh as she leaned against his chest.

“Now?” He glanced out over the water. “We enjoy each and every day we have together. Then, sometime before Christmas, I’ll pull my grandmother’s ring out of the safe and get down on one knee and ask you to marry me.”

She jerked back quickly, but when he looked down at her, she was smiling up at him.

“Then we move into our home on the hill, your castle. I will either commute to Seattle or just work from Pride. We have at least two children and a few more French bulldogs.” Brook laughed. “Then, we live happily ever after.” He kissed her nose.

“I like that plan,” she said softly as she wrapped her arms around him again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brook was standing in the kitchen the following day, making her and Willy grilled cheese sandwiches, when the doorbell rang.

She opened the door and instantly wished she'd remembered to check the security cameras first.

Edith Montague stood just outside the front door, running her eyes up and down Brook, judging her shorts and tank top and messy hair.

She'd spent most of the morning outside, playing in the water with Willy. The rest of the morning she'd enjoyed a good book while lying on the sofa. She looked sloppy and at home. There were probably creases on her face from when she'd fallen asleep reading.

Edith, for her part, was dressed in white flowing pants and a soft silver blouse that only had one strap, showcasing her perfect skin and breasts. Her belt and purse matched her heels and no doubt cost more than anything Brook would ever own.

The woman's blonde hair lay over her shoulders perfectly. Everything about the woman screamed movie star.

"Can I help you?" Brook asked, trying to hide her frustration and embarrassment at looking so haggard.

Edith sighed and then shocked Brook by saying, "I'd like to apologize."

"For?" Brook asked.

Edith's eyes moved beyond Brook's shoulder. Brook glanced over and saw Willy slowly making his way towards them.

"Is that really James's dog?" Edith asked.

Brook turned back towards the woman. "Yes. His name is Willy."

Edith surprised her even more by kneeling and holding out her hand towards Willy. The dog took one look up at Brook, who gave him a quick nod, then made his way cautiously towards Edith.

Edith scratched Willy on the head with her perfectly manicured nails.

"I've never really been around dogs," Edith said, looking up at her.

"Willy's pretty cool. Ryder rescued him. Someone had tossed him in a bag and thrown him in the water. He would have drowned."

"Oh." Edith frowned. "Who would do such a thing?"

Brook tilted her head, trying to decide if Edith was being sincere. When she saw worry and anger behind the woman's eyes, she relaxed.

"We were just making some lunch. Would you care to come in?" she asked.

Edith stood and gripped her hands together. "I'd like that."

The next half hour had Brook questioning everything she thought about the other woman.

While Brook ate her sandwich and chips, Edith chatted away as they sat on the back patio. She talked to her as if they were old friends, telling her stories of her ventures and of her friends.

When Edith asked questions, Brook was too cautious of the woman to give away much information. Even after Edith basically owned up to the fact that she'd never really felt anything stronger than friendship towards Ryder.

“It was really pressure from my parents that caused me to see James in the first place.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “That and, well, he’s very rich and extremely hot.” Edith let out a loud chuckle.

Brook forced a smile and took another sip of the wine that Edith had suggested they enjoy. Edith was on her second glass, but Brook held back and nursed her first drink. At this point, Edith seemed more than a little tipsy. The fact that she had gotten so on only two glasses of wine made Brook wonder if she’d had something to drink before coming over.

The longer she listened to Edith talk, the more she was sure of that fact. Her words were starting to slur, and it was obvious the woman was far more relaxed than when she’d arrived.

Suddenly, Edith stopped talking and frowned. “Would you mind if I...” She nodded towards the house.

Brook raised her eyebrows in question.

“It’s just, I’ve had two glasses,” Edith said with a smile.

“Sure.” Brook moved to get up, but Edith stopped her.

“No, don’t get up. I know the way.” She grabbed her purse and stumbled inside.

Less than a minute after Edith disappeared into the house, Brook followed her inside. There was no way, after the other night, that she was going to trust anyone in the house alone.

Even though Ryder had his laptop with him, there were other things in the house worth protecting.

Nick had hinted that one of the employees might be behind the break-in, but Brook just didn’t trust Edith. With her eyes on the closed bathroom door, she poured herself a glass of juice and gave Willy one of his treats, trying to look as if she had a reason to be inside instead of waiting outside for Edith.

Brook was shocked when she heard the upstairs bathroom toilet flush. Eyeing the closed door of the powder bathroom, she realized instantly her mistake. She’d assumed Edith would use the downstairs guest bathroom. She hadn’t.

Quickly moving to the base of the stairs, Brook wondered if she should go up and escort Edith out of the house.

Then Edith appeared at the top of the stairs, looking totally sober and pleased with herself. However, when she spotted Brook, her smile slipped, and she carefully put back on her drunk act.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m used to using the main bathroom upstairs. You know, when James and I…” Edith dropped off, waving her hand, and almost falling down the last stair.

Brook leaned on the railing, blocking her exit.

“You can drop the act,” Brook said firmly.

Edith frowned slightly, then she giggled. “I know what this looks like.” She tried once more to move past Brook, who held firm.

“What this looks like is that, two days after someone broke in and stole from us, you take it upon yourself to snoop around the house. It makes me wonder why, and now I wonder if you had anything to do with the break-in,” Brook said smoothly.

“Someone broke in?” Edith gasped slightly as she gripped her purse a little tighter.

Brook sighed and held in her temper. Then, she snatched Edith’s purse out of her hands and dumped the entire contents on the floor.

“Oops,” Brook said as Edith screamed in anger.

Instantly, Brook saw the black jewelry box among all of Edith’s frivolous possessions.

Brook grabbed for the box while Edith reached for it at the same time.

“What’s this?” Brook asked, opening the jewelry box.

Inside was a vintage floral-style wedding ring. The delicate feminine design had ten small diamonds nestled around a very large one in the center. The style was so anti-Edith that Brook understood instantly what it was. More importantly, that it didn’t belong to Edith. “This isn’t yours.”

“Yes, it is.” Edith moved to grab it from Brook’s hands.

Since Brook was a few inches taller than the other woman, she easily moved it out of her reach.

“The question is, how did you get into the safe?” she asked.

Ryder had mentioned giving her his grandmother’s wedding ring when he’d proposed. She’d seen him get a few things out of the hidden safe that sat behind a panel in their closet and knew for a fact that she’d seen this jewelry box in there.

She hadn’t seen the ring itself, but Ryder had described it to her perfectly.

“It’s mine.” Edith reached for it again.

“No, it may have been given to you when Ryder proposed to you, but since it was locked up in the safe upstairs, I’d wager it no longer belongs to you.” She shut the lid to the box and tucked it in her pocket. “What else did you grab from the safe?” She turned back to the items on the floor.

There, among her many tubes of lipstick, makeup, and perfume, was a bundle of papers.

This time, however, Edith snagged them first.

“Okay, you want to play? How about I call the police?” She watched Edith’s eyes narrow as her chin rose in challenge. “Or better yet, Ryder?”

Edith pouted and shoved the papers at her. “Fine,” she said, then she bent down and started gathering her things.

“Why?” she asked her once all her makeup items were back in her purse. “Why would you want these?” She waved the papers and the ring. “I’m sure you have plenty of jewelry that costs more than this.”

“I do, but it was given to me. It should have been mine,” Edith said with a huff. “My father made me return it to James when he called the wedding off.”

“It was his grandmother’s,” Brook said.

Edith just shrugged. “He gave it to me.”

Rolling her eyes, she looked down at the bundle of papers, then gasped. “Were you seriously trying to steal the deed to this place?”

“It would have been mine when we married.” Edith threw her purse over her shoulder.

“You know that you can’t just steal the deed and get the property, right?” she asked, a little befuddled.

Edith’s chin rose again, but Brook could see the confusion behind her eyes.

Brook took a deep breath. “Ryder’s name is on this.” She waved the papers. “He’d have to sign them over to you. There would have to be lawyers and notaries to switch ownership to you. This paper is pretty much worthless.” She tucked it into her back pocket. “Besides, I’m pretty sure this is just Ryder’s copy. His lawyers probably have others.”

She remembered getting her own copy of the cottage’s deed. At first, she’d wanted her parents to hold onto the legal form, worried she’d misplace it. Her father had explained that the county clerk had copies if she did misplace it.

“What were you going to do? Forge his signature?” she joked. She gasped when Edith glared at her. “Maybe I *should* call the police!”

“It’s supposed to be mine,” Edith said in a high-pitched voice.

Neither of them had heard Ryder come in through the garage as they had talked.

“Thank goodness I called the wedding off then,” Ryder said, gaining both of their attention.

“You’ve ruined everything,” Edith screeched. To Brook’s surprise, Edith lunged at her.

Before Ryder could pull the smaller woman off her, Edith pulled Brook’s hair and her very long manicured nails scraped down her right arm, leaving behind a nasty red mark.

“Enough!” Ryder barked, pulling Edith back a few feet from Brook. “Call security,” he said, handing her his cell phone.

She dialed the number and waited, then quickly relayed that they needed help before hanging up.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” she asked. Edith’s face went pale.

“No, I think having security escort her off the property is humiliation enough. They’ll also bar her from returning to the neighborhood,” Ryder answered.

“She got these out of your safe.” Brook held up the papers and the ring. “If I hadn’t dumped out her purse, she would have left with them.”

Ryder turned slowly to Edith. “Why?”

Edith’s eyes narrowed. “You’re the one who broke things off. I should have had them,” she said in a low tone. “Just because you changed your mind doesn’t mean I’m not due what I was promised.”

“Promised?” Ryder shook his head.

“Why do you think I agreed to the marriage?” Edith laughed, then looked around. “This place, the ring, and half of your dear daddy’s business. Only, he died before we could walk down the aisle and seal the deal. You dragged out the engagement too long. Then you backed out and my parents grew a conscience and made me return the ring.” She jerked her arm free from Ryder’s and then straightened her clothes just as security knocked on the door.

The same two guards that she’d seen plenty of times stood just outside the front door.

“Miss Montague was just leaving. Please make sure to mark her off the guest list,” Ryder said to the men. “She’s no longer welcome on Hunt’s Point,” he said as one of the guards took Edith’s arm and started walking her out the front door.

Edith jerked her arm free and marched out the door without saying a word, probably not wanting to make a scene

in front of the two newcomers.

Ryder shut the front door and turned back towards Brook.

“Are you okay?” He looked at the scratch on her arm.

“Yes. I’ve had worse after wrestling with my cousins,” she joked as she wrapped her arms around him. “I’m sorry. She asked to use the bathroom. I hadn’t expected her to head upstairs.” She shook her head.

“No, I’m sorry. I should have changed the codes to the safe.” He sighed.

She leaned back and looked up into his eyes. “Why did she do this now? I mean, weren’t these in the safe the entire year you were gone?”

Ryder frowned at her. “No. I stopped by the bank the other day and got them out of my security box.”

Brook waited, but when he didn’t expand, she asked, “Why?”

Instead of answering right away, he took her hand and walked over to sit down on the sofa.

“I’ve put the house on the market. I officially closed on the house in Pride today and have every intention of making that move a permanent one.” He smiled at her. “And, well, the ring... I’ve already told you why I want that close by.”

She smiled. “You did.” She handed him both items. “For when you’re ready.”

He chuckled and set both items on the coffee table. When he turned back towards her, his smile was gone. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t.” She stopped him by placing a finger over his lips. “There’s no way you could have known she would do something like this. She’s a spoiled child acting out.”

He nodded. “Right.”

Then she smiled. “You really did close on the house today?”

His smile returned. "I did."

"Good, because I have a dozen more ideas to show you." She pulled out her phone.

Ryder laughed and then sat back as she scrolled through the many Pinterest designs that she'd picked out earlier.

After that, Ryder returned the two items to his safe and changed the code. She was happily surprised when he shared the numbers with her. Then they decided to head out for a quick dinner.

"It's the day I saved Willy," he said with a smile.

"A very good day indeed," she said, hugging the dog to her chest.

She changed into a sundress and him into a pair of shorts and a button-up cotton shirt with flip-flops. The more relaxed attire suited him better than the dress clothes.

They ate at an outdoor restaurant overlooking the water while Willy lounged and slept under their feet. A perfect ending to a very strange day.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There was so much that Ryder had to deal with before he and Brook could head back to Pride. The house on Hunt's Point was officially on the market. Already, they'd had half a dozen showings.

He'd tasked Brook with going through the house and marking any items that she wanted for the Ocean View place. He'd arranged for those items to be packed up and stored at a facility just outside of Pride until the house was ready for them.

He was also selling the boat and the cars. At first, he'd thought about moving them to Pride, but just to take the yacht out, he had to have a crew of at least four. The thought of maintaining such a large vessel for the rest of his life had him quickly accepting the first offer that came his way. Besides, Brook had her sailboat that they could go out on.

They were set to meet with Parker at the end of the next week to go over all the remodeling designs on the house. He was spending ten hours a day getting things in the office ready to leave. He'd talked to the board about his move, explaining that he wasn't leaving the position, just shifting locations.

They were hesitant at first, but after what they'd gone through with Mark, they agreed to give it a try. The trial period would last three months and if things ran smoothly, they'd agreed to sign off on it permanently.

He'd already implemented a lot of changes around the office. One of the changes allowed a lot of the workers to

work from home offices. The other was allowing a more casual dress code.

He was happily surprised at how well all the new changes were going. Everyone had seen a noticeable improvement in morale and, according to the accounting department, numbers were up almost twelve percent.

He'd been informed that Mark had finally gotten out of jail, but he hadn't heard anything further on the case against him, as his lawyers were dealing with it.

His lawyers were also dealing with a few loose ends that he'd left dangling when he'd left a year ago, things he should have dealt with long ago. Properties his father had owned that Ryder never cared for were being sold. Items in the safe at the bank would be auctioned off, along with most of the paintings and other artwork in the house.

He was sitting in his office getting ready to clock out and head home when the phone rang.

"Is this James Gallant?" the woman asked.

"It is." He waited. "Can I help you?" he asked when she didn't say anything more.

"I... this is going to sound totally weird, but... I'm... My name is Faith Reginald." He heard her take a deep breath. "I'm... My mother is Grace."

His heart leapt in his chest, and his hearing and eyesight ceased to work for a few seconds.

Grace. His mother.

Then everything rushed back to him. His hearing, his eyesight, and most importantly, his mind.

"I see," he said, clearing his throat. "And what can I do for you?" he asked in a clipped tone.

How many people had come out of the woodwork after his father's death, demanding a slice of the financial pie that his old man had left behind? Too many.

“It’s not really about me. First, I want to make myself clear. I’m not contacting you because I want anything from you. To be honest, I only just found out about you a week ago.”

It was strange, but he could hear the honesty in her voice.

“Okay,” he said slowly.

He heard her take a deep breath. “I... have an older brother. Half-brother really. John.”

“Miss Reginald. Faith,” he said when she didn’t continue.

“He’s more your brother than mine. You and I... We’re half-siblings,” Faith said.

Ryder swallowed. “Are you saying...”

“My mother apparently hid her pregnancy during her divorce to your and John’s father. I only just found out, like I said, last week. But John, he’s known for a little longer.”

Ryder instantly saw the irony in the names. His father had always wished that he’d been named after him. However, before his father could arrive at the hospital after Ryder’s birth, his mother had already named him James Ryder.

“How long has he known?” Ryder asked.

“My mother claims that he’s known for about a year. He did one of those DNA tests and confronted my mother until she told him everything,” Faith said. “That’s when he took off. We haven’t seen or heard from him since. Mr. Gallant, James...”

“Ryder,” he corrected. “Everyone calls me Ryder.”

He heard her take another deep breath. “John is in a dark place. I won’t lie to you. He always has been. My dad, his stepdad, when he was alive was a real SOB. And John always got the back of his hand for mouthing off. Not that sometimes he didn’t deserve it, but...”

“Why call me now?” he asked.

“It was in the news, about the break-in at your home in Seattle. It’s just... That’s sort of John’s style. My mother never

wished for either of us to contact you. She claimed it was for the best. For years, I've wondered about her past. Then, a few days ago, when we were sitting down having coffee, the news report about your home break-in flashed on the television, I could tell something was wrong. It took me a full hour to get the truth out of her. I'm not sure why—"

"She signed a gag order during the divorce," Ryder broke in. Everything suddenly made sense. After talking with Brook about his mother, he'd asked his lawyer to look into the divorce settlement. Most of the court documents were sealed, but after finding his father's original lawyer, the man had confessed to that much.

"Still, she's my mother," Faith said, sounding annoyed. "All I could get from her was that you and John had the same father. I had to do the digging myself. I even had to talk to my mother's older sister, Lindy. The woman is bat-shit crazy."

He didn't know why, but he smiled at that thought. Maybe because he had never known that he had an aunt on his mother's side.

"Why do you believe it was your brother... my brother, who broke into my place?" he asked.

"John is a huge computer nerd. He dealt with Bitcoin and had some shady trading and stock practices. After he left, we found out that he'd stolen a bunch of money from everyone in the family. Every time he'd visit someone, he'd plant a software or app on their computers or other devices, whatever he could get his hands on. Each and every one of us, my mother, my aunt, my cousin, and even my boyfriend at the time, was hit. John got more than ten grand from us."

Ryder sat up and thought about the accounting department's discovery of missing money from Mark's department.

"Do you have more information on what software he used?" he asked.

"I don't. I'm not very computer savvy, but my ex-boyfriend knows all about it. He's the one who discovered it

and cleaned up everyone's devices. I can give you his name and number if it would help."

"Thanks," he said, jotting down the information.

"Like I said, I wasn't going to contact you, but it's been a week since I found out... well, everything. I don't know if you have any other family, but... I just wanted you to know I existed. I didn't have the best role model in my family, and I'd like to say that John was a good brother, but that wouldn't be true. For as long as I can remember, he's had a mean streak. I mentioned my dad, how he was to John, but that's no excuse for my brother. He's been in and out of jail from as far back as I can remember. My mother is..." She took a deep breath. "She's extremely selfish and secretive and was an absentee parent for most of our lives. I hope it wasn't him breaking into your place. I hope that he hasn't tried to suck you dry, but I fear... Which is why I've called. If it is him, you may or may not have noticed money missing already. He'd start small. A few dollars, maybe hundred at first. Then, if you didn't notice it, thousands." She paused. "God, if he has had an entire year..." She dropped off.

"Thank you," he said, breaking the silence.

"I'm just outside of Portland, by the way. If—when—you find out if it was John," Faith added.

"Faith?" he said, suddenly feeling a kinship with the woman. "Thanks for calling me."

"Sure. I only wish I'd known about you sooner. I wish..." There was another pause. "I'm sorry if it was my brother. I hope they catch him. I hope he hasn't hurt or bothered you too much. If you need anything, here's my number."

She rattled it off, but since it had registered when she'd called, he already had it.

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate the warning."

"It was nice talking to you. You sound like him, but... nicer," she added with a chuckle. "If you need me..."

"I'll call," he said, before hanging up.

He sat there, looking at the phone and thinking. After a while, he picked up the phone and called Faith's ex-boyfriend, who answered on the second ring.

Ten minutes later, Bryan had walked him through scanning his laptop for the software he had called Basement.

Ryder remembered the folder Nick had sent to Josh and held in a groan.

Apparently, what the software did was connect your financial accounts to a bogus trade or stock company account. Then it would add a small purchase to each transaction you made. Each day's pennies or even dollars would be moved from the holder's accounts. Because of the way the software was written, each transaction would show up as either an accounting error or a fee of sorts.

"Most of us didn't even realize we were missing money. I'm very meticulous when it comes to my finances, being basically broke, but still, John got almost two grand from me over the six months that I was seeing Faith," Bryan said while they waited for the search on Ryder's laptop to finish.

Ryder already knew that the file was there, even before the search completed. His stomach rolled as his anger grew.

"It's there, isn't it?" Bryan asked.

"Yeah, how do I delete it?"

"You don't," Bryan jumped in. "If you do, he'll be onto you. I'm going to give you a guys contact. He works for the FBI. They have an ongoing case against John."

"Can I at least tell how much he's gotten and when it was installed?" he asked Bryan.

The man walked him through finding out when the software was installed.

To Ryder's surprise, it had been installed on his laptop roughly a week before he had left Seattle.

After getting the FBI's contact information from Bryan, he thought about the missing money from Mark's department again and ran the scan on his work PC. The one Mark had

been using for the past year. Sure enough, it was there. The software had been installed almost a full year earlier.

“It looks like John saw an opportunity,” Bryan added. “I’m really sorry, man. It’s taken me months to come to terms with the fact I’ll never see that money again.”

“Thanks,” he told the guy. “Are you in IT security?”

“Yeah, I work for a company called Internal Security,” Bryan told him.

“Josh Williams’s business?” he asked, surprised. What a small world.

“Yeah.” Bryan chuckled. “Best job I’ve ever had.”

“Are you out of the Pride office?” Ryder asked.

“Nope, I’m in Portland. Gotta love working from home,” he said with a chuckle.

“Bryan, I think you just helped me make up my mind to switch my firm’s security needs over to Internal Security,” he joked.

“Too bad I don’t get a commission,” the man said with a laugh.

“So why would he need to get his hands on my computer again? I mean if the software does all that on its own...” Ryder asked.

The man was quiet for a moment. “He would have installed an encryption key on it. You said you hadn’t been home for a while. If he had access to the machine last year, he might have gotten spooked for some reason and wanted to get his hands on the key to close down shop. That’s the only reason I can think of for him wanting it. Is there anything you’ve done that could have spooked him?”

Ryder thought about his return to Seattle. Thought about firing Mark. Hell, there was so much he’d done in the past month that would have someone stealing from him spooked.

After hanging up with him, he called the number for the FBI contact and spoke in great length with an Agent

Blackfeather. By the time he hung up the phone, it was past ten and there were several messages from Brook.

He'd sent a few text messages to her, telling her that he'd be late. The texts were her response and an image of her and Willy snuggled up on the sofa, watching television while eating popcorn. The fact that his dog had on a T-shirt and bunny ears had him laughing the entire drive home.

They were both fast asleep when he quietly undressed and crawled into bed. Brook moaned and snuggled into his chest when he pulled her closer.

"Okay?" she asked with a mumble.

"Yes, sleep. We can talk in the morning." He quickly shut down himself.

When he woke, it was to the smell of bacon. He opened his eyes and smiled at the plate Brook held in front of his face.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Starved," he groaned, sitting up. "I forgot to eat dinner," he said as she set the plate down on his lap.

"I figured." She ran her eyes over him. "There's no chance you'd be able to go back to sleep after eating, is there?"

He thought about everything he and the agent had discussed and shook his head.

As he ate, he filled Brook in on everything he'd learned the day before. Everything Faith had told him and what he and Bryan had found, plus what the FBI agent had planned in order to catch his brother.

She sat beside him, looking shocked, saddened, and angry. All of the emotions he felt himself.

"What does he look like?" Brook asked when he was done speaking.

"The agent?" he asked, confused. "It's a woman." It was obvious his mind wasn't working due to the lack of sleep. After all, he'd only gotten a few hours.

“Your brother,” she corrected. “Did your sister send you a picture?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I... forgot to ask.”

“Maybe,” Brook said, pulling out her phone and doing a quick search. Then she frowned and looked at him. “Nothing. I couldn’t find anything on John Reginald.”

He thought about it. “Search for Faith Reginald. I know a lot of guys who don’t have social media accounts. But women... they tend to share pictures of family.”

Brook gasped, then turned her screen towards him. “He looks like you,” she said in a soft voice.

Ryder’s eyes narrowed slightly as he scanned the image of the man. The image was obviously several years old and too grainy to show many details but, sure, he could see the resemblance. It was due to the graininess that he knew why the guy looked familiar.

“Son of a bitch.” He took her phone and jumped out of bed. “Son of a bitch!” he said again and he walked to the closet to get dressed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brook had no real clue what was going on. It had been almost two weeks since Faith had contacted Ryder and, currently, the house was full of people from Ryder's company.

She was wearing a long blue cocktail dress and low heels. Her long hair was curled and pushed off to one side, showcasing the tan she'd been working on each day, lying by the pool with Willy.

Ryder had decided to host an elaborate going-away party before everything in the home was either packed up or sold. They were due back in Pride in two days so they could meet with Parker on the first phase of the remodel.

She walked around the home, happily playing host and meeting and talking with everyone that worked for Ryder.

She knew that there were about a dozen FBI agents in the house, most of whom were dressed as waitstaff or had mixed in with the crowd.

The FBI had decided to set a trap for Johnathan Reginald.

Currently, only two people at the company knew that Johnathan was Ryder's younger brother. The first was Lindsey Jackson, head of the accounting department. She was working closely with the FBI on compiling the evidence. The other was Kelly Larchwood, Ryder's secretary, who had made all of the arrangements for the party.

Brook had met both of the women prior to today's events and liked each of them.

According to Lindsey's calculations, John Reginald had gotten away with more than a quarter of a million dollars from Gallant Industries over the last year. He'd taken twice that from Ryder's personal accounts.

Ryder had cursed himself a fool for not watching his accounts when he was on the road.

The fact that most of the money had been taken from Ryder personally made sense since he'd been out of touch for most of the yearlong hiatus. It was probably harder to keep the lost money from a firm that had an entire accounting department watching every penny.

Lindsey had been really good at matching every cent to where it belonged. Going back over everything, she realized that every dime that had been stolen from the business had been marked as transfer fees by one department head. Mark Lindgren.

Mark wasn't at the party that day. Not only because he'd been fired when he'd punched Ryder, but because he was sitting in a federal jail cell awaiting arraignment.

Ryder let a few fake rumors spread that Mark had moved out of the city after he was fired. If John had any connections to Mark, that rumor would cover his absence.

So far Mark hadn't exposed to the FBI just how he knew John or even if he'd helped the man in any way, other than covering up the missing money, a move that could have easily been to cover his own ass rather than to help John in any way.

She had never seen Ryder's brother personally, but now understood how he'd gained control of Ryder's laptop and the rest of the systems at Gallant the year before. It was easy when you were hired as head of the IT department, which he had been, shortly before Ryder took off. It didn't help Mark's case that he'd been the one who had hired John.

Thanks to her cousin Nick, they understood how John had gained access to their house. After the night of the break-in, Ryder's neighbor had security cameras and a motion sensor

installed on their dock so that no one could sneak onto Hunt's Point from their property again.

Ryder and the FBI had been careful in the week and half prior to ensure that John wouldn't get spooked and disappear before they could catch him. They had been busy compiling all the evidence and trying to get enough to make the arrest.

John had covered his tracks very well. If not for the information that he was Ryder's brother, they would have never even looked at the man. He had been hired under the name Paul White, not John Reginald.

That was another ding against Mark. The application in the company's files had so many holes in it.

The FBI were going off the assumption that John needed Ryder's computer to gain access to Bitcoin funds through the encrypted key.

They believed that once he had it, he would disappear. They'd been watching the man's every move.

She didn't know why they believed he'd make his move during the party but figured she could at least enjoy the guests.

The FBI agents had pulled encrypted files from all of the workstations. More than a dozen other employees at the firm had been hit with the software. They were still trying to calculate just how much money John had gotten his hands on.

Ryder had opened other bank accounts and had moved most of his funds over to the new ones so that the amount being siphoned from his other accounts was limited and controlled. They didn't want the cash flow to cease, just slow, so they didn't tip off John.

The FBI was sure that they had enough evidence against him, if they could get proof that he was the one after the laptop.

They believed this move against Ryder was a very personal one.

Thankfully, Ryder's laptop was now in the custody of the FBI. There was a duplicate laptop sitting in the middle of

Ryder's home office desk as a trap.

It had taken some doing, but thanks to John leaving the encrypted key on Ryder's computer, the FBI had access to every penny that had been stolen from him and moved to the Bitcoin account, about a hundred thousand dollars. The rest had been deposited into other various accounts. All of which could be seized after John was in custody.

Currently, there were more than a hundred people coming and going in the massive house, including staff and caterers.

She'd been assured that there were hidden cameras zeroed in on the fake laptop. Despite knowing this, Brook kept stealing glances towards the office. She kept wondering when or if the man would make his move.

Ryder had told her privately that if John had presented himself to him last year, Ryder would have seen to it that he had gotten his fair share of their father's estate.

Ryder had plans to meet Faith, his half-sister, on their trip back down to Pride. They had talked to her over the phone a few times since her initial call. Brook couldn't wait to meet the woman.

But before she and Ryder could head back to Pride, they had to catch John. They couldn't start their new life together with that fear looming over them.

Brook couldn't wait to head back to Pride and leave all this craziness behind. She wanted to spend her time picking out paint colors and curtains and rugs. Turning her dream castle into her dream home with Ryder.

She was daydreaming about how life was going to be for them when she felt something sharp poke her just under her left shoulder blade.

"Easy," a deep voice said directly behind her. "Let's take a drive." A hand gripped her upper arm, and she was shoved towards the hallway that led to the garage.

She made a move to get away, but the knife that was poking her dug deeper into her skin. She heard the material on

her dress slice open and felt a trickle of blood ooze down her side. Instantly, her stomach rolled at that thought.

Glancing around, she realized that she'd lost track of Ryder. Lost track of... well, anyone who could help her. She was surrounded by a room full of strangers. How could she be so alone in the crowd?

Faith was correct, John and Ryder sounded a lot alike. That thought had her shivering.

They made it to the end of the hallway, John half dragging her as they went, and were standing just outside the doorway to the garage when Ryder appeared at the end of the hallway.

“Let her go,” Ryder growled as he rushed towards them.

The arms that had been holding her disappeared quickly as Ryder plowed into the other man, knocking them both down to the marble floor. Their flying bodies took out the small glass table and flower vase.

The loud crash as the glass shattered caused everyone to rush over and see what was going on. Agents appeared, guns drawn, as the two men fought for control.

Brook noticed a long knife sitting amongst the shattered glass and held onto the wall when she saw the drip of blood. Her eyes turned back to the men, and she winced when John's fist plowed into Ryder's gut. But then Ryder swung out, connecting his fist to John's jaw, and the man's body went limp.

Ryder left the unconscious man on the floor and rushed over to her. His arms wrapped around her body, holding her tight. Her knees went weak, and she was pretty sure she would have slipped to the floor if not for his hold on her.

“Are you okay? He didn't hurt you?” he asked as his eyes ran over her.

“I...” She blinked a few times.

“She's bleeding,” someone said directly beside her.

Ryder jerked back, and Brook frowned as he looked down at his blood-soaked hands. She watched, as if in slow motion,

as a thick stream of blood oozed from the spot John had held a knife to her skin.

This time, her knees did buckle as her vision swam and swirled. Her stomach lurched but she swallowed the bile and closed her eyes.

How many years had she had to learn to control this? She was being stupid. She knew the cut wasn't bad. It wasn't about the pain. She'd felt worse. Broken bones and bruises she could deal with.

No, what she couldn't stand was the sight of blood. It was the reason she'd failed all her tests in the coast guard. Hemophobia had been the sole reason she was stuck working in her mother's bakery instead of being alongside her father, saving lives.

"Easy." Ryder's voice was close, and she tried to focus on it as her body became weightless.

"I'm sorry," she said over and over as Ryder cleaned and bandaged up the cut in the downstairs bathroom.

He stopped cleaning the cut and looked up at her. "Don't be sorry. I shouldn't have ever let him get that close to you."

She closed her eyes. "Ryder, I—"

"I love you." He placed his lips on hers. "That's all that matters," he said against her mouth. "Nothing else comes close."

She changed into a pair of comfortable cotton pants and a flowing blouse that Ryder had retrieved from upstairs.

By the time they walked out of the bathroom, only a handful of agents and cleaning staff were left in the house.

"What happened to John?" she asked after Ryder handed her a glass of water.

"Sit." He motioned to the chair. "I'll go find out."

Shortly after Ryder had disappeared, one of the female agents sat next to her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

“Better.” She took another sip of the water.

“We’ve got an ambulance standing by if you need to be looked over.”

“No.” Brook shook her head. “Really, it was just a scratch. Ryder cleaned and dressed it. I’m okay.”

The woman nodded. “They’ve taken John Reginald into custody. Hearing that, Mark Lindgren has cut a deal in exchange for a lighter sentence.”

Brook turned towards the woman. She remembered seeing her earlier, but now, she really looked at her.

She was roughly Brook’s age and around her own height and build. Her long straight black hair and deeper skin tone were an obvious hint of her American Indian heritage.

“I’m Dakota Blackfeather.” She held out her hand. “I’m the lead agent. I’ve been working this case for almost a full year. Ever since I was contacted by Bryan Ericson and Faith Reginald.”

Brook shook the woman’s hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

The woman’s smile slipped a little. “I’m sorry that my agents allowed John to slip in and hurt you.” She motioned to Brook’s side.

“No apology needed. How did he get in?”

“There you are. I was just looking for you to get an update,” Ryder said. He shook Dakota’s hand.

“I was just filling Brook in,” Dakota said to Ryder.

When Ryder sat beside Brook, Dakota finished telling them how John had attacked the agent standing guard in the garage. He had once again slipped onto the point by means of one of the neighbor’s properties. This time, they had found a small motorboat three docks down at a property that was closed up for the summer.

“For all the security on the Point, this is the second time someone’s broken in,” Ryder said with a sigh. “I guess it’s a

good thing we're leaving soon," he said to Brook.

"Ryder's filled me in on your new place in Pride," Dakota said just as her phone rang. Before answering, she held out her hand. "It was nice meeting you," she said to Brook.

Brook shook her hand. "If you're ever in Pride..."

Dakota nodded and smiled, then stepped away to answer the phone.

Just watching the woman suddenly made Brook feel inadequate. All those years she'd trained to work with the coast guard. Sure, she couldn't pass that one last test, thanks to her hemophobia. But over the past few years, she'd allowed that excuse to stop her from doing other great things.

With her training, she could do or be anything. So she couldn't be active duty and out on the water with the rest of the crew. That didn't stop her from doing other things. But what?

"Are you okay?" Ryder asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"I..." She took a deep breath. "I think I want a change."

She watched his eyebrows shoot up, and a worried look cross behind his eyes. "A change?"

She took his hand, then tugged on his arm until he followed her out to the quiet backyard.

Willy followed them outside and rushed to chase some birds out of the yard.

Sitting down, she held onto Ryder's hand.

"I need a career change. For as long as I could remember, I've wanted to follow in my father's footsteps."

"Coast guard?" Ryder asked, then his frown grew.

"Yes, but I could never pass the first aid portion of the exams, thanks to my hemophobia." She sighed. "I let that stop me from doing other things. I've always felt like if I couldn't get what I'd wanted my entire life, then..." She shrugged. "I fell into a pattern. I guess it was easy for me to work with my mother instead. It paid the bills and was, well, easy." She

chuckled. “But I want more of a challenge now.” She turned slightly towards him. “I plan on being very busy for the next year, remodeling and making our home.” His smile grew. “But when that’s done, I’d like to start something new. I don’t know what just yet, but...” She took a deep breath.

“Hey.” He pulled her close. “Whatever it is you decide. I’ll...” He stopped and looked over as Willy plopped down at their feet. “Correction, *we’ll* be right beside you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The following morning, they headed down the coast with their bags packed in the van. The rest of their things, everything Brook had deemed worthy to move, would be carefully packed up and shipped by the moving company.

All of the cars had been sold and shipped out. The Bugatti was going to a buyer overseas and was being shipped later that week.

They had accepted an offer on the house on Hunt's Point and would close in the coming month.

The board of directors had agreed to allow him to act as CEO and run the business from Pride. He had three months to prove to them he could make it work.

He knew that he'd have to head back to the city once in a while, which is why they had decided to keep his sea plane, which was being flown to Pride by a hired pilot and parked at the town's docks for now.

His life in Seattle was finally at an end.

Later that week, he planned on trading in the travel van for a truck. The beast had served him and Willy well over the past year. He was going to miss it. But his wandering days were over.

Brook mentioned that there were several good dealers in Edgeview, a town near Pride. They talked about heading there once they were settled so they could pick out a truck that would suit their needs better.

He couldn't wait to get back to the small town. It was strange. His entire life, he'd lived in cities. But after last year, he'd become accustomed to the quiet and the slower pace of the country.

He parked the van at a restaurant by the river in Portland where they were going to meet his half-sister, Faith.

A wave of nerves hit him the moment they stepped into the restaurant.

He hadn't even really given his brother a second glance. After all, the man had done so much damage that Ryder didn't even want to think about him. But meeting Faith meant more to him, even if they weren't full siblings.

"Hey." Brook took his hand. "I'm right here." She leaned up on her toes and kissed him.

"Ryder?"

They turned and saw Faith walking towards them.

John hadn't looked like him, he'd looked like his father. Ryder had always wondered if he'd taken after his mother more than his dad. Here was the proof of that.

His sister's features were so like his, it was instantly obvious they were related.

He rushed to meet her and wrapped his arms around her as she cried against his chest.

"You... we..." She laughed. "I've been looking at pictures, but I had no idea how alike we looked," Faith said when she finally pulled back.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I always knew I hadn't taken after my old man."

Faith nodded. "John?"

"Looked just like him. It was a wonder I didn't pick up on it earlier." He shrugged.

"We have a table." Faith motioned, then turned to Brook and held out her hand.

Brook surprised her by hugging her. “Thank you,” Brook said softly. “This could have gone on a lot longer if you hadn’t contacted Ryder.”

Faith smiled and then they followed her to a private table overlooking the water.

“I don’t know how much you know about our mother’s family,” Faith started after they had all ordered drinks.

“Nothing,” Ryder admitted. “Just that I came from good stock. Or so my father once told me. I don’t even know her maiden name.”

“Reginald was my father’s last name. My mother kept it after his death, but she was born Grace Lenore Montague,” Faith answered.

Brook gasped as Ryder stiffened.

“Montague?” he asked.

Faith nodded. “Yes. Now that I know you exist and who you are... I’ve sort of been stalking you,” she said with a nervous giggle. “Trying to catch up on the twenty-some years we’ve missed together. First things first, Edith is a third cousin of ours. But still, if you think about it, it’s a good thing you called the wedding off.”

“Yeah.” He relaxed a little. “Still, it really pisses me off that dad knew. It makes me wonder why he pushed the wedding despite it.”

“Who knows.” Faith shrugged. “Second thing you should know.” She glanced over her shoulder and nodded. “My mother found out about our meeting.” Ryder tensed. “She’s at the bar.” Faith motioned with her head to the bar area behind Ryder’s shoulder. “She says that if you want, she’s there. If not, you can simply ignore her, and she won’t be hurt.” Faith lowered her voice. “She’s been crying nonstop since she told me about you. She keeps worrying you’ll sue her for breach of the gag order she signed during the divorce with your father. She may be a member of the Montague family, but she’s a black sheep. She’s been divorced and doesn’t conform to the family’s image.” Faith sighed and looked over his shoulder

again. “She tries to fit in. Really. Like I said, she wasn’t the best parent, but since my father’s death, she’s been trying harder.”

Ryder could see Brook looking over his shoulder but he had yet to turn around and get a look at the woman. He had no memories of her. Nothing.

All his life, he’d believed that if she’d loved him, she would have fought for him. She would have hunted him down and tried to be part of his life.

Then he thought about her leaving after the divorce—single, pregnant, worried that his father would swoop in and take away that baby as well. Something he could totally see his father doing without even blinking an eye.

And maybe if his father had taken John away from Grace, he would have ended up better off. Or maybe it would have just fueled his psycho behavior further. Either way, looking at it now, he could see that his mother’s actions had all been because she’d been afraid.

His father had lots of money and power and if she’d been turned away by her family, she would have been all alone. The hate and hurt he felt towards her had dwindled in the past year and especially in the past few days. It was still there, but was far less than it had been in his youth.

He stood up and made his way across the room.

She was younger looking than he’d imagined. Maybe it was because his father had always looked old. Even when Ryder had been younger, his father appeared ancient. He had been almost fifty when Ryder had come along. His mother must have been in her twenties or thirties when he’d been born.

Her sandy blonde hair color matched Faith’s but was cut and styled in a shorter fashion. She was wearing black slacks that hugged a very fit figure, and she wore a white blouse with long sleeves. The jewelry that flashed around her neck and wrists could have been real, but something told him that she didn’t care one way or another.

As tears streamed down her face, he engulfed her in his arms and allowed her to cry against his shoulder.

“My boy,” she kept saying over and over. “My boy.”

What would it have been like if she'd been in his life? If he'd grown up knowing about his brother John and his half-sister Faith? Could he have stopped the criminal activity and eventual downfall of his brother?

Then he realized that if that had happened, he most likely wouldn't have taken his yearlong trip and met Brook.

Glancing over his mother's head, he saw Brook wipe the tears from her eyes as she smiled at him.

No matter what, one thing was clear. He wouldn't wish away that chance meeting a couple of months ago on that stormy beach. Brook was his life now. Everything he wanted was because of her.

He had no future if she wasn't in it.

Pulling back, he smiled down at his mother. Here, as with Faith, he could see the similarities.

“Would you like to join us? I'd like to introduce you to the woman I'm going to marry,” he added with a smile.

“Oh,” his mother gasped, and then she wiped her face with her hands. “I'd like that very much.”

He took her hand and walked with her back towards their table. He held out a chair for her and then sat down next to her.

Looking around to the three women watching him, he realized how full his life felt versus how empty it had been last year at this time. How could so much change so quickly?

He'd questioned his sanity over the last year whenever he'd fallen off a wave or spent a lonely night with only a dog as company. Now, however, he realized that he'd been searching for something he hadn't known was possible. Finding love was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

The four of them talked for more than two hours. Only after he'd promised to stay in contact and after Brook had

invited them down to Pride for a visit, did they finally climb back into the van and continue their journey towards home.

“Well?” Brook asked him once they were on the highway.

“Yeah,” he sighed, rolling his shoulders. “Is it possible to be exhausted because of too many emotions?”

“Yes,” she said, taking his hand. Willy nudged their joined fingers until they both gave him attention, and they laughed.

It was nice having someone he loved more than anything to talk to on the trip back to Pride.

The two-hour trip flew by and just as the sun was starting to sink, they pulled onto Ocean View.

“I thought we’d stop here first,” he suggested.

He’d arranged for Parker to deliver some things and had every intention of spending their first night back in Pride in their new home together. He knew they’d have to stay in her small cottage until most of the big work was done. They couldn’t even turn on the electricity until all of the wiring was checked and inspected.

“I was hoping you’d say that. I’ve been dying to see the place again,” Brook said cheerfully.

As they parked, they looked out over the view. There was a low layer of clouds hovering just above the surface of the water, but above the fog, the night sky was clear and filled with so many bright colors, he doubted anyone had enough skill to paint it. He could even just make out the first twinkles of stars appearing.

“Wow,” Brook said with a sigh. “I think it’s welcoming us home.”

He smiled at her. “Then let’s not disappoint.” He opened his door and waited until Willy jumped out before rushing over to help Brook out. He took her hand, but then stopped and went back to get her jacket.

“It’s a little chilly,” he said as he slipped on his own light hoody.

“We only have a few more weeks of summer,” she said, zipping her own jacket. Then she took his hand. “Let’s take a walk first.”

He nodded and pulled her to the path that headed towards the beach below.

She stopped at the top of the hill and gasped. “You had the stairs fixed?”

He smiled. “Parker’s been working all week to get this done in time.” He pulled her into his arms. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” She laughed when he spun her around in his arms. “I love you,” she yelled happily.

He set her feet back on the ground, then dropped to one knee and pulled out the ring box that he’d shoved in his hoody pocket.

“It’s time,” he said with a smile. “Time that I told you and showed you just how much you mean to me. Time I gave you more than just my heart.” He held up the ring. “You’re my everything. I can’t imagine another day without you in it. I want to give you everything I have, everything I am. I want to grow old with you. Here.” He motioned to the house behind them. “I want to spend the rest of our lives getting to know one another, learning just how much joy and fun we can create.” He took a deep breath as tears rolled down her cheeks. “Will you marry me, Brook?”

“Yes,” she said, kneeling in front of him and wrapping her arms around him as they kissed. “Yes,” she said again when he slipped his grandmother’s floral ring smoothly onto her finger.

EPILOGUE

Brook stood on the deck of the *Calypso* on the opening day of her new business and smiled. There were at least six students standing on the dock, listening to her instructions.

Even though it was only a part-time gig, she didn't mind. She had a million other things that ate up her time. Finishing the house being the biggest.

Most of her time was taken up with planning the remodel. Not to mention making sure everything was ready for her and Ryder's wedding, which was less than five months away.

They'd left the past behind them in Seattle. Ryder's brother John had been tried and convicted a month after he'd been captured.

Mark had been cleared of most of the charges when it had come to light that he'd been blackmailed by John, who had found incriminating data on his computer about his many affairs. Mark had agreed to look the other way about the missing money in exchange for John keeping his secrets from his wife.

The money John had siphoned had been found and returned except for a hundred thousand dollars. Ryder had decided to eat that so all of his employees could get every penny of their own money back. Just one more reason she loved him so much.

But that was all in their past.

Today was all about her future.

This was the first day of her new business. A business that she had come up with and had started herself. Pride's one and only sailing and boat safety school.

Okay, so it wasn't the coast guard. But with any luck, what she taught here would help save people's lives.

How many tourists or younger kids ended up in bad situations on the water because they didn't know the basics? She'd grown up hearing about all the times that her father had to rescue someone for doing something stupid on the water.

Well, this was her chance to knock that number down.

She loved the water. No matter what time of year it was. Even now, with the cold winter wind blowing in over the water, she had a smile plastered on her face as she taught her half dozen students.

This was hers. Something she could be proud of. Something she'd dreamed of her entire life. Getting paid to be out on the water.

Her first class was her introductory sailing class. Her students included a couple of townspeople she'd known her entire life. Some had always dreamed of learning how to sail, a few others were afraid of the water and just wanted to overcome their fears. The last student... she glanced towards Ryder and smiled. Well, he just wanted to learn how to sail so he could be with her on the water and so that next summer, they could take off on their dream honeymoon.

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<http://JillSanders.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jill Sanders is a New York Times, USA Today, and international bestselling author of Sweet Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, Western Romance, and Paranormal Romance novels. With over 90 books in eleven series, translations into several different languages, and audiobooks there's plenty to choose from. Look for Jill's bestselling stories wherever romance books are sold or visit her at jillsanders.com

Jill comes from a large family with six siblings, including an identical twin. She was raised in the Pacific Northwest and later relocated to Colorado for college and a successful IT career before discovering her talent for writing sweet and sexy page-turners. After Colorado, she decided to move south, living in Texas and now making her home along the Emerald Coast of Florida.

You will find that the settings of several of her series are inspired by her time spent living in these areas. She has two sons and off-set the testosterone in her house by adopting three furry little ladies that provide her company while she's locked in her writing cave. She enjoys heading to the beach, hiking, swimming, wine-tasting, and pickleball with her husband, and of course writing. If you have read any of her books, you may also notice that there is a love of food, especially sweets! She has been blamed for a few added pounds by her assistant, editor, and fans... donuts or pie anyone?

