ASH KELLER

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SUITED FOR IONE

A STICKS & STONES ROM COM

Suited for Love

A Sweet Romantic Comedy

Ash Keller

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Author's contact: https://www.ashkeller.com

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Free Gift

For exclusive access to *Christmas Blind Date: A Sweet Romantic Comedy*, join <u>Ash Keller's VIP Reader's Club</u>!

Lucy Murphy is convinced that Murphy's Law is not only real, but a family curse. So, agreeing to a blind date on Christmas Eve is probably a *really* bad idea.



Christmas Blind Date is a sweet romantic comedy, suitable for readers looking for a clean & wholesome read. It's a standalone story with a happy ending. Get your free gift!

Chapter 1

Margo

"I WANT TO SEE more sweat!" The perky instructor screams like a banshee, thrusting her hips from side to side.

More sweat? I already look like I jumped into a swimming pool with my clothes on.

Glaring at her, I force my body to keep moving. Her smile hasn't slipped once as she sadistically demands perspiration. *She can't be human*.

I run through a list of monsters in my head, trying to decide what she is. I come up blank, unable to think of any rumored to look like Elle Woods with a jingle-bell belt.

A Zumba belt, Briony explained before class as she fastened one around her own waist. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that she's shaking her hips with all she's got, like she's one of those hula-girl figurines truckers stick to their dashboards.

Somehow, Briony manages to look flawless despite the sheen of sweat coating her pale skin. Regular trips to the salon keep her fashionable silver bob looking perfect. She's quick to tell people she believes in aging *gracefully*, not *naturally*. That means camouflaging her gray hair with stylish silver dye and frequent visits to the spa for Botox injections.

She catches my eye and shimmies in my direction. Nodding toward the instructor, she shouts, "I told you this class was the best!"

I'm too out of breath to respond, so I nod. Why did I let her drag me to her Advanced Zumba class?

Oh, right. Because she's the boss.

Briony Kelly may not sign the checks at Boutique Chrysalis, but she's the most powerful woman in the company. Boutique Chrysalis is known for having its finger on the pulse of the fashion industry. We don't chase trends; we *set* them. As Executive Buyer, nothing is sold in one of our stores without Briony's seal of approval. There's not a single designer in New York, London, or Paris who doesn't know her name.

As a junior buyer hoping to move up in the company, that means I jump when she says to jump. *Or shake my hips, as the case may be.*

As I clomp along with the music, trying my best *not to die*, I look around the room. It's filled with fit and wealthy New Yorkers in designer athleisure wear, shaking their hips with all their might, jingle-bell belts ringing. As they shimmy across the floor, they look like human tambourines.

And I'm a bass drum. I trip over my own feet as the instructor adds an extra step to an already complicated

combination.

"You know what sweat is, right?" she shouts. "It's your fat cells crying. So, cry me a river!"

Feeling like I could *drink* a river, I flail around madly in an attempt to keep up with the steps. I give up on shaking my hips and settle for trying my best to keep moving. I silently pray that the class is almost over.

The song moves seamlessly into the next, and I try not to whimper. Have I stumbled into the *Hotel California* of gyms?

I am never leaving this class. Ever.

With a malevolent grin, the instructor makes another demand for sweat. I stare at her in disbelief. She can't be serious. I have no more sweat to give. I'm all out of sweat.

On the brink of heat exhaustion, I'm saved by an Ed Sheeran ballad. My heartbeat slows along with the tempo, and I'm no longer gasping for air. I could maybe even carry on a conversation if my mouth wasn't dry as chalk.

Mercifully, the class finally ends. I guzzle a bottle of water to replenish the liquid in my body. From the corner of my eye, I see the instructor speed-walking toward me. Her ponytail bounces with every step. I swear, this lady could give the Energizer Bunny a run for his money.

She opens her mouth and I flinch, expecting the banshee. Instead, her voice is sympathetic. "How are you?"

"Sweaty." *Understatement*. My XL t-shirt clings to my body like a suckerfish.

She laughs. "You did really well, considering this class is for advanced students. But next time, come to my beginners class. I promise you'll still get a great workout, but it'll be a lot more fun."

Okay, so maybe she's *not* a monster. Even the Winchester brothers get it wrong sometimes. *Mental note: stop watching reruns of Supernatural*.

"Thanks," I say, returning her smile. "I probably should incorporate more cardio into my exercise routine."

"What's your current routine?"

Heat creeps into my cheeks. "Um, I occasionally stream *Yoga by Adriene* videos."

She smiles kindly and plucks a business card out of the fanny pack at her waist and hands it to me. "Check my website for class times."

Briony runs over to chat with the instructor and I take a quick peek at my phone. There are a few texts from my best friend and roommate, Cara, and a missed call from a number I don't recognize. They left a voicemail. I'm about to tap the button to hear it when Briony waves an arm to get my attention.

Sorry, mystery caller. Briony beckons. Hastily shoving my phone into my bag, I give her my full attention.

"Margo," she says, "first thing tomorrow, I'd like to see you in my office to talk shop." I nod like a bobblehead before I can rein in my excitement. "Talk shop" is one of Briony's catchphrases, and she never uses it with junior buyers. She just makes demands that we eagerly follow.

This can only mean one thing: after nine years, I'm finally being promoted to senior buyer. When she turns away, I'm tempted to jump with joy.

If my arms and legs didn't feel like Jell-O, I totally would.

Chapter 2

Tuck

THE ORANGE GLOW OF the rising sun casts shadows on my bedroom wall. I roll over to hit the snooze button, only to see that the alarm isn't set to ring for another hour.

Why am I awake? I usually sleep like the dead.

Ah. There's the culprit.

The person ringing my doorbell is either very brave—or very stupid. I'm not known for being Mr. Brightside first thing in the morning. *Or ever*.

Bleary-eyed, I force myself out of bed. Sliding my feet into flip-flops, I stumble down the narrow staircase that separates my apartment from the shop.

Can't beat the morning commute. But I'm also never really off the clock. The doorbell rings again, proving my point.

The stairs lead into the cramped breakroom at the back of the shop. Kayaks line the walls, making the tiny room even more claustrophobic. Turning sideways and sucking in my stomach, I squeeze between a giant sea kayak and a kitchen table.

After running the gauntlet, I sprint down the center aisle, past shelves of fishing lures, tackle, and hooks, to answer the door. Through the large display window, I see the chief of police, "Coop" Cooper, with his face pressed against the glass.

He's on duty, but only a local would know it. He's wearing his standard uniform: khaki pants, muck boots, and a Hawaiian-print shirt. His long, gray hair is tied back, same as always. When he's not working, he tops off the look with a floppy fishing hat adorned with gold fishhooks.

This morning, a blue ballcap is perched atop his head, emblazoned with the words FRIENDLY PD.

And tucked under his right arm is an enormous orange tabby cat.

I crack the door and squint against the first beams of sunlight. "Do you know what time it is?"

He shields his eyes and looks toward the sun, as if gauging the time of day by its position. "Seems to be morning."

"Come back later," I snarl, attempting to close the door. Coop blocks it with a booted foot.

"No can do, Keeper of Collars. Houdini needs your services."

Grumbling under my breath, I flip the cardboard sign in the window from "closed" to "open." There's no use trying to go back to bed now. The Bait Bucket may as well open for business.

Coop sits the cat on the floor and they both follow me to the checkout counter. Next to the register is a box of break-away collars. I scoop Houdini from the ground and set him on the counter.

Plucking a collar out of the box, I snap it around his neck. He shakes his head and the metallic bell tinkles melodically. Then he stares at me, his neon-yellow eyes expectant. With a sigh, I reach into another box for a cat treat and toss it to him. He gobbles it up and leaps from the counter, hunting for a stray fishing lure to bat around.

I turn my attention back to Coop. "The town needs to find another Keeper of Collars. I declined the position, remember?"

He shrugs. "You were appointed by the mayor. You'll have to take it up with her."

I blow out an exasperated puff of air. I've been taking it up with her since the day of my so-called appointment—more than five years ago. "She's the most unreasonable woman in Georgia."

Coop grins, showing all his teeth. "Your mama is a fine woman, and the best mayor Friendly's ever had."

I roll my eyes. Few people even remember a mayor before her. She's held the position for more than thirty years, since I was a boy. Coop's been chief of police just as long. Sometimes the crashing waves on the beach are the only proof that Friendly isn't frozen in time.

"Well, I'll be seeing you, Tuck." With a quick nod, he heads for the door.

"Take Houdini with you!" I look around for the cat. "Where'd he go?"

But Coop's already gone. Sighing, I begin searching the shop for the felonious feline. I never understood the term *cat burglar* until I knew Houdini. He's broken in and out of every business in town. As huge as he is, he's astoundingly stealthy. I listen for the sound of the bell on his new collar. *Silence*.

When I spot the collar in the middle of an aisle lined with fishing poles, I growl in frustration. Houdini goes through a lot of collars, but it usually takes a few days for him to break free of a new one.

The town of Friendly is a barrier island off the coast of Georgia. We're not built up like touristy beaches. There aren't high-rise hotels or swanky resorts on the island, and we like it that way. Even so, the size of our tiny town swells in the spring and summer.

Surrounded by ocean, river, and marshland, Friendly is a bird-watching mecca. To protect the birds, there are strict ordinances for pet owners. Domestic cats must be kept indoors.

Except Houdini.

It's impossible to keep him inside. Despite his immense girth, he's an impressive escape artist. Many have tried. All have failed.

After weeks of town meetings and countless hours of discussion devoted to the *Houdini Problem*, a decision was made.

Houdini can roam the streets and beaches of Friendly as its official feline mascot, and he shall be fed, watered, and loved by the entire town. And the Keeper of Collars will make sure he always wears a bell around his neck to give Friendly's beloved birds a fighting chance.

It's a big ask of the poor shmuck tasked with being the Keeper of Collars.

After searching everywhere for the cat, I deduce that he must be lurking in the breakroom. Wedging my body between the refrigerator and a kayak, I crane my neck awkwardly to look inside the watercraft.

"What on earth are you doing?"

I jump at the sound of the voice, sending the kayak crashing into the one next to it, causing a domino effect. "Look out!"

My buddy Bishop jumps out of the breakroom just before the final kayak hurtles through the doorway. It slams into a display of fishing lures. Seemingly out of thin air, Houdini appears, pawing at the packages now littering the floor.

Bishop raises an eyebrow. He's dressed for court, but loosens his tie and drags the kayak out of the doorway so he can enter. "You need more space."

I snort. "You don't say?"

He helps me stand a kayak back against the wall. "About that..."

My head whips around to look at him. "Do you have news about Hildy's Hut?"

Two years ago, I had the bright idea to add kayak rentals to my business. Unfortunately, kayaks take up a lot of space. Located next door, Hildy's Hut is the perfect solution. I made her a great offer, well above the market value. But she refused to sell.

In fact, she said she'd *die* before she'd sell. And she was true to her word.

Bishop nods. "I discovered that old Hildy died intestate."

Intestate? Coop told me she'd died of a massive heart attack, quick and without much suffering. "I hope it wasn't a painful way to go."

Bishop smirks. "It means she died without a will."

I scowl at him. "Whatever, Harvard Law. What's it mean for me?"

"The next of kin will have to be located. But it's unlikely they'll want to keep a rundown junk store, especially when there's a buyer already lined up. If I was a betting man, I'd say you'll have the keys by the end of the month." *By the end of the month.* With a satisfied smile, I continue standing the kayaks against the wall. Hopefully, for the last time.

Chapter 3

Margo

I DOLLOP A FEW scoops of yogurt into two bowls, topping them both with granola and fresh blueberries. A few minutes later, Cara joins me at the kitchen table.

"Thanks," she says, dipping a spoon into her bowl. She holds the spoon at an awkward angle, with her manicure on full display. It's the perfect pose for an ad campaign, but not so perfect for eating. I suppress a smile as she tilts her head to meet the spoon instead of the other way around. As one of the highest-paid hand models in the world, Cara uses every opportunity to train.

"What's on the agenda today?" I ask.

She smiles. "You know I can't tell you. I signed a nondisclosure agreement."

"Give me a hint." I love hearing about her work, especially when she gets to model jewelry. She was once photographed wearing a multi-million-dollar ring on each finger. All ten of them. "It's a car commercial. That's all I'll say."

My face falls in disappointment. I have no interest in cars.

Cara wags her eyebrows mischievously. "The casting director called me in at the last minute to be the hand double for an A-list actress. She's a cuticle picker. It looks atrocious."

I lean forward. "Who is it?"

"Can't tell you." A smile dances on her lips. She knows I'll watch every car commercial featuring a famous actress with suspicion now. "What's on your agenda today?"

A huge grin stretches across my face. "Briony wants to *talk shop*." I accentuate the words.

"Talk shop?" Her eyes widen. "Does that mean..."

"I think so."

Cara jumps up to do the Snoopy dance. "Why aren't you dancing?"

"I'm trying not to get my hopes up."

She raises one eyebrow, giving me her who-do-you-thinkyou're-kidding look.

Who *am* I kidding? My hopes are in the stratosphere. After nearly ten years with Boutique Chrysalis, I've earned this promotion. Once I'm a senior buyer, I'll have a stable of junior buyers to send to the trade shows and warehouses of *my* choosing. I'll be able to pitch ideas and designers directly to Briony. And I already have a binder full of exciting designers that I can't wait to show her.

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BRIONY STEEPLES HER HANDS together on her desk. Her long fingernails come to points and are lacquered with red polish. She looks prepared to gouge out a person's eyeballs. I just hope they're not mine.

I lift my hand to tuck a strand of hair behind an ear before remembering that it's no longer long enough for that. I love the pixie cut, but I'm not used to it yet. Since I can't tuck my hair, I settle for tracing the multi-colored dots on my skirt. The pattern is playful, reminding me of a Funfetti cake.

Briony's been flipping through my binder for several minutes. Her face is a blank slate, so I have no idea if she likes what she sees. With each passing second, a pit of dread cuts deeper in my gut.

When she pushes her Gucci reading glasses on top of her head and rubs her temples, I gulp. *This can't be good*.

With a sigh, she turns the binder toward me so I can see the page. Tapping a fingernail on a photograph of a gorgeous summer dress, she says, "You would select this piece for our summer collection?"

Beads of perspiration pop up on my forehead. *Is this a trick question?*

Taking a deep breath, I nod. "Yes, I would."

"Tell me why."

I sit up straighter, grateful to be back in my comfort zone. I can talk about clothes all day long. "The combination of colors and textures is innovative while also being very commercial. Everyone will want this dress. I think the only question is whether we could keep it in stock. She's a newer designer so production may be an issue."

Briony drums her nails on the desk. "You've been here nearly a decade, but you still don't understand Boutique Chrysalis."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

She purses her lips. "Everything you said is correct. And the dress is beautiful...but it's not Chrysalis. You have to learn to look past the clothes to the bigger picture." She points to the designer's mission statement. "The designer prides herself on designing for women of all shapes and sizes. She has a very strong brand focused on unity and inclusivity."

My eyebrows pull together. "Isn't that a good thing?"

Briony leans back in her chair. "Tell me, Margo, does Boutique Chrysalis sell plus-size clothes?"

Frowning, I shake my head. I wear a size fourteen and the only things I can purchase at our stores are casual shirts, skirts with elastic waistbands, and accessories. Cara can't shop at Chrysalis, either. Every penny of her modeling income is spent elsewhere. "Not currently, but..." Briony raises a sculpted eyebrow. "But you'd like to change that?"

"There are so many designers who are designing for curvy women now. We can expand the sizing at Boutique Chrysalis to..."

She holds up a hand. "Why would we do that?"

Why? *Why not*? "The average woman in the United States has a double-digit dress size. It's a huge market for Boutique Chrysalis to tap into. And with all the emerging designers, it's an exciting time for..."

"Women like you?" she interrupts.

"I was going to say *fashion*." I fight to maintain my composure despite the sour taste in my mouth. "But yes, as a plus-size woman, it's wonderful to see designers and stores carrying beautiful and stylish clothes in larger sizes."

Briony sighs dramatically. "Be that as it may, it doesn't fit the Chrysalis brand. We sell clothes to the *Chrysalis woman*. She's smart, sophisticated, and stylish. Yet she's always working to improve herself, dissatisfied with anything short of perfection."

My eyebrows draw together in confusion. What does any of that have to do with the size of a woman's clothes?

She pushes the binder toward me. "To put it simply, we're not here to dress the caterpillars."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. Briony Kelly just told me in no uncertain terms that not only am I *not* a Chrysalis woman, I'm

a lowly caterpillar.

Maybe she's right. I certainly feel as small as an inchworm right now.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, I force my eyes to meet hers. "I'm not being promoted."

"Your eye for sellable clothes is impeccable. But until you understand our brand, I can't promote you. The truth is, I don't think Boutique Chrysalis is a good fit for you."

It's not a good fit because you refuse to carry my size! Then I process the subtext of her words. My eyes snap to hers. "Are you firing me?"

"You're welcome to stay on as a junior buyer indefinitely. But I don't think there's any room left for you to grow. If you'd rather move on, I'm prepared to give you a glowing recommendation and a generous severance package."

Feeling completely blindsided, I close my eyes a moment to gather my composure. Angry tears threaten to fall, but I choke them back. "I'll take a look at the severance package."

In my purse, my phone vibrates.

Chapter 4

Margo

I'VE BEEN WHITE-KNUCKLING THE steering wheel so long that my fingers are numb. After thirteen hours in the car, I think I have a small taste of Cara's job as a hand model. Her hands always ache after a grueling day on the set.

Wiggling my fingers to get the blood moving again, I tap a button beside the steering wheel. "Call Cara."

"Calling Cara," the robotic voice responds.

She answers on the first ring. "Caught me during a prop change. Only have a minute. There yet?" Her words are rushed, but I can hear the concern in her voice.

I glance out the window at a stand of palm trees. "I'm in the home stretch." A common expression, but as I say the words, it feels like a challenge. I can almost hear the palm trees laughing. *Home? That's a stretch*...

Truth is I'm as out of place here as a palm tree in New York.

"How has the drive been?" Cara speaks loudly to cover the noise in the background.

"Stressful, but there were no major detours or accidents, thank God. I think I'd have ditched the car and walked to Georgia."

She laughs. "It's a shame you can't just hail a cab when your feet get tired."

"One of New York's many benefits," I agree. All of my doubts and fears bubble to the surface. "Have I made a huge mistake?"

"About what?"

"Leaving Boutique Chrysalis. Moving to Georgia. Starting a business. Take your pick."

There's a long pause before she speaks. "You're my best friend, and I'd love to tell you to turn the car around. I hate that you're so far away. But this opportunity is a godsend. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be an investor."

My chest swells with affection for her. "I can never thank you enough for that."

"Nonsense. It's a wise investment. Hang on..." The sound is muffled and I can picture her cradling the phone to her chest. Even so, I wince at the volume of her voice when she yells, "Coming!" She hastily speaks into the phone again. "Got to go. Text later."

And then she's gone. The sudden silence is jarring. Tears sting the backs of my eyelids, but I blink them away. Cara's right. This opportunity is a gift. After losing my job, I cried for days, ignoring all calls and messages, including those from the mystery caller. When I finally answered, a lawyer told me I'd inherited beachside property from a long-lost great-aunt that I hadn't known existed.

When one door closes, another opens.

Those were my father's last words before he died. I kissed his forehead and told him to go through the open door. But inside, I seethed with anger, not ready to say goodbye. I'd have given anything to keep that door closed—to lock it and throw away the key.

But these last few weeks, I can't get his words out of my head. If he were alive, he'd be great-aunt Hildy's heir, not me. In my heart, I believe he opened this door for me. And I can almost feel his hand on my back, gently pushing me through.

With the inheritance, Cara's investment, my severance pay, and my meager savings, Sticks & Stones Boutique was born. I will dress *all* women and carry clothes in a variety of sizes. No one will feel like a caterpillar in my store—they'll all be butterflies.

It's a dream come true.

For three weeks, contractors from Savannah and Atlanta worked to make the dream a reality. Almost none of the inventory at Hildy's Hut was usable, so it was sold, donated, or tossed. In its place, mannequins and shelves stand ready for gorgeous clothes. And the cherry on top: a spacious upstairs apartment. It couldn't be more perfect.

A flashing sign on the side of the road catches my eye. ROAD CLOSED AHEAD.

Shouldn't the GPS be rerouting me? My GPS app remains silent.

Tapping the wheel nervously, I search for a detour sign. All I see is marsh. Tufts of grass stick up from the water. A beautiful white egret sits on a mound of mud.

Half a mile later, the road is blocked by a row of orange cones. Beyond them, the road disappears, swallowed whole by the marsh. Unable to believe what I'm seeing, I step out of the car and walk past the cones for a better look.

I can't help but laugh. I told Cara if there were any major detours, I'd ditch the car and walk. But I never said anything about *swimming*.

There's a ripple on the surface of the water, barely ten feet from where I'm standing. Alligator? Anaconda? Creature from the Black Lagoon?

Shrieking, I dash back to the car and lock the doors.

What? I saw *Jurassic Park*. If velociraptors can open doors, why not alligators?

After a few deep breaths, I attempt to turn the car around, and immediately regret it. There's not room for the maneuver on the narrow, two-lane road. So, inching forward, then backward, then forward, then backward, over and over again for what seems like forever, all the while on the lookout for door-opening alligators, I'm finally heading back in the direction I came.

There's still no sign of a detour, but I spot a plank of wood tacked to a tree. "Farm fresh eggs" is scrawled across it in red spray paint, with an arrow pointed toward a gravel road.

Do I go down the scary road? I've seen enough movies to know it's a bad idea.

Seems to me I have three choices:

- 1. Follow the gravel road and pray that the person with farm-fresh eggs is a) not a homicidal maniac, b) knows how to get to Friendly, and c) will share that knowledge with me.
- 2. Swim across the marsh with the alligators.
- 3. Drive back to New York.

Despite all its caveats, number one is the best option.

The road is bumpy with potholes where the gravel has been washed away. Eventually, it dead ends at a small farmhouse. Though weathered, the house gives off a warm, homey vibe. No knives hanging from the trees, heads on spikes, or anything else that screams MURDERER.

When I knock on the door, a frail woman who appears to be in her sixties answers. Her head is wrapped in a scarf with pink Breast Cancer Awareness ribbons on it. "Hi," I say, pasting a smile onto my face, "I'm so sorry to bother you, but I'm hoping you can give me directions to Friendly?"

She tugs on an earlobe. "You were on the road to Friendly before you turned up my driveway. Just stay on that for another twenty miles or so."

I shake my head. "The road is closed. I need to find an alternate route."

"That's the only way to get in or out of Friendly—unless you've got a boat?"

"Afraid not."

"Then you're out of luck."

"So, everyone on the island is just...trapped there?"

She nods. "Happens sometimes at high tide. Nothing to do but wait it out." She walks away, leaving me standing in the doorway. After several steps, she looks over her shoulder at me and cocks an eyebrow. "You coming in or not?"

Leading me through the house to a large kitchen, she waves toward a table. "Sit a spell. I'll grab a pitcher of tea."

I pull back an old, rickety chair and hope it'll hold my weight. I breathe a sigh of relief when it doesn't collapse under me. "Thanks. Do you know much about Friendly?"

She fills two glasses with ice. "Lived there most of my life. Moved out here in '04 with my husband, may he rest in peace. My brother, Coop—he's the chief of police in Friendly—has been trying to get me to move back. But I'm happy here." She runs a hand over her headscarf. "And with all my doctor's appointments, a flooded road would be mighty inconvenient."

I watch nervously as she lifts a large pitcher out of the refrigerator, wondering if I should offer to help. But she handles it with ease, placing it in the middle of the table. Taking a seat herself, she pours the tea into glasses.

I take a sip, then reflexively spit it back into the glass, trying not to gag. Heat creeps into my cheeks as the woman watches me with a bemused expression. "I'm sorry. It's a bit sweeter than I'm used to."

She shakes her head. "You must be the New Yorker taking over Hildy's Hut."

My eyes snap to hers in surprise. "Yes, that's right. My name is Margo Sterling."

"Carlinya Cooper." She reaches for my glass. "Are you going to drink this?"

I shake my head vigorously before realizing that may hurt her feelings. I plaster a smile on my face. "I'm not thirsty right now but thank you."

"Waste not, want not." She pours my tea back into the pitcher. *Gross*.

Staring at my now-empty glass, I'm glad I didn't drink more of it.

"At the town meeting," Carlinya continues, "Mayor Tuck said that Coop said that your contractors said that you said you'd be here *next* week."

"They talked about my store at the town meeting?" I can't keep the excitement out of my voice. I'm thrilled to hear that there's already buzz about Sticks & Stones in the town.

"In a manner of speaking." She glances away, not meeting my eyes. "I reckon you ought to know, though I sure hate to be the one to tell you...folks ain't real happy about you coming to town."

My eyes widen in shock. "Why? They don't even know me."

"Exactly."

I wait for Carlinya to expand on her statement, but she doesn't. "I don't understand."

She shrugs. "It's a small town. Folks support their own. And the mayor's son owns the shop next to yours. The Bait Bucket."

"I assume that's some sort of fishing shop?"

"Yep."

I shake my head in confusion. "But why is that a problem? My business won't compete with his."

Carlinya dissolves into a fit of laughter. "No, I wouldn't think so," she wheezes. Wiping tears from her eyes, she apologizes. "I haven't laughed that hard in ages. Just the thought of those smelly, old fishermen in a women's clothing store..."

"But if that's not the issue, what is?"

She takes a big drink of her tea. "He had plans for Hildy's Hut. Wanted it for his own business."

"I see."

I do...and the picture isn't pretty.

I'm moving to a town full of people who don't want me there—and I'll be trapped with them at high tide. *Fabulous*.

Chapter 5

Tuck

AS I CLIMB THE wooden ramp over the dunes, my tackle bag bounces on my hip. In one hand, I carry a fishing pole. In the other, a thermos of coffee.

When I reach the top of the dune, the sun is rising out of the Atlantic, an orange globe of light floating on the water. It's surreal.

Not for the first time, I wish I was a morning person. Alas, I am not. *But there's no denying the beauty of that sunrise.*

Stopping at the bottom of the dune to kick off my shoes, I take another sip of coffee before sinking my toes into the cool sand. At the water's edge, Bishop casts a line. Hardly a day goes by that my friend doesn't start his day by fishing at dawn.

He has four fishing pole holders planted in the sand at intervals, with two lines already in the water. He walks back to me with a third pole in his hands and drops it into the third holder. *Make that three lines in the water*.

"Where's the fourth pole?" I ask.

He grins. "You're holding it."

"You put that one out for me?"

"Always do, on the off chance you'll show up. You do, once a decade or so."

I look at him skeptically. "Once a decade or so? Doesn't seem worth the trouble of hauling it to the beach every day."

He chuckles. "You got me. It's not *only* for you. Anyone who shows up is welcome to use it. Jared uses it a couple times a month. And once in a blue moon, your sister does."

I groan. All my loved ones are morning people, even my seventeen-year-old nephew, Jared. "What about my mother? Does she use it too?"

He ignores me. Everyone knows the mayor doesn't fish.

"Did you happen to bring me a chair, too?"

He gestures toward his cart. "In there."

I pull out a chair and set it up beside his. Then I walk to the water's edge to cast my line. The cool water licks at my calves as I whip the rod back for the cast. It arcs high into the air before landing exactly where I intended.

Bishop whistles. "Nice cast."

We sit in amiable silence and watch the poles for any movement. Every now and then, we reel in the lines to make sure the hooks and bait are still there. The pelicans swoop down to hunt for breakfast. They're far more successful in their fishing attempts than we are, flapping their wings to soar into the sky once they catch their meal.

Bishop glances at his watch and swears. "Lost track of time. Court is in less than an hour. Can you haul the gear back for me?"

"Will do. With you gone, maybe the fish will start biting."

The sun is high enough in the sky to warm my skin. I shed my hoodie and kick back in my chair. The breeze off the ocean is a bit nippy, but it's growing warmer every day. In just a couple of weeks, it'll be warm enough to swim. A couple of weeks after that and the summer tourists will start to arrive.

I spot a dolphin and follow it with my eyes as it swims down the beach.

Then I see *her*.

She's a stranger, which isn't uncommon in the summer months, or even in winter, when bird enthusiasts flock to the island to see the shorebirds that migrate from the Arctic. But in April, it's unusual.

I've never been a romantic. And I don't believe in love at first sight. But when she spots the dolphin playing in the waves, her whole body responds with delight. She throws her head back in laughter, clapping her hands.

My heart literally skips a beat.

Who knew that was a real, physical reaction and not just a silly description used by poets?

I've scoffed at poets my whole life, but right now, I could write a Shakespearean sonnet. *If only I knew what a Shakespearean sonnet was*...

Maybe a limerick?

There was an old man by the sea

Not ancient, though. Just forty-three.

But when he saw her

It caused such a stir

That his heart skipped an entire beat.

Okay, so no poetry. But I have to say *something* to her. Preferably something that won't make me sound like a blithering idiot.

When the dolphin dips out of sight, she starts walking in my direction again, dancing away from the water that washes over her feet with each crashing wave.

She's stunning. From her dazzling smile to her joyful exuberance to the way her billowing dress forms to the curves of her body when the wind catches it just right...

Get it together, man.

Clearing my throat, I pry my eyes away from her. Then I notice something she hasn't: she's about to run into one of Bishop's fishing lines.

Leaping out of my chair, I run toward her, waving my arms. "Watch out!" She looks at me like I'm Freddy Kreuger come to life. I point to the fishing line, but it's nearly invisible in the sunlight. I mime reeling in a fish, but that doesn't work either. She backs away from me slowly before turning to run.

Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for, but at least she's moving away from the fishing line now.

I'm glad Bishop isn't here to witness this. He'd never let me live this down. It would become one of those "Remember that time when..." stories that get repeated at every cookout and bonfire.

My lips press into a line as I watch her run from me. Then she crumples to the sand—just in time for the remnants of a wave to wash over her and steal the bag she had draped over her shoulder.

I dash forward, attempting to reach her bag before it's lost to Davy Jones' Locker. Catching the strap with a toe, I yank it back from the greedy fingers of the sea.

Unfortunately, as it tumbled in the surf, the contents fell out. At least I rescued the bag. Maybe I'll score some points for that.

I run over to hand it to her, but she just stares at me with a mask of terror and pain. When I reach down to help her up, she shrieks and scuttles back like a crab.

Any desire to wax rhapsodic about her beauty vanishes in a wave of anger.

"Stop," I bellow. "What is wrong with you?"

She freezes, glaring up at me, suddenly looking so ferocious that I take a step back despite her current position in the surf.

"What's wrong with *me*? You're the one charging like a rabid rhinoceros!"

My eyebrows shoot up. "A rabid rhinoceros?"

She nods primly.

"Well, I was trying to keep you from being clotheslined by fishing wire." I gesture to the line of poles Bishop set up that morning. "Perhaps I should've just let you sever your pretty head?"

Realization dawns in her big, green eyes. "Oh."

I cross my arms. "Oh."

Her eyes flash with anger. "How was I supposed to know that?"

"That I'm not a rabid rhinoceros? I don't know...common sense?" Then I notice the blood dripping from her foot. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine." She pushes up from the ground, wincing when her injured foot connects with the sand.

Instinctively, I wrap an arm around her waist to support her weight.

"Thanks," she mutters. "And I'm sorry. I have an overactive imagination and I watch far too many horror movies."

"Horror movies? No wonder you thought I was a raving lunatic. I can't watch anything scarier than *Traitor Tater and* the Spuds of Deceit without the lights on."

The corners of her mouth twitch. It's barely a smile, but it makes me ridiculously happy to have earned it. "I love that cartoon."

"So, you're not insane. Good to know." She glares at me again, but there's no heat in it, and a small smile still plays on her lips. "Let's get that cut cleaned up, okay?"

She nods. "Thank you."

I point to Bishop's things. "I'll need to carry you over there."

She looks to where I'm pointing. "I can walk."

"And get more sand in your wound?" Before she can object, I lift her into a bridal carry, supporting her legs and back. She gives a little cry of surprise before wrapping her arms around my neck.

I suck in a quick breath. I've never been so affected by a woman. What is it about her?

With great reluctance, I sit her onto Bishop's chair. Then I begin searching through his things for a first-aid kit. I'd bet my life that he has one. The man's an Eagle Scout.

It takes only a few seconds to find it. I also grab an unopened bottle of water.

A shiver passes through her and she wraps her arms around her body in a hug. I want to kick myself. I should have realized that the cool breeze on her wet skin would be torture. I jog over to my chair to grab my hoodie for her. She accepts it gratefully.

Kneeling in front of her, I pat my thigh. "Let's see what we've got." She obliges, placing a lovely foot—aside from the blood—onto my leg. Her toenails are painted lavender.

I twist the cap off the bottle and use the water to cleanse her wound.

"Thanks. I guess I was wrong about the townspeople—or at least one of them." She smiles and I can't help but smile back.

But my smile quickly fades when I process her words. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs. "I was told the locals don't want me here."

No. *She can't be*. No, no, no. The gods can't be this cruel. "You're the new owner of Hildy's Hut?"

She smiles, a dazzling, show-all-your-teeth sort of smile the same smile she wore when she saw the dolphin. "Now it's Sticks & Stones Boutique."

I stifle a groan. How unlucky can a guy get? First, I see the girl of my dreams. Then I scare her so badly she runs from me, cutting her foot on a shell. And now I discover she's my nemesis. My hands shake a bit as I squeeze antibiotic cream onto her cut.

"So, it's true?" she asks. "The whole town is out to get me just because the mayor's kid wants a bigger bucket of bait?"

I bark a laugh. "The Bait Bucket."

"Whatever. There was even a town meeting about it." Her eyes narrow. "I suppose you went?"

"Of course. Everyone goes to the town meetings."

"I wasn't invited."

"You didn't live here."

She raises her chin. "As the topic of discussion, I should have been invited. But then I suppose the town couldn't have its little witch hunt."

Witch hunt? Where does she think she is? Seventeenthcentury Salem? Things change in Friendly at a snail's pace, but we're not *that* far behind the times.

I shake my head. "No one is out to get you. No one will hurt you. No one will even be mean. Not to your face, anyway."

"Nice."

"They're just not going to encourage you to stay," I explain, wrapping a bandage around her foot. "That's much different."

Now is the time to tell her who I am, but I don't. Because the moment I do, I can no longer pretend like I have a chance with her. And I'm not quite ready to let that idea go.

Chapter 6

Margo

"OKAY," THE GORGEOUS MAN says, his voice a deep baritone. He snaps the first-aid box shut. "All done."

I take a look at my bandaged foot. Not bad.

Standing, he turns his back to me and bends down. "Hop on."

"Wh-what?" Smooth, Margo. Real smooth.

He grins at me over his shoulder, showcasing a dimple in one cheek. *Mercy*. "Haven't you ever had a piggyback ride? It'll be the easiest way to get you back to your place."

The man wants me to ride on his back?!

I bite my lip, glancing toward the dune. I've never been described as a lightweight, and I'm also wet and covered in sand.

He straightens and plants his hands on his hips. "Do I have to bridal carry you again?"

"Certainly not," I say, shaking my head. "I can walk."

He stares pointedly at my bare feet. "And where are your shoes?"

"They were in my bag..." We both turn to look at the ocean.

"Your plan is to walk back with a wounded foot and no shoes, through the sand, and up an old ramp that's almost guaranteed to give you splinters? Is that right?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, kneeling in front of me once again. This time I climb on, squeezing my knees into his ribs to get a better grip. He chuckles, looping his arms under my legs.

The breeze is cool on my wet skin, but I only have goosebumps where he's touched me: my doctored foot and the points where his arms are now wrapped around my legs.

"What about your stuff?" I ask.

"It's almost low tide, so it won't get washed away."

I glance at the line of poles and fishing gear. I know absolutely nothing about fishing, but it appears to be valuable. "You're not worried someone will steal all that?"

He laughs. "In Friendly? No. I'm not worried."

It's hard not to be impressed by his strength as he carries me. I'm fully aware of the hard muscles and thick shoulders that are currently pressed against my body.

Even in the deep, soft sand, he moves gracefully. When he reaches the ramp over the dune, he doesn't slow down.

He smells wonderful, too, a combination of salty air, fresh laundry, and espresso. I lean closer to breathe it in.

Despite the throbbing cut on my foot, Friendly is looking up. At least one local doesn't hate me. He's not my target clientele, but it's better than nothing. Besides, he could have a sister. *Or a girlfriend*...

Heat creeps into my cheeks. I'd never be brave enough to ask him face-to-face. But something about the piggyback ride is freeing.

Clearing my throat softly, I speak to the back of his head. "You're not the target market for Sticks & Stones but maybe you have a girlfriend?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. I'm single." *Is that humor in his voice?* Now I wish I *could* see his face.

A potential client would have been nice, but a small part of me—fine, a *big* part—is relieved that he's single. *Friendly is* definitely *looking up*.

Inventory for the store will arrive over the next several days. By the grand opening next week, the mannequins and shelves will hold gorgeous pieces by some of my very favorite—and often overlooked—designers. With any luck, my business will not only be a success, but these designers will get the recognition they deserve. Briony was right about one thing: I have an excellent eye for spotting pieces that will sell.

But first, I'll need customers.

How grand will my opening be if no one shows up?

"Here we go," he says, pulling me from my thoughts. I'm surprised that we've made it back so quickly. Sitting me gently on the ground, he says, "Oh. What about your key? Did that get swept away, too?"

Smiling, I point to a keypad next to the door. "I had keyless entry installed."

"Good idea," he says. "Think you can make it from here on your own?"

"Yes, thank you for your help...." I pause, realizing that I don't know his name. "I'm Margo Sterling." I hold out my hand and he shakes it. His hands are callused, a working man's hands.

He flashes his lopsided grin. "Tuck."

"Maybe I'll see you around, Tuck?"

"Guarantee it."

"Oh, I get a guarantee?" I attempt to flirt, batting my eyelashes.

"Absolutely. I'll be right over here at my big ole' bucket of bait."

My jaw falls open. "You...?"

He grins. "Pleasure to meet you, neighbor."

Chapter 7

Margo

WHAT. A. JERK.

I'm practically breathing fire as I punch in the code to the door. He whistles as he walks back to the beach. Whistles! As if he couldn't be more pleased with himself.

I'll be right over here at my big ole' bucket of bait. UGH.

The lock clicks open and I storm into the building, remembering too late that my foot is injured. Whimpering, I sink onto a platform holding three naked mannequins. Looking down at my wounded foot, I scowl. He wrapped it so expertly, so gently, that I'd been tricked into believing he was a nice guy. I should have stuck with my first inclination—to run far and fast.

But I've never been much of a runner.

Burying my face in my hands, I try to block out the memory. Why did I have to run from him like he was an axe-wielding maniac?

And that couldn't be the end of my humiliation. Oh, no. I had to go and step on a sharp shell and fall into the path of surging water, losing my shoes and my dignity in one fell swoop.

But most of all, I hate that I just stood there with my mouth wide open like a Venus Fly Trap waiting for lunch while he walked away whistling the chorus to *Don't Worry, Be Happy*.

I hate him. Hate. Him.

I'm not loving Friendly, either. The town needs to be renamed. It's not fair to lure unsuspecting and innocent bystanders here with the idea that the name somehow fits the town.

I didn't expect a parade or anything, but so far, Friendly has greeted me with a closed road and a nasty neighbor. I am not impressed.

Maybe I'll suggest a new name at the next town meeting. I should be invited now that I'm a resident.

Mental note: Brainstorm hateful names for the town.

I look around at my empty store. *This* is impressive, I have to admit. Sticks & Stones is as lovely as any of Boutique Chrysalis' locations—and I haven't even put out any of the stock yet.

The in-store stock will be limited to save on costs. But it won't be limited by *size*. No woman will feel left out in my store.

If a dress is offered in multiple prints, I've only ordered it in one or two. If someone wants a different print, I'll order it for them. There will also be an online component to my business. A person will be able to make purchases from anywhere in the world at any time of day.

That's the aspect that most interested Cara. She can't wait to order new clothes from Sticks & Stones.

A wave of homesickness for my former roommate washes over me. I want to talk to her so badly, to tell her about my handsome but detestable neighbor, but I can't bring myself to call. Not when I'm feeling so low.

A good night's sleep will help, I think. I did *not* get that last night.

I don't really believe in ghosts...most of the time. But with it being so quiet, every noise in the apartment was amplified.

There was a scratching at the window. Then I could have sworn I heard footsteps on the roof. I held out as long as I could before going to the kitchen to search for a salt shaker.

If reruns of *Supernatural* have taught me anything, it's that evil spirits hate salt. I figured it couldn't hurt to keep the shaker on my nightstand. Especially since great-aunt-Hildy died in her sleep.

The bed was replaced, of course, though it pained me to get rid of her beautiful, antique, cherry wood bedroom suite. I went back and forth about it for a while, but in the end, I knew my imagination would never let me sleep soundly in a dead woman's bed.

But I still spent the night tossing and turning. At one point, I woke up tangled in blankets and sweating profusely. So, I opened the bedroom windows to let in the breeze and discovered that I can hear the crashing waves from inside the apartment.

That was nice. My own personal sound machine.

But even then, I slept fitfully, dragged into nightmares with villagers chasing me with pitchforks. I didn't drift into a peaceful sleep until after the cat snuggled against me and started to purr.

The only problem? I don't have a cat.

So, I've been in Friendly for approximately twelve hours, and I've hallucinated a ghost cat, humiliated myself in front of my neighbor-slash-nemises, and sliced my foot open with a shell.

Nope. So far, Friendly has failed to impress.

Chapter 8

Margo

I HAVE TO CONFESS that there is one area where Friendly does impress. Sunrises. The sky is on fire with shades of orange and peach and pink.

Most of my inventory has been placed on shelves, racks, and mannequins now. But the display window remains empty. I've been waiting for inspiration to strike. And now it has.

I'll curate a Sunrise Collection for the window! Several of the designers I've handpicked for Sticks & Stones work with these color combinations.

As I walk along the beach, I'm careful to avoid fishing lines. There's only one fisherman today, and though he's an attractive man who appears to be in his late thirties or early forties, he's not Tuck.

I'm a little disappointed about that.

And I hate myself for it. I shouldn't *want* to see him again. And I don't. I absolutely do not.

Except that I kind of do.

The question is *why*?

I still have the hoodie he loaned me, so I have an excuse to pop by his *ole' bucket of bait*. But just picturing his smirking face as he said those words makes me see red all over again.

After my anger faded, I spent longer than I'd care to admit replaying the meeting in my mind.

Who am I kidding? It's been several days and the cut on my foot is nearly healed, but I still can't stop thinking about it.

He let me go on and on about the town, and even listened to me complain about the "mayor's kid," knowing full well that I had no clue who he was.

That wasn't exactly *nice* of him, but can I really blame him for that? It's not like he coerced me into running my mouth.

And he certainly had no obligation to patch me up, loan me a sweatshirt, or carry me home. Why had he done all that? Was it just so he could gloat when I found out who he was?

Maybe. But somehow, I don't think so. I think he was being genuinely kind.

But then he'd ruined it all at the end, mocking me. *The joke's on you, Margo. Hardee. Har. Har.*

As I'm walking back up the dune, I cross paths with a pretty blonde with the cutest little dog. What really catches my eye are their accessories. The dog has the sweetest little booties to protect her feet and a matching collar and leash. The pattern is similar to my favorite skirt—the one that reminds me of a Funfetti cake. It may even be the same fabric. In any case, it's a very on-trend pattern for spring.

But what really amazes me is that the woman's floppy sun hat and tote bag both match, too.

It's the sort of thing that can teeter the line between tacky and stylish, but in this case, it's done masterfully.

I need it in my store. It'll sell like hotcakes.

"Excuse me, sorry to bother, but I'm dying to know where you purchased those accessories?" The dog wags her tail and I bend to pet her.

The woman's skin turns a lovely shade of pink. "I made them."

"You're kidding! Do you sell them anywhere?"

"I have an Etsy store." She reaches into a bag and hands me a business card.

I read it aloud. "Doggy Designs by Hazel."

"I also design for cats," she says quickly. "In fact, my best seller is a bowtie collar for cats. It went viral a few years ago and still sells very well."

An image of a black and white cat floats to the surface of my mind. "I remember that! The cat was in a firefighter's wedding, right?"

Hazel's blush deepens. "That's right."

"I love it." I hold out my hand and introduce myself. "I'm Margo Sterling. I own a new shop in town. I'd be very interested in selling your designs."

She shakes my hand but doesn't meet my eyes when she says, "My name is Hazel Tuck."

My heart sinks. "Tuck?"

She releases my hand. "Yes. The mayor is my mother, and my brother is a local business owner." She clears her throat nervously. "He owns the store next to yours."

"We've met."

"So, I'm not sure it's a good idea to..." Her voice trails off.

I raise my eyebrows. "Your brother wants my store so he can expand his business, correct?"

She nods.

"But he wouldn't support you in your own business expansion? I don't believe that."

She chews on her bottom lip. "When you put it that way..."

"Just give it some thought. You know where to find me."

"I will." A mischievous smile crosses her face. "So, how's Tuck handling the shared space situation? Between you and me, I think he's even more upset about having to share the rooftop terrace than he is about losing out on the store."

Rooftop terrace? I have no idea what she's talking about, but I play along. "He doesn't share well?"

"Not really. And he's had it all to himself for years since Hildy was too old to climb the steep steps. I bet it's killing him to have to share." *Steps?* The contractors never mentioned roof access. Surely, Hildy didn't wall over it?

Hazel and I say our goodbyes and I practically skip all the way back to Sticks & Stones. I bet I can convince her to sell her products in my shop. There's no logical reason for her to say no. Especially with the distribution through the online store included. Wealthy New York pet owners will definitely want her accessories—and they'll pay through the nose for them.

I guarantee she's underpriced everything in her Etsy shop.

And then inspiration strikes like a lightning bolt. To get customers in my shop, all I need to do is win over the female Tucks.

Mayor Tuck is the key to the whole town.

The entire plan falls into place in a matter of seconds. And it'll work. I'm sure of it.

In the meantime, I have a rooftop terrace to find, and a male Tuck to annoy. He's gotten under my skin. It's only fair that I get under his.

Chapter 9

Tuck

I MAY NOT CATCH many sunrises, but I almost never miss a sunset.

My private rooftop terrace has the best view in town. From up here, I can see the entire island, including the gorgeous sunsets to the west. Best of all, there's no speaker for the doorbell up here. It's my private sanctuary. The one place no one can find me.

Until now.

Her door hasn't been opened in so long that the hinges squeal. *I'll have to find some grease for that later.*

I haven't seen her since the morning we met on the beach. I'd hoped that being struck dumb at her beauty was a one-time thing.

No such luck.

Her short hair is the color of caramel and skims along the top of her ears and just above her eyebrows, highlighting those lovely green eyes. Even wind tousled, it looks soft and touchable.

I desperately want to touch her.

She barely glances at me as she stares out over the dune at the ocean. "It's amazing. You can see for miles."

I sigh, giving in to the inevitable. "Yes, but right now the show's behind you. Turn around."

She looks at me then, taking in my camp chair facing toward the west. Her gaze moves up to the sky, and her lips fall open in a tiny O.

"Wow," she breathes.

"Told you," I say, my lips twisting into an involuntary smile. I *really* wish this girl didn't get under my skin so much.

"It's breathtaking."

I keep a rack of chairs stacked in a corner. Reluctantly, I rise to get one for her. Settling it next to mine, I gesture for her to sit. "Join me?"

She looks at me with surprise but takes a seat. "Thanks."

Opening the cooler for a beer, I offer her one. She eyes it warily like it may be poison.

I laugh. "You really do have an overactive imagination, don't you?"

How can she make a scowl look so *pretty*? She accepts the drink, turning her eyes back to the sunset.

We drink in silence, watching the sun dip lower in the sky. As much as I love a pink sky, I can't keep my eyes from flicking to her profile. I've seen a thousand sunsets. But only one Margo Sterling.

Even her name is beautiful.

I stifle a groan as I pry my eyes away from her face. Why couldn't Hildy's heir have been a cranky, old man? Or better yet, someone who was willing to sell to the highest bidder.

Her voice breaks the silence. "I'll need a sunset collection, too."

"What?"

"Sorry, just thinking aloud. I've been planning my window display."

I take another sip of beer to hide my grimace. "The shop is coming together then?"

A smile spreads across her face. "I know you don't really care, but it's perfect. Everything I've ever wanted and more. Except for the town boycotting me, of course."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her the town will come around, because I know it's what she wants to hear. But it wouldn't be true. Friendly has its quirks. Some good and some bad. But for better or worse, we stand by each other, Friendly versus the world.

She leans back in her chair. "I have a plan for that, though."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Like I'd tell you. You're probably making a list of ways to sabotage me."

"I wouldn't do that. Believe it or not, I'm not a bad guy." I look at her pointedly. "By the way, how's your foot?"

She blushes, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of peach. "Much better, thanks." Then she does what women do best she changes the subject. "I can't get over how amazing this view is."

"I can't believe you stayed away for so long. No matter how much you despise me, you have to admit the view makes up for it."

I shouldn't look at her but I do. I can't help myself.

She's staring intently at her beer bottle, picking at the edge of the label with a fingernail. "I don't despise you."

Then she looks at me, her eyes meeting mine. I search them for...something. *Anything*. Is there even the tiniest spark of attraction?

"Then why did it take you so long to come up here?"

She laughs. It's so beautiful. So pure. Like church bells. "It took me until now to find the door."

My eyes widen. "What?"

"It was hidden, like a secret passage. There's built-in shelving and an armoire along one wall. The door is *inside* the armoire. I had to climb through it to get here. Can you believe that?"

I can't help but laugh. "This is your Narnia."

"Yes!"

"I had no idea. By the time I bought The Bait Bucket, Hildy was already too old to climb the stairs to the roof. I always wondered how she got upstairs to the apartment, actually."

"She had one of those motorized chair lifts on the staircase."

"No way! Did you give it a try?"

She shakes her head.

"How could you resist?"

"I've seen Gremlins."

I chuckle at that. "You think Friendly has gremlins?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Maybe not, but who's to say your minions haven't sabotaged it?"

An unpleasant tension crackles through the air, threatening to ruin the good mood.

"Listen, I have an idea," I say, leaning toward her. "From now on, the roof is Switzerland, okay? Up here, there is no you versus me, or The Bait Bucket versus Sticks & Stones."

"Or the town versus me?" She tilts her head, considering. "Deal."

The sun dips below the horizon. Margo hugs her arms around her body to hold in the warmth. I shrug off my sweatshirt and hand it to her. She smiles. "I still haven't returned your other one. Do you have an unlimited supply, or will you eventually run out?"

"It'll take a while, but I'll eventually run out."

"When that day comes, I'll repay the favor."

I chuckle. "You'll loan me one of my own sweatshirts?"

We fall into easy conversation, the hours ticking late into the night. When we finally leave Narnia, it almost feels like we're friends.

But what happens when we're back in the real world?

Chapter 10

Margo

AFTER ANOTHER LATE NIGHT on the roof with Tuck the fifth in a row—I fall into bed, exhausted. Somehow, we've become friends.

But only on the roof. Don't forget that.

Sighing, I nestle beneath the covers. The sound of waves rolling onto Friendly Beach lulls me to sleep. Just as I'm drifting off, I feel my ghost cat curl up at my feet. He doesn't visit every night, and when he does, it's after I've already slipped too far into unconsciousness to move. I guess all cats are the same whether alive, dead, or imaginary—they do what they want, when they want.

When I wake, I feel more refreshed than I can ever remember feeling. Sunlight filters in through the windows and I look out at the dune. I see Hazel walking down the ramp with her little dog. The handsome fisherman is with her, dragging his cart of gear. I've since learned from Tuck that his name is Bishop, and he's some sort of super genius. According to Tuck, everyone expected Bishop to go on to be the governor of Georgia or maybe even a Supreme Court Justice. It was a shock when he came back to Friendly and opened a local practice. No one knows what possessed him to give everything up to be a small-town lawyer.

But judging by the way he's looking at Hazel right now, it seems pretty obvious to me.

In the back of my mind, it occurs to me how absurd my life has become. My closest friend in Friendly is the man who wants nothing more than for me to disappear so he can have my shop.

And then there's my imaginary cat. I chuckle as I pour my morning cup of coffee.

I have no right to feel this content. The grand opening for Sticks & Stones is today, and I'm not expecting a single customer to show up. But it doesn't matter, because I'm still planning my *real* grand opening.

When I head down to the store, I make sure to lock the deadbolt to the apartment. *You can take the girl out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the girl.*

As always, I beam with pride when I step into the store. Sticks & Stones exceeds my wildest expectations. Every designer I approached was eager to work with me. I negotiated far better deals than I ever could have for Boutique Chrysalis. I don't have the same resources, of course, but I've built a reputation for being trustworthy and fair. The sunrise and sunset collections are displayed front and center in the display window. The aesthetic for the store is clean and cool with a beachy vibe. The accessories are located near the checkout counter, and I've left a space for Hazel's products. She hasn't agreed to sell them in my store yet, but I know she will. It's all part of my master plan.

In the meantime, my online store is already doing a steady business.

The bell over the door chimes and I look up in surprise. "Carlinya!"

I try to walk toward her slowly, but I'm so excited to see a friendly face that I end up sprinting across the store.

I pull her into a hug. "How are you?"

"Fine as frog hair and twice as slick."

I shake my head, laughing. "Um, I guess that's good?"

She chuckles. "Hildy's Hut sure looks different."

"Sticks & Stones," I remind her gently. "Can I show you around?"

As I walk her through the store, she taps her chin thoughtfully. "I figured it'd all be weird stuff, like in them fashion shows. Clothes made out of chicken feathers and bubble wrap. The models look like aliens half the time."

I laugh. "Have you been to many fashion shows?"

She gives me a look. "I own a TV, dear."

"Ah," I say, chuckling. "Well, you won't find chicken feathers or bubble wrap here. Just timeless, beautiful clothes for women of all shapes and sizes."

"I like that. I was pleasantly plump before the big C if you can believe it."

I try to hide my shock. She's skin and bones now. "How are the treatments going?" I'm not sure if it's okay to ask, but I can't help it. I really like Carlinya, and I worry about her.

"I'm doing well enough."

She doesn't seem to want to talk about it, so I change the subject. "What brings you to town?"

"I told Coop I was coming to visit him, but really, I wanted to see your store." Seeing my face light up, she quickly adds, "Tell anyone and I'll deny it."

"I won't have to tell anyone," I point out. "I'm sure someone saw you come in here. Soon enough, the whole town will know."

"Eyes everywhere," she mutters.

"We could pretend you robbed me," I suggest.

She laughs. "That'd be a hoot. Call Coop to arrest me." The laughter turns into a coughing fit and I guide her to a chair before dashing behind the checkout counter to pilfer my stash of bottled water.

She accepts a bottle with a shaking hand and takes a sip. "Sorry about that. Traveling takes a lot out of me. It's one of the reasons Coop wants me to move back to Friendly."

"He sounds like a good brother."

She smiles. "He's a pain, like all siblings should be. Do you have any?"

"Nope. Just me."

"Think you'll ever want kids?"

A picture of Tuck holding a baby pops into my mind. Just the thought makes my ovaries quiver. "I always thought I'd be a mother. But I'll be forty next year, so I think that door may be closed."

Carlinya waves a hand in the air. "When one door closes, another opens."

I gasp, a wave of emotion threatening to knock me over. "My father told me that once."

"Smart man." She scratches her chin. "Hildy never had kids."

"Oh." I never knew my great-aunt, so I sometimes forget that everyone else in town did. "I guess I figured as much since I'm her closest heir. Did you know her well?"

Carlinya shrugs. "She kept to herself mostly, especially in the later years. She had a fella for a while, the original owner of The Bait Bucket. She was a bit more social then. After he passed, we stopped seeing much of her. She didn't even open her store most days."

"Depression?" I ask.

Carlinya shakes her head. "Nah. She just wasn't much of a people person. The only person she ever seemed to like was Tuck."

That gets my attention. "Tuck?"

Carlinya nods. "He's a good neighbor, that boy."

I think of my collection of his sweatshirts. I have three now. I'll return them...eventually. The one he gave me the first night on the roof is my favorite. It's old and faded with "Friendly High School Dolphins" screen-printed on the back. It must be over twenty years old.

Carlinya stands. "Well, I guess I ought to be going before Coop starts to worry. Thank you for the water."

"Not yet," I beg. "I have something for you. A small gift to thank you for your kindness that first day." I run to grab the gift bag from underneath the counter.

She looks at it with surprise. "My name is on the tag."

"Of course, it is. I told you it's a gift for you."

"But how did you know I'd come by today?"

"I didn't," I admit, "but I had a feeling you'd visit eventually."

Her hands tremble slightly as she opens the bag. She pulls out the delicate silk scarf. It's a gorgeous swirl of pinks and blues.

"It's part of my sunset collection," I say, gesturing to one of the mannequins with the scarf wrapped around its head. To my horror, tears well in her eyes.

"Oh, no. Carlinya, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..." I shake my head helplessly, unsure what I've done wrong. Perhaps it's an unwelcome reminder of her illness?

She sniffles. "You're a good girl."

"Why are you crying?"

She smiles but shakes her head. "I like you. I wish folks would give you a chance."

"Actually, I have an idea about that. I could use your help if you're up for it." Carlinya is trustworthy. I'm not sure how I know, but I do.

Hildy may have been my long-lost relative, but I feel like I've gained a surrogate aunt in Carlinya.

She listens to my plan and her eyes sparkle with mischief. "I'm in."

Chapter 11

Tuck

JARED HELPS ME MANEUVER a kayak through the center aisle of the store. It's a tight squeeze and we have to turn the kayak on its side. "There's got to be a better way to do this, Uncle Tuck."

"Yeah? I'm all ears."

"Maybe we can keep a few on the street?" he suggests.

"I've thought of that. But we'd still have to store them in the breakroom at night."

"Couldn't we store them in the boathouse?"

Hazel and Jared live two blocks from the beach with my mother. The boathouse in the backyard houses an old fishing boat and doubles as a garden shed. But with a little rearranging and organizing, we could fit in storage for the kayaks. "That's not a bad idea. But they'd still have to be brought to The Bait Bucket every day, and that'd be a lot of hassle."

"I've been thinking about that," Jared says. "What if you put me in charge of Tuck's Kayaks this summer? I can drive the kayaks here in the morning and set them up, and then be in charge of getting all the paperwork in order for rentals."

I grunt as I lift my end of the kayak over an end cap filled with fishing lures. "Who's going to help me in the store if you're outside with the kayaks? Summers are busy around here."

"Maybe it's time to add another part-time employee."

That has crossed my mind, too. Back when I thought Hildy's Hut would be home to Tuck's Kayaks, I had plans to add another employee. "Have anyone at mind?"

"I heard Mandy Aronson's looking for a job."

I chuckle. Jared has had a crush on Mandy Aronson since middle school. He tries to hide it, but his cheeks turn pink every time he says her name. And he always says her full name even though there's not another Mandy on the whole island.

"Tell you what," I say, "if Mandy Aronson doesn't have a problem handling live bait, I'll hire her."

Jared stumbles, nearly dropping the kayak. "Really?"

"Really. Now, take care of this customer's kayak rental. If you're going to run Tuck's Kayaks, you may as well get started."

He's six feet of hard muscle now, but when he beams at me, he still looks like a little boy. I stand to the side, listening as Jared talks to the customer. He asks what type of adventure the man is looking for. After learning that the man is a wildlife photographer and will be packing expensive equipment, Jared checks the tide chart and explains where the calmest water will be.

He points to a map we keep on the counter. "You'll want flat water, so stay on this side of the island. There's an old, historic lighthouse on an inlet in the estuary. It photographs well, and there's a lot of wildlife, too. There will definitely be a large variety of birds, but you're also likely to see dolphins."

I can't help but smile with pride. Jared has helped me in the store since before he could walk. And his idea to use the boathouse does provide a solution of sorts. It's not as ideal as a dedicated store front, but it could work, at least as a temporary fix until Margo sells me her property.

"One more thing," Jared says to the customer. "If you're on the water, wear a life vest. The tides can change quickly."

As Jared's fitting the man for a life vest, the mayor comes into the store.

I flash her a smile. "Finally taking up fishing?" I laugh at the expression on her face. "One of these days, you're going to tell me that story, Mom."

"What story?"

I raise an eyebrow. "The story about what happened to turn you off fishing. You married a fisherman, your son owns a bait shop, your grandson is a natural..." I pause while we both look at Jared with affection. "Not to mention, no one can pack away more fish tacos than you in one sitting."

She glares at me. "I'm here on official business, for your information."

Official business? "I don't see Houdini."

"Not Keeper of Collars business. Mayoral business."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

She opens her purse and hands me a card. "There is going to be a political fundraiser next week."

"A what?" I look at the invitation, bewildered. Then my eyes snap up to hers. "No way."

She nods. "Clever girl, your neighbor."

Chapter 12

Margo

I CLIMB TO THE roof a bit earlier than usual. I'm a little nervous to see Tuck tonight, but my anxiety will just grow the longer I wait. News travels fast in a small town, and I have no doubt he's heard it all by now. May as well face the music.

Now that my plan to win over Mayor Tuck is in motion, and through her, the town, I'm worried about how Tuck will respond. We've become friends over the past weeks—maybe even more than friends. Our rooftop meetings have become my favorite part of the day. But no one else even knows about our friendship. It doesn't exist outside of our little Switzerland.

So, I can't help but wonder...is it even real?

When I step onto the roof, I freeze in surprise. Tuck is spreading out a blanket. Instead of the usual cooler of beer, there's a bottle of wine in an ice bucket, and next to that, a giant picnic basket.

"What's all this?"

He pats a spot on the blanket. "I hope you came hungry?"

I take a seat and attempt to peek into the basket.

He pulls it out of my reach. "Not yet. First, the wine."

I wait patiently as he uncorks the bottle and pours it into two glasses. "What's the special occasion?"

He holds up his glass to make a toast. "To your diabolical plan to win over the town." He taps his glass against mine. "Cheers."

An uneasy feeling grows in my stomach. "It's not diabolical. It's just..."

"Clever? That's the word my mother used." He shakes his head. "A campaign fundraiser for the mayor of Friendly? Really?"

His tone is friendly, but the words feel like barbs. *What* happened to this being Switzerland?

I shrug. "That sort of thing is common in New York City."

"It'll be a first for Friendly." He laughs. "You do know that she's run unopposed for more than thirty years? She doesn't need a campaign fundraiser."

I sip my wine, a nice, full-bodied Chardonnay. "The ethics rules allow campaign contributions to be allocated for community services or donated to charity."

"So, you get people into your store, and my mother gets to look good when she puts the money toward the town?"

"Exactly."

"I have to admit, it's brilliant." There's a strange edge to his voice.

"Is the food in the basket as good as the wine?" I ask, attempting to change the subject.

"Best fish tacos Friendly has to offer. Pete's Bar & Grill doesn't open until next month, but I have an in with the chef."

"Lucky me." There's no mistaking the flirty tone of my voice, but there's not even a hint of a smile on Tuck's face. It doesn't make sense. The setting couldn't be more romantic, with the sunset and the wine. It feels like a date. Though truth be told, I'd started to think of all our rooftop meetings as dates.

Every night, I wonder when he'll finally kiss me.

But now he seems so distant.

He pulls the food out of the basket. Everything is compartmentalized so that we can assemble the tacos ourselves. Pete clearly knows how to pack a picnic basket.

When I bite into the taco, I close my eyes to savor the explosion of flavors on my tongue. After eating in the finest restaurants New York has to offer, I'm not easy to impress. But this is the best fish taco I've ever tasted.

"This is amazing," I tell him. "Please give my compliments to the chef."

The corner of his mouth lifts up. It's the first hint of a genuine smile I've seen tonight. "I'd better not. His head is big enough already."

As we eat our tacos, we watch the sunset in silence. That part alone isn't unusual. But the silence feels different tonight. Heavy.

"Tuck..." I hate that my voice sounds so unsure, so needy. "What's wrong?"

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"You seem...different."

He runs a hand through his thick hair. "I've never been good at this," he grumbles.

"Good at what?"

He gestures to the picnic around us. "Putting the moves on a woman."

I blink in surprise. "Is that what this is?"

He raises an eyebrow. "The wine didn't give it away?"

"Well, yes...but...I'm a little confused because...you seem upset with me?"

"I'm not." His voice is husky. He scoots toward me, reaching a tentative hand toward my face. "May I?"

I nod, unsure what I'm giving permission for, but more than happy to give it.

"I've wanted to touch you since the moment I saw you." His hand grazes along my jaw, then brushes my short hair away from my face. His fingers have traced only a few inches of skin, but my whole body flushes with heat. I lean forward, instinctively, drawn toward him as if pulled by a string. "But why today?"

"Hmmm?"

"You've wanted to touch me...?"

"Yeah," he murmurs, cupping my face in both hands. "More than anything."

"Why did you wait until now?" My voice is a whisper.

He's quiet for a long time. The sun dips below the horizon, leaving the roof dark with shadows. I shiver, but whether from the cold or from his touch on my face, I'm not sure.

"I see you brought your own sweatshirt tonight," he says quietly, as if reading my mind.

I smile. "Your sweatshirt," I remind him.

He shakes his head. "It's yours if you want it."

"Tuck..."

"Yes?"

I tilt my face up to his. "What's different about tonight?"

He opens his mouth to speak but closes it again. Finally, he says, "I'm afraid it'll come out wrong."

"Tell me. Please." I'm ashamed to beg, but I need to know.

He sighs, releasing my face and backing away. I almost whimper at the loss of contact. I reach out, entwining my fingers in his, desperate to re-establish the connection. "You told me you had plans to win over the town," he says, "but until today, I didn't believe you. I thought your time in Friendly would be temporary."

"Isn't that what you want?"

He shakes his head.

"But if I leave, you'll be able to buy my building. Don't you want Hildy's Hut?"

He looks away. "Honestly? Yes. I know that makes me sound like a jerk, but I need more space, and Hildy's Hut would have been perfect. But I can't have it. It's Sticks & Stones now."

Sticks & Stones. My store. "You're okay with that?"

His gaze falls to my mouth. Instinctively, my tongue darts out to moisten my lips. "Space is overrated," he growls.

With that, he tugs me down on the blanket, folding his body around mine, until there's no space between us. When his tongue grazes my lips, I moan, clutching his shirt in my fists and pulling him closer.

Maybe he's just manipulating me. This could be a ploy to get me to lower my guard or to cancel the fundraiser altogether.

But with his mouth on mine, I don't care. In this moment, nothing else matters.

Oh, yes. Space is definitely overrated.

Chapter 13

Margo

MY LITTLE BOUTIQUE LOOKS different filled with customers. I clutch Carlinya's arm and lean down to whisper in her ear. "Did the whole town show up?"

She grins. "Half the town, anyway. The *female* half. Now, go win them over, city girl." Pressing a hand against my back, she gently pushes me toward the mayor.

"This is stunning," Mayor Tuck says, fingering the delicate pink lace of a dress in my sunset collection. It reminds me of my rooftop dates with her son, and I feel heat rise to my cheeks.

"Thank you. Every piece in the store was handpicked with love."

"I heard you were a buyer at Boutique Chrysalis?" a woman asks. I don't recognize her, but that's true of almost everyone here. After weeks of pretending I didn't exist, every woman in town has turned into a Chatty Cathy. Carlinya catches my eye and grins, giving me a thumbs up. She looks beautiful, wearing a simple sundress and the headscarf I gave her.

"Yes, ma'am. I worked for Boutique Chrysalis for almost a decade."

"Do you know Briony Kelly?" another woman asks, her eyes wide with excitement.

I nod, surprised that they know who Briony is. Boutique Chrysalis has television commercials, but while Briony is famous within the industry, I didn't think anyone else knew her name.

"Is she as terrifying in person?" a third woman asks.

I frown. "I'm sorry, but how do you all know about Briony Kelly? I didn't think she was well-known?"

"She was a guest judge on *The Runway Project*. I just love that show."

"That episode went viral."

"She was downright cruel."

I bet she was. Abusing hopeful designers would be right up Briony's alley. "She has very strong opinions," I hedge.

"She was completely unreasonable. The contestants were only given chicken feathers and bubble wrap for material, but she expected perfection for the runway."

"Chicken feathers and bubble wrap, huh?" I raise my eyebrows at Carlinya. She just grins back at me.

"So, why'd you leave Boutique Chrysalis?" one of them asks.

"It wasn't a good fit," I answer honestly. "Have you ever been to a Boutique Chrysalis store?" They all shake their heads. "Well, they don't sell clothes in my size, and that just didn't sit well with me. There's no reason every woman shouldn't have access to beautiful clothes. Once upon a time, it was difficult to find designers who made clothes for plussize women." I sweep my arms out, gesturing to the clothes throughout my store. "As you can see, that's no longer the case."

Several women applaud, including Mayor Tuck.

I mill about the store, answering questions and leading people to the silent auction table. Odds are, my wealthy New York connections will win most of the auctions, but I doubt anyone in Friendly will mind since every penny will come to the town.

A group of women is gathered around the display of pet accessories. I step forward to sing Hazel's praises. "I listed Hazel's products on the online store less than forty-eight hours ago. Her entire line is on back-order now."

Mayor Tuck beams at her daughter. "Did you know she sews clothes for women, too? Besides hats and tote bags, I mean."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. "I didn't."

The mayor twirls in a circle, showing off her expertlytailored pantsuit. "This is a Hazel Tuck original."

Hazel's cheeks turn scarlet. "I'm not a designer," she's quick to clarify. "I'm just a seamstress. I used a pattern for the suit."

"Don't sell yourself short," I say. "It's gorgeous. I've seen thousand-dollar suits that aren't half as lovely."

Ideas for how to utilize Hazel's talent immediately spring to mind. I could hire her as a seamstress immediately. And with a bit of training and an injection of confidence, I bet she could design garments of her own.

"Margo," a woman calls, beckoning me toward the sunrise collection. Before I reach her, I hear several people shouting.

"No, Houdini!"

I spin to see what the commotion is about. Scaling the shelves along one wall is a fat, orange cat.

"Bad cat," the mayor yells.

I'd quake in my boots if she yelled at me like that, but the cat ignores her, curling into a circle atop a pile of jeans.

Mayor Tuck looks at me with an apologetic face. "I'm so sorry."

"Is it your cat," I ask, confused.

She laughs. "No. Well, yes. Technically, he's everyone's cat, even yours."

My cat? "I don't understand."

"Tuck didn't tell you about Houdini?"

"No," I say slowly, shaking my head.

The mayor chuckles. "I thought he complained to anyone with ears about his assignment as Keeper of Collars. He's been trying to get me to appoint someone else for years."

What in the world is a Keeper of Collars?

The women take turns filling me on the *Houdini problem*. My eyes widen as they explain his special skills of breaking and entering.

"An expert cat burglar, you say?" Looking up at the orange cat, sleeping soundly, oblivious to the commotion he's caused, I can't help but grin. "You know what? I think maybe I've just seen a ghost."

Chapter 14

Margo

THE WOMEN SLOWLY LEAVE in small groups, until only Carlinya is left. She beams it me. "You did real well, city girl. Won your way right into their hearts."

I grin. "You think so?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll be honest. I didn't think you could do it. A person can live here twenty years without accomplishing what you have today."

"I couldn't have done it without you."

She waves a hand dismissively. "All I did was give you some names and addresses of women to invite. You did the rest."

When she leaves, I lock the door, then sink onto the floor. Houdini leaps down from his shelf and comes over to rub against my legs.

"Hey there, buddy," I coo, stroking his fur. "Nice to see you're not a figment of my imagination. I thought I was going crazy there for a while." He purrs loudly, snuggling into my lap.

My cat. That's what the mayor had said. She'd included me as a citizen of the town. My grand plan worked.

I can't believe how perfect the fundraiser went. Several designers donated to the silent auction. Stunning, one-of-a-kind pieces that I have no doubt went for astronomical amounts.

They wouldn't have donated pieces for Briony.

Oh, they may have donated pieces for some fundraiser she was organizing, but it would be for exposure and recognition. It wouldn't be for *Briony*.

But there's nothing to gain from donating to the town of Friendly, Georgia. They helped me because I'm *me*. Briony and hateful women like her may see me as a caterpillar, but that's not how anyone who *matters* sees me.

And most importantly, it's not how I see myself.

I want to find Tuck. I'm sure he's already heard about the fundraiser, even though it's only been a few minutes since everyone left. I glance at my watch. It's just after lunchtime. There are far too many hours until sunset.

And besides, it's about time we do things out in the light of day, where others can see us. There's no reason to hide on the rooftop anymore. The town has accepted me as one of their own. And Tuck has given up any designs he had on taking over my building. It's time to be a couple. I touch my lips, still bruised from all the kissing from the night before. *And the night before that...and the night before that...and the night before that...*

Then again, maybe I'm not quite ready to leave Switzerland.

I look at Houdini. "What do you think? Should I wait until sunset? Or march over to Tuck's big ole' bucket of bait and plant a kiss on his lips?"

Houdini blinks his big, neon eyes slowly.

"Oh, look," I say innocently, finding the clasp to his collar and removing it. "Looks like you need a collar. As a resident of Friendly, I'm obligated to take you to the Keeper of Collars immediately."

I walk into The Bait Bucket with Houdini cradled against my chest. A teenager looks up from the counter, a goofy grin on his face. Hastily, he stuffs his phone in his back pocket, patches of red fanning out across his cheeks.

Busted. I wonder if his mom and uncle know about the girl he's texting. He obviously has feelings for her.

I smile warmly. "Hi, Jared, I don't think we've officially met yet. I'm Margo, from next door."

He nods. "Mom is excited that you're selling her stuff in the store."

"I'm grateful she's allowing me to carry her designs. Your mom is really talented." I bob my head toward Houdini. "Is your uncle around?" He shakes his head. "Uncle Tuck went to the shrimper to pick up some more bait."

"Shrimper?"

"Shrimp boat," he explains.

"Ah, well, Houdini needs a collar. Do you know where Tuck keeps them?"

Jared reaches into a box and pulls one out. I place Houdini on the counter so he can get his new collar. He patiently waits for Jared to snap it around his neck. Then he leaps from the counter and dashes to the door. He waits, poised to pounce.

I tilt my head, watching him. "What is he doing?"

Jared laughs. "Just watch."

We don't have to watch long. Within a few moments, a gust of wind pushes the door open an inch. Quick as lightning, Houdini sticks his head through, wedging the rest of his body through the impossibly small crack.

I look at Jared in amazement. "How in the world?"

Jared grins. "People say he has leprechaun magic."

I raise an eyebrow. "Leprechaun magic?"

"The story is that he chased a leprechaun up a tree, and the leprechaun made a trade with him. The leprechaun's life for a bit of leprechaun magic."

The women at the fundraiser didn't mention that. "Where'd the story come from?"

"No one knows for sure. But I think it was old Hildy."

My eyes widen. "My great-aunt?"

He nods. "She wrote children's books."

"No one told me that!"

"We sell some of her books. Hang on..." He jogs to a bookshelf in the corner of the store and pulls a few books down. He puts them on the counter for me to see. Sure enough, *Hildy Sterling* is written across the bottom in big block letters. "They're the only books Uncle Tuck carries that aren't related to fishing or kayaking."

"Can I buy them?"

Jared grins at me, looking so much like Tuck that the family resemblance is unmistakable. "Of course."

Tears well in my eyes, though I'm not really sure why. I never knew her. From what the townspeople say, she wasn't much of a people person. But she's given me so many gifts. The career of my dreams, a beautiful home, a man that I'm on the edge of falling for.

And now, looking at her books, I see that she loved fantastical stories as much as me. Maybe she watched *Supernatural* reruns, too. I bet she would have gotten a real kick out of me thinking Houdini was a ghost cat.

"You should read them after dark," Jared advises.

I glance up at him. "Why?"

He shrugs. "They're spookier in the dark. When I was a kid, we used to read them on camping trips. They made great stories to tell around the campfire."

I smile. "Okay. I'll read them after dark," I promise. "Any suggestions for killing time until then?"

"Kayak?" he suggests.

"Kayak." I test the word on my tongue. One night on the roof, Tuck pointed the little, old lighthouse out to me. He said it was a great kayaking trip for a beginner. "Is it safe to kayak on my own?"

Jared chews on his bottom lip. "We do recommend partnering with someone if you've never been in a kayak."

"I've kayaked on rivers and lakes quite a bit. I'd really like to go to the old lighthouse. I've heard it's not too hard for beginners."

"Oh, yeah. That's an easy one. Be sure to wear your lifejacket, of course, but the water stays fairly flat on that side of the island. It's one of my favorites. Lots of dolphin activity over there."

Within a few minutes, I've filled out paperwork for Jared. While he gets the kayak ready for me, I run home for a quick wardrobe change. Then I'm back at The Bait Bucket, ready for my next adventure.

Chapter 15

Tuck

WHERE IS MARGO? The sky is already a breathtaking shade of pink, but she hasn't emerged from her apartment yet. From what I've heard, the fundraiser couldn't have gone better. She may be celebrating with some of the local ladies. Or she could have fallen asleep?

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I answer without looking at the caller. "Margo?"

The voice on the other end isn't Margo's. It's Coop's.

And something is *very* wrong.

"Slow down, Coop. What are you saying?" I've never heard the chief's voice sound so frantic. Not even the time there was a nasty shark bite on the beach. He wears a Hawaiian-print shirt while on duty, for goodness' sake. This isn't like him.

He takes a deep breath and starts again. "Tuck, a kayak washed up on shore. Without a rider. It's one of yours."

Oh, no. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. It says 'Tuck's Kayaks' right on the side."

Panic wells up in my belly. "Where's Jared? He sometimes takes a kayak..." But Jared's an experienced kayaker, and he knows the water around here better than anyone—maybe even better than me. It's hard to believe he could ever get in trouble on the water.

"I was at the mayor's place when the call came in. Hazel says Jared went to a movie tonight with the Aronson girl, but that he worked at The Bait Bucket today. Could he have rented the kayak to someone?"

"I'm on the roof. It'll take me a minute to get to the front of the store. I'll call you right back."

Despite my relief that Jared's okay, I fly down the stairs three at a time, panic threatening to consume me. *Where is Margo? Please, please don't let it be Margo...*

There's a post-it note stuck to the counter, with a note in Jared's sloppy handwriting scribbled across it. For a second, my heart stops. Then it hammers in my chest double-time.

I punch Coop's number into my cell phone as I set off in a dead run to my mother's house. He answers on the first ring.

"It's Margo, Coop. I'm going to get the jet ski from the boathouse." I've never run the block to my mother's house faster, not even when I was playing QB on the high school football team. When I get there, Coop's already got the jet ski loaded on the trailer. My mother's wringing her hands. "I tried calling, but she's not answering her phone. I'll keep trying. She wouldn't have gone anywhere without her phone, would she?"

I nod, but we all know if her phone worked, she'd have called for help. And if her phone is lost, maybe she's...

The blood is rushing in my ears. I'm having trouble thinking. "Jared, we have to find Jared. You have to get him out of that movie. He always asks where the kayaker is planning to go. He'll have answers."

Hazel runs out of the house waving her car keys. "I'm headed to the theater now."

But the theater isn't on the island. It's a forty-minute drive.

"It'll take too long." My voice sounds like it belongs to someone else. I don't recognize it. "It's getting dark, Coop. We have to find her now."

"I've called the Coast Guard," Coop says. "We'll find her."

A lightning bolt streaks across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder. I growl with frustration. The situation is growing direr by the second.

"Just a pop-up storm," my mother says. But there's no conviction in her voice. Even pop-ups can cause dangerous conditions. I run to the truck, check that the jet ski trailer is secure, then hop into the driver's seat. But where should I go?

Think, Tuck, think. Where? "The old lighthouse," I yell to Coop. "That's where I'll be."

He hands me a radio. "Channel three. Let me know if you find her."

"When you find her," my mother corrects.

Hang on, Margo. I'm coming for you. And I'll never, ever let you go.

Chapter 16

Margo

THE OLD LIGHTHOUSE CREAKS and groans with each blast of wind. It's a stretch to call it a lighthouse. It hasn't been lit in more than one hundred years, after all, when the top of the structure fell victim to hurricane-force winds in the early twentieth century.

At least, that's what the historical placard next to the lighthouse says.

What remains can barely even be classified as a ruin. Chunks of the walls are missing, and the spiral steps are crumbling with age.

Huddled inside, I'm more or less protected from the might of the wind—unless the wall comes crashing down on my head. The fact that it's already missing its top and the majority of one side isn't reassuring.

A loud crack of thunder vibrates through my entire body, bringing a whimper to my lips. The rainfall intensifies, hurled down from the clouds like bits of shrapnel. Reluctantly, I unzip my life vest and slide my arms out of it. Stuck on a tiny island surrounded by water, taking it off is probably really stupid.

But I've already done so many stupid things today...what's one more?

Curling up in the fetal position, I tuck as much of my body under the vest as possible. The damp and cold of the stone floor seeps through my clothes and into my bones, but the vest dulls the pounding of the rain and may offer minimal protection if the stone walls do come crashing down.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Kayaking was fun. And dare I say? Easy.

Jared was right about the dolphins. Within minutes, I counted more than five bobbing up and down in the water around my little boat. And two were babies!

I managed to snap a photo and shoot Cara a text. "Fundraiser couldn't have gone better. And look! Now I'm kayaking with baby dolphins. BABY DOLPHINS1! I love Friendly and you will too. Come visit soon."

I love Friendly. It's true. I didn't think it was possible, but now, I can't imagine ever wanting to leave.

After sending the message, the kayak paddle slipped from my grasp, falling into the water. In my mad dash to catch it, almost flipping the kayak, there was no chance of holding onto the phone. I don't know exactly when it fell into the water, only that it was inevitable. It was destined for a burial at sea. But I made it to the lighthouse, heaved the kayak up onto the rocks, and hiked to the ruins. As the sun started to dip in the sky, I decided it was time to get back to shore to watch the sunset with Tuck like always. Only, when I stepped out of the ruined lighthouse, I saw that the majority of the island was gone, along with the kayak. Thwarted by the high tide, once again.

Shortly after that, it started to rain.

Had Jared remembered to leave a note for Tuck telling him where I was? Would he be coming to rescue me?

Please, Tuck. Please come for me. Soon.

Another terrifying clap of thunder rattles the walls. I squeeze into an even tighter ball until almost my entire body manages to fit underneath the life vest.

The wind howls through the crumbling stone, playing tricks on my mind, shrieking my name.

"Margo!"

I peek out from beneath the vest. "Tuck?"

He falls to his knees onto the rough stone floor beside me, pulling me into a seating position and wrapping his arms around me.

"Thank, God," he murmurs into my hair, repeating the words over and over. "Thank, God. Thank, God. Thank you, God." I tuck my face into his chest, which is uncomfortable against his bulky life vest. But I don't care. I'll take Tuck however I can get him. The tears flow freely, and I'm both immensely relieved that he's here, and embarrassed for him to see me like this.

"How did you know I was here?"

He strokes my hair. "The kayak washed up on shore. I saw a note from Jared that you'd rented it. It didn't say where you went, but I remembered that we'd talked about the lighthouse." He takes a shuddering breath and I realize that he's upset.

"Tuck? Are you okay?"

"I've never been more frightened in my life. I thought I'd lost you."

"You'll never lose me."

"Swear it?" His voice is rough, pained, and a little bit desperate.

"I swear it."

His lips brush mine just as his handheld radio crackles to life. "Tuck, are you there, Tuck?"

Tuck swears under his breath before responding to the call. "I found her, Coop. At the old lighthouse. She's okay, but send the Coast Guard this way."

Despite the cold stones seeping through my skin and the torrential rain, when Tuck's mouth claims mine again, warmth spreads through my body, from every nerve ending in my lips straight down to the tips of my pinky toes.

I have so many things I want to say to him. *Thank you for rescuing me. Please never let me go. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.* But the words can wait. For now, I try to say it all with my kiss.

Chapter 17

Margo

TUCK WALKS ME TO my door, waiting as I punch in the code on the keypad. As if anything could happen to me in Friendly.

Besides losing my kayak, getting stuck in a storm, and being on the brink of hypothermia, of course.

My teeth haven't stopped chattering since the Coast Guard arrived at the lighthouse. The second Tuck and I broke apart, the cold returned with a vengeance. I'm dying to take a hot shower and fall into bed. I have no doubt I'll sleep well tonight.

When I reach the stairwell to my apartment, I smile at the sight of Hildy's motorized chairlift. I'm tired enough to risk the possibility of tampering by gremlins. Taking a seat, I push the button.

It inches slowly—very slowly—up the stairs, but I laugh with delight. I wish I'd known my great-aunt. Despite the fact that she wasn't a people person, I really think I'd have liked her.

At the top of the stairs, I step off the chair and head to the bathroom, turning on the tap to the shower. As the bathroom begins to fill with steam, I feel the cold and the weariness begin to leave my bones. Only the complete physical and mental exhaustion remains.

Too tired for a long, luxurious shower, I stay under the stream of water just long enough to warm up. When I fall into the bed, I find a handsome fella is already there waiting for me.

"Hello, Houdini."

He stretches, arches his back, and then curls up on top of the comforter. I snuggle in next to him, lulled to sleep by his purring. When I wake in the morning, Houdini is gone, but there's a black collar in the middle of the bed.

Smiling, I think of the Keeper of Collars. Tuck. My love.

Feeling happier than I've ever felt in my life, I hum as I make a pot of coffee. Flipping on the television, I search for a *Yoga by Adriene* video on YouTube. As I stretch out my yoga mat, I see Hildy's motorized chair at the top of the stairs. There's something sticking out of the bottom. Going over to inspect, I see that it's an envelope that's been tucked into the arm of the chair.

Grinning, I open it. Maybe it contains the secrets to Houdini's leprechaun magic.

My breath catches as I read the typed words at the top of the page. LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF HILDY STERLING.

Quickly, I skim the document. It's not long. It's short and to the point, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Hildy had a will.

And she left everything to Tuck.

What does this mean? Her estate has been through the probate courts. Will they reopen the case now? They have to, right? Tuck has a legal claim to Sticks & Stones.

No. He has a claim to Hildy's Hut. Sticks & Stones should never have existed in the first place.

My heart thunders against my ribs. I could stick the document in the garbage disposal, shred it to pieces, and pretend it never existed. Everything can remain just as it is—absolutely perfect.

Except it's not perfect, is it? Not for Tuck. He still needs more space for his kayak shop. And the building rightfully belongs to him—not me.

I'm going to lose Sticks & Stones.

After all my hard work getting the town to accept me, I'm going to lose them, too.

And worst of all, I'm going to lose Tuck.

Chapter 18

Tuck

FOR ONCE, I POP out of bed in the morning, ready to start the day. *Ready to see her*.

With Margo in my life, I have a feeling I'm going to be seeing a lot more sunrises. After all, every moment wasted on sleep is a moment I could be spending with her.

I rush up the stairs to the roof, somehow knowing she's already there, waiting for me. And she is.

She's so beautiful, standing against the rail, looking at the crashing waves with her hair blowing in the breeze. I follow her gaze to the beach. The summer season has begun. There's already a handful of people walking along the shoreline. I can make out a fisherman at the water's edge. *Bishop*. Some things never change.

And some things do. My eyes settle back on Margo. I still can't believe how lucky I am to have her in my life. I make a solemn vow to never take her for granted. Every day, I want to feel this sense of wonder and gratitude that she's mine. "Good morning, beautiful."

She turns to face me, and I can immediately tell that something is different. Something has...shifted.

I take a step toward her. "Margo? What is it?"

"Jared told me that my great-aunt Hildy was a writer." There's a strange edge to her voice.

Despite a sense of unease that's bubbling in my chest, I smile at the memory of Hildy. "She was always coming up with fun stories."

Margo tilts her head in thought. "Everyone says she wasn't a people person. But it seems that she liked you."

"Can you blame her?" I waggle my eyebrows. "I'm very likable."

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Tell me about your relationship with her."

"With Hildy? There's not much to tell. Hildy did like me better than most. And I liked her. Once a week or so, I walked her to the top of the dune to see the waves crashing on the shore."

"That's nice," she says with a smile.

The corners of my lips quirk at the memory. "Hildy hated sand. So, she never wanted to go all the way to the beach. But she did love the crashing waves."

We stand in companionable silence for a moment before she holds out an envelope for me. "You need to see this. I found it this morning."

"What is it?"

"A gift. From Hildy."

I take the envelope and open it, pulling out the document. My mouth drops open as I read it. "Hildy gave me..."

"Everything," she says, nodding.

"But…"

She turns her back to me, once again looking out to sea. "I won't fight you for it, Tuck. It's yours, fair and square."

I stare at her back, watching her hair fly freely in the wind. "But...your shop. What would you do without it?"

Her body stiffens. "I have options. I'm a talented retail buyer. I'll have no problem getting a job. And no matter where I land, I think I'll keep the Sticks & Stones online store. Maybe I'll even find another location for a storefront... someday."

Wait... is she saying what I think she's saying?

Blood roars in my head. "You're talking about leaving?"

She shrugs. "Some things aren't meant to be. And in this case, you'll have room for your kayaks. That's what Hildy wanted. That's how it should be."

"No."

"Tuck..."

"Turn around and look at me," I demand.

She slowly turns to face me, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

"You're not leaving me." My voice is like steel. "You're staying."

Holding up the piece of paper, I rip it in half.

Epilogue

Margo

"YOU LOOK MIGHTY PRETTY for a city girl."

I turn away from the mirror to beam at Carlinya. "You look mighty pretty yourself."

And it's the truth.

It's been one year since her chemotherapy and radiation treatments ended. Gray ringlets fall softly around her pink cheeks. And true to her word, she's put on enough weight to be considered pleasantly plump—and perfectly healthy. For now, the score stands at Carlinya Cooper: 1. The Big C: 0.

As for my own beauty? I suppose it's in the eye of the beholder. Some women look positively radiant during pregnancy.

I am not one of those women.

I've been sick throughout my "advanced age pregnancy." My skin is pale as a sheet one day and red as a beet the next. The undereye circles are so severe that it looks like I've been punched in both eyes. And my ankles ceased to exist two months ago.

But at least my maternity wardrobe is to die for. As soon as I found out I was expecting, I started curating a seaside maternity collection for the store.

"How's The Bait Bucket remodel coming along?" Carlinya asks.

I smile at that. "Tuck finished yesterday. You should stop by and see."

Tuck's Kayaks is now on the first floor of The Bait Bucket, along with bigger items like poles, rods, and the coolers for live bait. The upstairs apartment has been completely remodeled to hold rows upon rows of tackle and fishing lures. We even moved great-aunt Hildy's motorized chairlift next door for better accessibility for Tuck's customers with mobility issues.

Now that I'm reaching the end of my pregnancy, though, I regret moving the chairlift. I move with as much ease as a beached whale these days.

"You should come upstairs and look at the nursery, too. Tuck and Jared finished assembling the cribs last week, and I bought the most adorable bedding for the babies."

"Are you going to send it back this time?" Carlinya teases.

"No!"

She raises both eyebrows.

"Probably not," I amend.

She laughs. "This may be your only pregnancy, so-"

I shake my head. "Um, this will *absolutely* be my only pregnancy. Not only will I be forty-two when the twins are born, but I'm getting two for the price of one! Can't beat that deal."

She laughs. "I suppose not. Do you have any names picked out?"

"Just one so far. We're going to name our little girl Hildy."

Carlinya smiles. "That's a lovely name, and a lovely tribute, too."

"If not for great-aunt Hildy, Tuck and I would never have found each other. She didn't do it on purpose, of course, but that doesn't matter. We're still grateful."

"No names picked out for the boy yet?"

"I suggested Houdini, but Tuck vetoed it."

Carlinya makes a face. "I'm with Tuck on that one."

At the sound of his name, the fat, orange cat appears seemingly out of thin air. *Leprechaun magic*.

I scoop him up from the ground and cradle him against my massive body. I give Carlinya a mischievous look. "I think I want to visit Tuck. You?" And with that, I snap Houdini's collar off of his neck. "Let's go find the Keeper of Collars."

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About the Author

Ash Keller writes contemporary romance and romantic comedies that are sweet on heat but big on heart. So, if you love sassy heroines, lovable heroes, witty banter, swoonworthy kisses and happily-ever-afters, you're in the right place.

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