



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



THE WILDER WIDOWS

WILDER EVER AFTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**KATHERINE
HASTINGS**

The Wilder Widows:

Wilder Ever After

Katherine Hastings

THE WILDER WIDOWS: WILDER EVER AFTER

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EPILOGUE

THANK YOU FOR READING

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

The Wilder Widows are back and wilder than ever! After completing their first set of wishes, Sylvie, Doris, Marge, and Alice reunite to fulfill their promise to each other. They must continue their new Wilder Widows annual tradition. Each widow gets one wish—one wild adventure—she’s dreamed of doing her whole life. The fabulous foursome will do anything and everything to help one another accomplish these lofty goals. Despite barely surviving their first attempt at satisfying their heart’s desire, they go for round two with unmatched courage and gusto.

Lots has changed for these four diverse women since they catapulted around the globe together, but one thing remains steadfast and true... their love for one another. With their newfound lease on life urging them on, the Wilder Widows set off once again on an epic journey together to push their boundaries and check a few more of those bucket list boxes as they push through their fears to hopefully make it back alive!

The Wilder Widows: Wilder Ever After is the second book in the Wilder Widows duet and is meant to be read after the first book.

SYLVIE

CHAPTER ONE

The familiar aroma of the flowers surrounding my home wafted into my nostrils as I passed through them to the front door. Lucas, the neighbor boy I'd hired to keep up on my gardens and yard while I lived with Tom in Valley Hills, had done an excellent job keeping the property in tip-top shape. It had been several months since I'd last visited Wilder Lane, and now fall rapped on the door. I wondered how much longer the blooms would remain before winter would steal them away again.

When I reached the front door, I slid in my key. As the lock clicked, a strange blend of emotions crashed into me. Every time I'd been back to visit since the year had passed when I'd found my way back to my one true love, nostalgia assaulted me along with tokens of my past life. As I stepped in and saw the photos of my husband Bruce and me lining the wall, those pangs of guilt wove into my stomach once again. I'd moved on with Tom so quickly after Bruce had passed ... or perhaps not moved on, but back. Back to the man who'd owned my heart for all the decades we'd been apart—a man who still did and always would.

I glanced down at the diamond on my finger.

The man who would be my husband in just one short month.

The guilt over my quick recovery from Bruce's death subsided a little as I stared down at the ring, memories of Tom's heartfelt proposal and the words of his eternal love flashing through my mind, causing my heart to race and the blood to whoosh through my veins. But then I glanced at the wedding photo of Bruce and me, and the guilt came crashing back.

I reached up and brushed the dust off our photo, a soft smile lifting my lips as I let the happy memories from my life with Bruce back inside. Our marriage had been far from perfect, and we'd had more bad days than good, but the longer he was gone, the more those good memories overshadowed

the bad. Like a tiny airbrush whisking away all the imperfections of our marriage. Stroke by stroke, the resentment and anger toward him I'd carried all those years blurred away until I could finally smile when I thought back on him. It was nice to remember him that way instead of how we'd lived most of our lives, but it also drove home the guilt that I'd moved on so quickly.

But, good or bad, Bruce was gone now, and it was time to take down our photos and say goodbye to that part of my life. As hard as it would be to shut the door and pack decades of a life into boxes, it was time. And I had no choice. My house was going on the market, and I would be making my full-time home with Tom after the wedding.

"Yoo hoo!" Doris called from the sidewalk as she hustled up with Alice and Marge in tow. "You're here! You made it!"

I dropped my bag and hurried back to the doorway, swinging it wide open and capturing them in my arms as we squished into a group hug.

"Oh, I missed you!" I squeezed them tight, closing my eyes as my truest friends smashed me in between them. "I missed you so much."

"Right back at you." Alice brushed a kiss on my cheek.

"Damn, it's good to see ya, girl." Marge let go first, clearing her throat as she straightened her button-down shirt. "Too bad you didn't get in last night as planned. You missed margaritas at Alice's."

With a frown, I answered, "I know. Some stupid engine problem, so we all got grounded while they switched flights. I was so mad because I knew you ladies were having fun without me."

I released my grip on them, standing back to look into the faces of the women who had changed my life. Over a year had passed since I'd first met them, but they still looked the same as that fateful day they'd knocked on my door. Alice was as elegant as ever, perhaps even a little more elegant if that was possible. Marge's bowl cut hadn't changed even one bit, like

whoever was doing her hair in Vegas had borrowed the bowl she'd always used from her mother's kitchen. And Doris was still Doris, beautiful and sweet with her full rosy cheeks and bright smile.

Doris pulled her small basket against her chest, reached up with a free hand, and touched my face. "Not as much fun as if you'd been there, dear."

I smiled and pressed a little more weight into her hand.

"But we still had fun. A *lot* of fun. I had Pedro bartending," Alice paused and leaned in, "and it's always extra fun with Pedro around, if you know what I mean." A sly grin lifted her full lips as she waggled her perfectly manicured eyebrows.

"Oh, stop it!" Doris swatted her arm. "Nothing untoward happened."

"Not while you were there," Alice challenged with a widening grin.

"Thank God for that." Marge rolled her eyes. "The last thing I need burned into my head for eternity is you in the throes with Pedro." She paused, then scrunched her face. "Oh, man. I just saw it. Now it's stuck in there on a horrifying loop. I can't unsee it. I might as well just walk outside and stare into the sun."

"You haven't changed a bit." I burst into laughter and pulled them back into a hug.

After we finally had our fill of embracing, I invited them inside. Doris set her basket on the kitchen counter and pulled back the floral towel covering it. The warm scent of Doris's famous fresh-baked muffins instantly filled my house.

"Oh, I missed that delicious smell! It's been three months since I saw you and got some of these." I hurried over and pulled one out. "Still warm!"

Doris grinned. "Fresh out of the oven, dear."

Marge flopped back on my couch. "I can't believe it's been three months already. I feel like we just saw each other

yesterday.”

“It feels like eternity for me.” Doris settled down beside her. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much I miss you all.”

“Axel not keeping you occupied?” Alice took a seat in the chair across from them, pressing a finger to her chin. “Because as newlyweds, you two should have plenty of things to keep you busy.”

Doris’s cheeks flushed pink as she wafted a hand at Alice. “Axel and I are just fine, thank you very much! That doesn’t mean I can’t miss you ladies.”

Doris and Axel had said “I do” in a small ceremony on the ranch six months ago. They’d had a short engagement, and Alice, of course, had teased her relentlessly that it was because she couldn’t wait to get him in the sack. Doris had denied it until she was blue in the face, but damned if they didn’t disappear for hours within minutes of the ceremony finishing, leaving us widows rolling with laughter at the accurate accusation.

“I’m just teasing, Doris.” Alice reached into her purse, pulled out a travel-sized bottle of vodka, and then dumped it into the glass of water I handed her.

“Not one bit.” I laughed as I passed glasses of water to the other ladies. “You haven’t changed one bit.”

Alice took a sip of her cocktail, then set it down. “Well, one thing changed.”

We all stared at her, waiting for an answer.

Her eyes widened. “You can’t tell?”

“Tell what?” I raked her with a gaze.

With a huff, she gestured to her eyes. “I had eyelash extensions put on this morning.”

“Is that what those are?” Marge furrowed her brow. “I thought some spiders were doing the dirty on your eyelids.”

I burst into laughter, nearly spewing water out my nose.

Alice scoffed. “They are all the rage right now. I wear falsies during my shows, but these stay on all the time. I happen to think they really open up my eyes.”

With a shrug, Marge said, “I guess if spiders doing the nasty on your eyelids is in style, then you completely nailed the look.”

Alice laughed and tossed a pillow at her. Marge dodged it, so it smashed into Doris and spilled some of the water in her glass.

“Hey! You got my pants wet!” She huffed and started dabbing at the spot. “You’d think after spending the past year together, you two would have figured out how to be nicer to each other.”

“Nah. In fact, we spend so much time together, we just figured out how to up our retorts.” Marge chuckled, and Alice lifted her glass in a cheers.

A ping of jealousy twitched inside of me thinking of Marge and Alice spending so much time together in Las Vegas. From the photos they constantly sent Doris and me of the two of them out on the town, it seemed they were glued together in their new lives. An unlikely pairing, to be certain, but the bonds of friendship we’d forged through our shared adventures had kept tight even without the Wilder Widows meetings forcing them together.

The four of us had gotten together several times since our last official outing, and as elated as I was to see them, each visit left me feeling sad and hollow when we had to say our goodbyes. It seemed so unreal that I’d nearly dismissed them when they’d come knocking on my door, and now my life felt empty when they weren’t around. Without their prodding, I might never have stepped outside my comfort zone. Even my blinding happiness with Tom couldn’t overshadow my love for these three little women who had taken up such a huge part of my heart.

“So, spill,” I said as I settled back in my chair. “What is going on with everyone?”

They all looked around, and finally, Alice started. “Well, let’s see. My show is sold out every night. Of course.” She flashed her straight, white teeth in a grin. “And, in even bigger news, the producers have approached me about booking me on a world tour. They want to take *Gammy* on the road! These beauties are going international!” She kicked up her legs, giving us a show of those stems that any woman of any age would turn green with envy over.

“What!” I shrieked, sitting up so fast I also spilled my water.

Doris grasped her chest. “You’re kidding! Oh, gosh! That’s incredible!”

Marge furrowed her brow. “Wait a minute. Does that mean you’re leaving me in Vegas? Why the hell didn’t you tell me this before?”

Alice twisted her lips. “I wanted to share the news with all of you at once. And it’s just an offer at this point. I haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

“But you’re going to, right?” My jaw remained slack. “I mean, a *world tour* of your show? Isn’t that a dream come true?”

Alice spun her drink in her fingers. “It is. It’s bigger than a dream come true, to be honest. The dream was to be a Vegas showgirl. I now do that five nights a week. This ... this is bigger than the dream.”

Marge grumbled. “Who’d have thought so many people would want to come see some old broad up on stage kicking up her stems?”

Alice arched an eyebrow and gestured to her legs. “These stems are worth every dollar of admission.”

“This is incredible, Alice.” I shook my head. “Truly incredible. I’m so proud of you.”

“Me too.” Doris’s cheeks grew with her smile. “And to think this is all happening because of what we did last year in Vegas. Isn’t life amazing?”

“Our lives all changed because of that trip.” I looked around at them. “I found Tom again. Marge met Roxie. Doris met Axel. And Alice became a star. I can still barely believe how much has changed in such a short time.”

“Don’t forget,” Marge chuckled. “We three weren’t the only ones to find true love. After we got to Vegas, Alice hunted down the one that got away—Harry Hayes.”

Alice rolled her eyes as Marge’s laughter poured out, shaking her shoulders.

“Shut up, Marge,” Alice scolded.

I joined in on the laughter, already knowing the full story. Six months ago, Alice informed us that Harry Hayes, the dashing movie star who got away, had been elated to get a call from Alice when she’d moved to Las Vegas. Alice had donned her sexiest attire and gone to his penthouse for lunch ... and the little romantic rendezvous she’d been imagining for years. But much to her horror, the man that had opened the door to greet her was no longer the heartthrob she’d been envisioning. Since he was older than her when they’d met fifty years earlier, he was now, well, elderly.

“I still can’t believe you thought he’d look exactly the same, Alice.” I snorted. “I mean, we all age.”

“Speak for yourself,” she tutted. “I happen to have found a pause button on this whole aging process. I guess I just thought with his money and history of being Hollywood’s sexiest star, that he’d have kept up on himself too.”

“What? The oxygen tank he was hoisting around wasn’t a turn-on?” Marge snorted.

Doris tittered beside us. “You know, it’s not all about looks, Alice. Maybe you should have given him a chance.”

Alice’s perfect nose scrunched up. “I could literally hear his diapers crunching when he walked, Doris. Diapers!”

Marge and I crumpled into laughter, clutching our stomachs as Doris and Alice joined.

“The one that got away,” I managed out before hysterics. “You sure did dodge a bullet there.”

“I dodged a freaking barrage of bullets! A machine gun spray of bullets! I could be there wiping his ass right now!”

She sputtered out the last words. Tears started to pour from my eyes at the vision of beautiful, elegant Alice grimacing while she used a wet wipe on her ancient husband’s ass.

“It’s all fun and games to date older, rich, worldly men, but no one warns you about the end result.” She shook her finger. “No one warns you that there’s ass wiping in your future! For me? Younger men! This is why I’m *only* dating younger men now. No one is wiping anyone’s ass, okay?”

“So, you’re saying you’re going to be the one getting your ass wiped?” I laughed.

Alice’s mouth opened into a big “O” that matched her wide eyes. “Never! I will never, *ever* need my ass wiped! I’m gonna be a fit, healthy, sexy woman well into my hundreds!”

“You keep telling yourself that, sweet cheeks.” Marge grinned. “But plastic surgery isn’t going to stop the aging process happening underneath all that taut, pulled skin. It’s coming for you, Alice. It’s coming. Diapers are in all our futures ... yours included.”

A flicker of fear ignited in Alice’s eyes, but she quickly extinguished it, scoffing as she crossed her legs the other way, showing off her incredible form. “Whatever. I’m not aging. I pass. Hard pass.”

“Oh, it’s that easy, huh?” I laughed.

“It is for me. I’m just passing.”

“I don’t mind aging,” Doris said. “It’s a gift many people aren’t given. Like our dear departed husbands, for instance.” She pursed her lips and gave us all a little look. “I bet they would happily don some diapers for the honor of growing old.”

Her words, though playful, hit me harder than I liked. I glanced up at the photo of Bruce again.

“Well, that’s depressing.” Marge shook her head. “Thanks for tossing a big pot of water, dousing out our good times.”

Doris frowned. “Well, I didn’t mean to be depressing. I just meant it’s the truth. We should be so honored to get the chance to grow old. Especially, grow old together.”

Her sweet smile warmed me back up again, and from the looks on Marge and Alice’s faces, it warmed them back up too.

“Well, I think it’s high time we put a little skip in our steps today.” Alice leaned down and pulled a bottle of whiskey from her purse.

“Oh, no! No way!” Doris swatted the air. “I’ve had my fill of whiskey, thank you very much.”

Marge grinned. “What? You afraid you’re gonna puke again?”

Doris’s wide eyes and her enthusiastic nod answered the question. “Yes! I was green for two days!”

“You really were.” I laughed at the memory.

“Tradition is tradition, ladies.” Alice spun the bottle in her hands. “We are at our one-year anniversary for our Wilder Widows adventure, which means we drink some whiskey, and then later, we pull out the first wish from the basket.”

My heart rattled with excitement at the thought of another adventure with my best gals.

“We’re really doing this again?” Doris asked, worry creasing the lines deeper in her face.

“You bet your sweet ass we are.” Marge slapped her thigh. “Give me that whiskey, and let’s get this show on the road!”

“That’s my girl!” Alice opened the bottle and took a swig, then handed it to Marge.

“Do we want glasses?” I arched a brow.

Marge took a big swig, finishing with an “ahh.” “Save the glasses. Straight from the bottle this time, ladies.”

With excitement fluttering inside my stomach, I took a swig next, handing it to Doris after the burn singed the back of my throat.

“Oh, I don’t know, girls.” She stared at it like a nuclear bomb that may detonate at any time.

Alice leaned forward, her piercing gaze narrowing with a sly smile. “Because you drank whiskey last time, you ended up on the adventure of a lifetime and with a hot cowboy husband who curls your toes in ways you’ve never imagined. Drink the whiskey, Doris. Let’s see what happens this time.”

Doris chewed her lip, then passed a nervous glance between us. Finally, she let out a deep breath and took a big swig.

“Whoo!” Marge cheered as Doris choked down the strong booze. “The Wilder Widows ride again!”

We all joined her in a cheer, each taking another long swig from the bottle.

“I missed you ladies.” I reached across the small space separating me from the couch and pulled Doris’s hand in mine, then across to Alice and clutched hers. Doris grabbed Marge’s hand, and the four of us sat smiling at each other.

The Wilder Widows.

Together again.

CHAPTER TWO

With whiskey lubricating our tongues, the widows and I rolled with laughter as we caught up on all the past events since we'd last gotten together. Alice and her many love affairs. Marge and the many eccentric moments of living out her life as a lesbian. Doris finally spilled the beans about the hot sex ... and the hooties ... she'd been having with Axel. And I just went on and on about how happy I had been after finding Tom again.

Marge choked on her laughter as she finished a story. "And then the drag queen hooked a heel in the crack in the floor, and all six foot six of her came crashing down on top of me like a freaking sequoia tree had met its match with a lumberjack, and I was the poor woodland creature beneath it! I swear when I finally climbed out from under her, I thought I'd broken my shin!"

We howled along with her, visions of Marge at a drag club crushed beneath a dancer burned into my mind for eternity.

"I can't even imagine!" Doris's shoulders shook with her laughter.

"Oh, I can imagine," Alice added. "I can imagine because I was there! I saw the whole damn thing go down. I even screamed at her to move, but maybe I should have been yelling timber!"

We laughed harder, my soul refilling with every laugh, every smile, and every moment spent with these ladies. *My ladies.*

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I let out a long sigh. "Wow. That is too much. I wish I could have seen that."

"Me too." Marge finished her chuckles. "You would have thought it hilarious."

We all sighed in unison, catching the breath laughter had stolen from us.

Needing to rehydrate my parched mouth, I took a sip of my water.

“Hey! That’s not whiskey!” Alice scolded, lifting the bottle and shaking it at me.

Waving my hands at her, I flopped back in my seat. “I need a break. I’m wasted.”

“Same,” Marge agreed.

“I feel funny again.” Doris held up her hand and looked at it. “It’s not shaking this time though, so that’s good!”

“They will shake tomorrow,” Marge said. “The hangover is what brings the shakes. And the pukes.”

Doris puckered her lips tight. “Oh, no. I don’t want the shakes and the pukes again.”

“Then drink some water. It helps to hydrate.” I pushed her glass at her, and she guzzled it down.

“Amateurs.” Alice rolled her eyes and took another swig from the bottle.

“Wow. I sure am gonna miss sitting here with you ladies,” I admitted, standing up to fill up the pitcher of water again.

“What does that mean?” Doris asked, and I froze in my tracks.

“Oh.” I spun toward them a little too fast and nearly lost my balance. The countertop steadied me as I gripped it. “Um, I have something to tell you, girls.”

“What’s going on?” Marge sat forward, concern furrowing her brow.

“I, uh ... I’m selling my house.”

“What?” they questioned in unison.

“You can’t do that!” Doris cried out. “What? Why?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Alice lifted her hands. “What do you mean you’re selling your house? I thought we all agreed to keep our houses here so we could come back and visit a few weeks every year.”

I walked back over and sat back down. “I know. I know we did, but I think keeping this house is holding me back from moving completely forward with Tom. Every time I come here, I’m riddled with guilt about moving on so quickly ... and going back to the man who was the true father of the child Bruce raised. I think holding onto this house is stopping me from closing that chapter on my life completely and moving forward.”

Marge’s frown deepened. “But does that mean you won’t be coming back here?”

“No! Of course not!” I reached over and took her hand in mine. “It just means I’ll have to stay with one of you if that’s okay, or I can get a hotel.”

“My house is enormous,” Alice said. “You’re always welcome there. And I have no intentions of selling. Real estate is a great investment.”

“So, you aren’t leaving us?” Doris’s eyes shimmered with tears.

“No! Never. I will never leave you, ladies. I just think that maybe this house is the problem, and it’s time I said goodbye.”

Marge smushed her brow. “Wait. There are problems? With you and Tom?”

My head nearly fell off I shook it so hard. “None. In fact, things with Tom couldn’t be more perfect. But somewhere inside of me, something is ... missing. I don’t know. Just ignore me. It’s probably just the whiskey talking.”

“Whiskey is truth serum. Don’t forget that.” Marge waved her finger in my face.

“It is,” I agreed. “And on the truth serum, I can tell you that I love Tom with my whole heart. Always have, always will. And Rachel took finding out he’s her real father in such stride. I knew she would, but seeing her and Tom build their relationship has been just incredible. But deep down, that stupid guilt rises up every time I see them together. Guilt that I took raising her away from Tom. Guilt that she never knew her

real father. Guilt that I lied to Bruce all those years. Just guilt. And I want it gone. So, I'm selling the house."

Doris tipped her head. "And you think that will help you let go of Bruce?"

With a heavy sigh, I answered, "I hope so. It's the only thing left I can think of to do. There's just something ... missing."

Alice leaned over and put a hand on my shoulder. "You do what you need to do to move forward and find your happiness. We'll understand."

"You will? You won't be mad?"

"We understand, Sylvie." Doris pinched her face, concern twisting it all up. "But I worry about you now. You deserve to be happy."

Marge nodded along. "As long as you don't ditch us, we won't be mad."

"You know I'll never ditch you. You ladies are my world. I'm so glad you understand."

Marge rubbed her chin. "You know. Since my mom passed away, I've also wondered what to do about my house. I don't exactly have a fortune to keep paying taxes and maintenance on it while I'm not even living there."

Doris's eyes went big. "Are you thinking of selling too?"

With a shrug, she slumped down. "I don't know. Maybe? I mean, if Sylvie is selling, maybe I should too."

"Oh! Then you can both stay with me!" Alice lit up. "Slumber party!"

"Well, I'm not selling." Doris shook her head hard. "I raised my family in that house. Too many memories to part with it. I want to leave it to the kids when I'm gone. I'm going to start renting mine out with the VRBO place. Maybe you should look into that, Marge."

"Maybe." Marge tipped her head the scrunched up her face. "I don't know how I feel about strangers going through

my stuff, though. I'm just tossing out ideas now since Sylvie said she was selling. I guess I'll look into both."

We sat in silence for a few long moments, and a mutual sadness passed between us.

"Wow. So, we're really moving on with our lives, huh?" I looked across their faces. "Really closing the door on Wilder Lane?"

More silence.

"I'm sad." Doris frowned. "I don't want you all to sell."

"You live on a ranch now, Doris," I said. "And you love it there."

"I do." She sighed. "You should see El Diablo. He's such a ladies' man. I'm gonna have a baby El Diablo next year. Axel just bred him."

"Oh, wow!" I clapped my hands together. "That's going to be wonderful!"

"I'm very excited. I'm going to be a grandmother again." Doris smiled, but the excitement she mentioned wasn't behind it.

I waved a hand in the air. "See! We all have great things waiting for us outside Wilder Lane. And it doesn't mean we aren't going to see each other as much. We will always make each other a priority. And each year, we're doing our wishes, no matter what!"

The sadness threaded between us softened as we all nodded.

"The wishes in *that* basket!" Alice pointed a pink-tipped finger at the knitting basket in the center of my coffee table. "The wishes we are going to pull out starting right now."

"Oh, hell yeah!" Marge bobbed her head up and down. "I am *so* ready for our next adventure!"

Doris narrowed her eyes. "Is your wish going to almost get us killed again?"

With a sinister smile, she shrugged. “Guess you’ll find out when it’s my turn.”

With a groan, Doris slunk into the couch. “Oh, geez. It’s gonna be scary, isn’t it?”

Marge just chuckled.

“Are we picking now?” Excitement bubbled up inside of me as memories from our first adventure flooded back into my mind.

“Well, as agreed, we’ve all cleared our schedules for the next month, right?” Alice looked between us, and we nodded. “Good. Then let’s get going and pick our wishes to kick off your bachelorette party!”

“Bachelorette party?” My eyes widened as I looked between them.

“Yep.” Marge gave a sharp dip of her head. “This is going to be one big bachelorette party for you! Us ladies talked, and it’s been decided.”

I clapped my hands together quickly. “Oh! Yay! So where are we going?”

With a snort, Alice pointed to the basket. “We’re going wherever the hell those wishes say we’re going.”

“Oh, my.” Doris fanned her face. “I’m so nervous and so excited! Who goes first?”

“Me,” Alice stated, and we all tipped our heads. “Two reasons. One, I went first last time, so I think we should just start there. Two, my wish has a specific date range we need to hit, so I vote me. Does anyone else’s wish have specific dates we need to do?”

We all shook our heads.

Alice grinned a smile so sinister that the butterflies in my stomach took flight then bolted into hiding.

“Perfect,” she crooned as she stood up. “Then I go first. Let me just reach in here and find mine. I marked it with a

dog-ear when I wrote it so I would know which one to reach for.”

“Clever.” I chuckled. “So, you’ve been planning on going first since we wrote these last year?”

“Of course.” She grinned as she popped off the top of our knitting basket. “I’m always first, remember?”

“Oh, geez. Oh, geez. Oh, geez.” Doris pressed her hands together and threw up a prayer. “Dear Lord, please don’t let it be anything bad. Please don’t let it be anything bad.”

“Let it be bad.” Marge leaned forward in her seat, eyes bulging wider than normal as she stared at Alice’s hand emerging from the basket.

“Well? What is it?” Shudders of excitement coursed through me as she unfolded the wish and held it up.

“Ladies, pack your bags because we fly out tomorrow morning and head out on ...”

We held our breath, each of us leaning forward, waiting for her to finish the sentence that would catapult us out onto our next journey.

“A cougar cruise!” She finished with a huge smile, opening the piece of paper to show us what she’d written.

“Cougars?” Doris shrieked. “I’m not cruising with cougars! Those things could kill us!”

Alice smacked her forehead. “Cougars like older ladies, Doris. A cougar cruise is a cruise where older ladies meet younger men, known as cubs.”

Doris gasped and clutched her chest. “I’m married!”

“And I’m getting married.” I arched an eyebrow.

“And I’ve got Roxie. I don’t need a cruise. I’m already a cougar.” Marge waggled her eyebrows.

“You don’t have to go cougaring yourselves, ladies. This is my wish, and I want to go on a cougar cruise and treat myself to some time with young, sexy studs in the sun. You can just soak up the rays, sip the fruity cocktails and enjoy the cruise

that will take us all through the Caribbean! Antigua, Barbados, Cozumel, Puerto Vallarta ... we're gonna see it all, babies!"

She lifted her hands in the air like the grand finale to one of her critically acclaimed performances.

At first, a bit of anxiety bubbled up when I considered what Tom would think of me jumping on a ship filled with horny young men. But then I remembered how he'd dipped me backward and kissed me before I'd left, telling me to jump into each adventure with both feet and not worry about him while I was gone.

"Okay! I'm in!" I jumped up. "We're going on a cougar cruise!"

"Yay!" Alice hopped up and down. "Ladies? You ready to get your cruise on?"

She and I turned to face Doris and Marge. Marge slapped her thighs and stood up. "Let's do it, baby!"

We cheered and turned to look at Doris. She chewed on her lower lip. "And there won't be any real cougars there, right? I don't like wild animals."

"No real cougars, Doris. The only cougar you need to worry about is this one." I waved a hand over Alice as she curtsied.

Finally, Doris stood. "Okay! I'm in!"

"The band is back together again!" Marge shouted, grabbing the bottle of whiskey from Alice and taking a swig. We all followed suit, finishing with a big group hug.

"Look out, boys! I'm coming!" Alice cheered, and then hugged us again.

ALICE

CHAPTER THREE

“Taken. I’m taken. Taken,” Marge spit out to every hot, young stud we passed by as we made our way onto the cruise ship. “Hands off. These goods are bought.”

As she told them no, I locked eyes with every six-pack-clad hottie I passed, my predatory gaze telling them the exact opposite. I was *not* taken, but I would like to be taken by them ... over and over again.

“Would you stop it?” Sylvie laughed, swatting Marge on the shoulder with her purse. “I’m also taken, and you don’t see me barking at every man we pass. Just act normal.”

Marge grabbed a fruit-adorned cocktail off the tray a cruise attendant held out in greeting. “Just don’t want any confusion, is all. I’m a taken lady.” She held up her glass and looked at it. “Hey! This kinda looks like the drink I had when I first met Roxie!” She grinned at us, then passed a look to all the nearby men and shouted, “You know, Roxie, my lady! Since I’m *taken!*”

I burst into laughter and slung an arm around her shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll be beating them off later, but for now, let’s just try to relax and have fun. We need to find our rooms and get unpacked. Then we begin our ten full days of pure paradise, ladies!”

Doris squealed with excitement as she hopped beside me. “I’ve never been on a cruise! This is just so exciting.” Her face fell as she leaned in. “And you’re sure there aren’t any real cougars on this ship? I really don’t want to be trapped on a boat with a wild animal.”

“The only cougar you need to worry about is me,” I said as a young man passing by captured my gaze, holding it with promises of pleasure sparkling in his aqua eyes.

I answered back with my own sultry promises, making a note to find him later.

“Okay, per the ship’s map, our cabins are this way.” Sylvie tucked the map into her purse and forged ahead, grabbing a cocktail on her way.

We each found our rooms, and I was pleasantly surprised by the suites I’d sprung for.

“Oh, Alice! These are too fancy!” Doris cupped her hands over her mouth as she stared into the first room. “I really feel terrible that you wouldn’t let us pay for our own rooms, and now to see these? It makes me feel bad. Did you at least use your AARP discount?”

I scoffed, my face contorting with the ridiculous question. “AARP? Why would I use AARP? That’s for old people.”

“Actually, that’s not true,” Sylvie said. “It’s for anyone over fifty. I know you’ve never told us your real age, but I think I can safely assume you’re over fifty. You should sign up. You get really great discounts. I use mine all the time.”

“I love AARP!” Marge agreed, then held up three fingers. “*And* did you know that if you hold out to subscribe until the third notice, they give you a free cooler? A free cooler! So awesome. I have six.”

“Six coolers?” Sylvie’s eyes went big. “What in the hell do you need six coolers for?”

Marge shrugged. “Why not? They’re free.”

“I didn’t know about the free coolers,” Doris said. “I could use a good cooler. Maybe I’ll wait to sign up until the third notice this year.”

“Nice coolers, too.” Marge nodded along. “You won’t be sorry. Alice, if you want in, I can get you the info. Then just hold steady and wait until that third notice. Then *bam!* Free cooler.”

I closed my eyes for a beat. “I don’t want to use AARP, and I don’t want a free cooler. I would die of embarrassment to hand over an AARP card. Now, can we drop it and get settled in?”

“Sure thing,” Sylvie said, poking her head into the room Doris kept peering into.

“You can go in,” I said.

Doris grinned. “I can?”

I nodded, and she burst into the room.

“It’s fancy!” Doris hurried around to look at everything and then rushed to the window overlooking the ocean. When she turned back to the bed and saw the towel folded up like an elephant on the pillow, she squealed and rushed over to grab it. “Can this room be mine?”

“All yours,” I answered. “Ladies, the rest of us are here.”

Doris followed along with us as we oohed and aahed over our suites. After we each chose our rooms, I called them back out to the hallway.

“Now, there is an orientation we are all required to go to in twenty minutes. Something about safety.” I wafted my hand through the air. “You know. So we don’t die on the cruise or whatever.”

“Is this dangerous?” Doris’s eyes widened.

“No,” Sylvie assured her. “It’s just like when you fly on a plane, and you have to listen to the flight attendant’s spiel. We’ll just learn all the important stuff to make sure we stay safe.”

Doris bit her lip. “Okay. If you say so.”

“I’m here, Doris.” Marge lifted her chin. “Don’t you worry. If this shit goes full *Titanic*, I can beat the crap out of anyone standing between us and the lifeboats. We’re not gonna be the ones left fighting over a floating door.”

“A door they *both* could have fit on, I’ll have you know.” Sylvie pursed her lips and lifted an eyebrow. “If we do end up on a door, we are *all* getting on that thing. No one is sinking to the bottom of the ocean.”

With a roll of my eyes, I sighed. “We’re not going full *Titanic*. Cruise ships are incredibly safe. It’s just something we

have to do. But as soon as the safety meeting ends, we're heading to the pool. I want prime seating to scope out all the cubs without their shirts on and pick my favorites, so have your suits on under your clothes so we can go straight there and get the premium pool lounges. I want the best seats in the house."

Sylvie nodded. "The pool sounds fantastic. Count me in."

"Roxie helped me pick out a new suit just for the cruise." Marge grinned. "I'm ready to cannonball, baby."

"A little sunshine sounds great," Doris added.

"Perfect. Then I'll see you ladies in fifteen back here in the hall."

They each gave me a curt nod, then we all disappeared inside our rooms.

After meeting back in the hallway and attending the safety talk together, where I got a good preview of the goods, I hustled them out of the conference room to the top pool deck with the three bars surrounding it. I'd studied the maps and decided that pool would be the most popular and draw the hottest young studs to it. With only ten days to indulge like I was in a never-ending man-filled buffet, I wanted to enjoy every single second of it.

"Here. These look perfect." I hurried toward the four lounges along the pool situated right next to the largest bar.

Another group of four younger ladies started toward them, but I narrowed my eyes and picked up the pace. My feet throbbed from the increased speed, but just like I did every night when I danced, I ignored the pain caused by years of punishment and pushed on.

"Whoa. Slow down, speed racer!" Marge called, but I sped up after seeing the tall, gorgeous redhead also picking up her pace.

We locked eyes, and I lengthened my already impressive strides until I reached the chairs first. I tossed my oversized bag on the lounge and widened my stance, warning her off my newly claimed territory. With pursed lips and a glare, she

waved at her three friends to follow her to the other side of the pool.

“Nice move,” Sylvie said as she hustled up behind me. “I thought for a second those women were going to beat us.”

With a glance over my shoulder at the women walking away, I smirked. “I didn’t. I always win.”

The redhead with the curves making her resemble Jessica Rabbit tossed one last glare over her shoulder at us, but I just smiled and slid into my newly acquired chaise lounge throne. *I* would be the queen of the cruise, and that broad had better not forget it.

“Damn. She looks like she wants to rip you apart with her cougar claws,” Marge joked as she finally reached us.

I scoffed. “Cougar? She’s no cougar. She can’t be, what, over forty-five? What the hell is she even doing on this cruise anyway?”

As I watched the much-younger woman and her equally youthful pack slide into their own lounge chairs in the far corner, a little snake of envy slithered up my spine. Her skin was as smooth as mine, and I knew without a doubt that it wasn’t medically enhanced as it was in my case. No. Her silky complexion and natural beauty were all organic, and the more I stared at her, the more the snake coiled inside of me, squeezing tight.

“Actually.” Sylvie slid off her sunglasses, “Before the cruise, I looked up what a cougar’s age is, and it turns out, a cougar is generally considered any woman over the age of forty dating a man significantly younger. And some people say even women in their thirties can be officially called cougars if they are dating men in their early twenties. So, she qualifies as a cougar as long as she’s dating dudes younger than her.”

The snake squeezed tighter. “Wait. Are you telling me this cruise will be filled with *young* women all vying for the same men as me?”

Marge chuckled. “What? Can’t handle the competition? Feeling a little threatened, are we?”

I tightened my face. “No. Of course not. I’ve stolen men from women half my age more times than I can count. I just thought this cruise would be filled with ...” I paused as I searched for the word.

“A bunch of blue hairs like us, so you’d look like a supermodel in comparison?” Marge arched an eyebrow.

Yes, I wanted to say, but instead, I shook my head. “I just didn’t realize there would be a bunch of obnoxious youngsters here. That’s all.”

Marge’s sinister stare told me she didn’t buy a word I’d just said, but she didn’t taunt me any further.

“Let’s just get situated so we can start shopping for my first fling.” I pulled off my Chanel sundress slowly, giving the men filtering in—and the staring redhead—a show as I revealed my black plunging one-piece with the sides cut out to show off my impressive figure.

I may be older than you, Jessica Rabbit, but I still have the goods.

“The sun feels wonderful!” Doris pulled off her floral sundress revealing a matching one-piece suit with a ruffled skirt going down to her knees. “But I don’t want to burn, so I’ll need someone to help me get my sunscreen on. I’m not as bendy as I used to be.”

“Same.” Sylvie agreed as she lifted her dress over her head to show off a beautiful, modest suit that flattered her figure well. “I don’t want to go lobster on the first day and ruin the trip. We have so many activities planned at each port, and I would hate to miss them because I’m unable to walk. I’ll do you if you do me.”

“Perfect!” Doris grabbed a bottle of sunblock from her bag and started rubbing it on her arms. “I’ll get what I can reach, and you can fill in the blanks.”

“I need some of that too. Don’t want to get any more wrinkles.” Marge, who’d sported an oversized t-shirt and khaki pants to the safety session, pulled her pants off to reveal her shorts.

My jaw unhinged and almost hit the pool deck. “Marge! What in the holy hell is happening with your legs? My eyes. My eyes!” I slapped a hand over my eyes, shielding them from the horrifying sight.

“What? What’s wrong? Did I cut myself or something?”

I peeked out between my fingers to see Marge glancing down at the limbs I could barely see beneath the wall of dark, curly hair. “Cut yourself? How could you cut yourself? That *hair* is so thick it would act as a shield wall for anything that tried to penetrate. How in the hell have you forgotten to shave your legs for this long? That is not even right!”

Marge furrowed her brow. “I didn’t forget to shave them. I stopped shaving them about six months ago. Turns out, a perk of dating women is that we don’t give a shit about hairy bodies. Women understand that body hair is natural, so we don’t really give a rat’s ass.”

“Lesbians really don’t mind?” Sylvie sat up, passing a shocked glance at Marge’s legs.

“Well, some of them do, of course, but most of us know bodies are hairy. It’s men who think that women are some hairless, baby’s butt smooth creatures. We’re not. We’re as hairy as them. Roxie doesn’t mind at all.”

“Roxie minds.” I looked away, waving a hand in the direction of her legs. “Roxie *definitely* minds. And if she doesn’t, I do. I am not sitting next to Sasquatch this entire trip. I’m taking you down to the salon, and we are ripping that forest off your legs.”

Her furrow deepened. “I’m not going to let some person rip out my leg hair by the roots just because it offends your fragile eyes. You’ll get used to it.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline as I tried not to look at her burly stems. “I will most definitely not get used to it.”

Doris let out a slow breath. “They really are quite unkempt, Marge. Perhaps a little trim would be worthwhile.”

Sylvie tipped her head. “Wow. So, lesbians really don’t mind? Man. If I’d known that, maybe I’d have forgotten all

about Tom and met some hot lady for my last wish. I freaking hate shaving and waxing. I swear, if I could travel back in time, I would find out who started the whole ‘women should be hairless’ trend and stop that shit right in its tracks. Women for centuries could be walking around proudly in all their hairy glory like Marge. Save countless hours and dollars trying to look like a hairless cat.”

“My cat is hairless.” I smirked.

Sylvie swatted me on the arm. “Now I’ll never unsee that mental image.”

I laughed. “It’s not that big of a deal to keep up on staying hairless once you get on a waxing schedule.”

“It still sucks.” Sylvie ran a hand over her smooth leg. “I just really want to go back in time and stop this whole ridiculous trend.”

“So, if you could travel back in time,” Marge said, “you wouldn’t go, say, stop Hitler or something else of that nature? You’d go back and stop ... hair removal?”

Sylvie straightened. “Well, if time travel existed, everyone and anyone would be racing back for all the evil people in the world. There’d be a line a mile long at each tyrant. And for good reason. So instead, I’ll leave everyone else to deal with history’s psychos, and I would be the only one racing back to stop hair removal.”

Laughing, I lifted a hand and flagged the passing server to come over. “Well, even if no one else ever shaved or waxed, I still would. I love how my body looks hairless.”

“To each their own.” Marge gestured to her leg. “I happen to like my au natural look.”

I sat up. “This is my wish, Marge. And I am adding that we don’t spend my entire wish with your horrifying jungle of matted hair ruining my view. Unless Sylvie finds a way to travel back in time and make them more fashionable, I am putting in a formal request we head down to the salon stat and get those things sorted out.”

Marge lifted her leg and moved it toward me. I nearly fell off my lounge chair trying to dodge it. “What? You don’t want to cuddle up with these babies? Snuggle in close and feel the softness on your cheek?”

“Gross! Marge!” I swatted her leg away, horrified when I made contact with the hairy limb.

Marge rolled with laughter, and Sylvie and Doris joined her.

“Oh, Marge. You’re going to give poor Alice a heart attack.” Doris said between giggles. “Maybe just this one last time, you could shave them.”

Marge grumbled and put her leg back down. “Then they’ll be all stubbly and itchy when they grow back in. Took me forever to get them this soft and comfortable.”

I sat up. “Not if you wax. They grow in soft from the start. It will last long enough to keep you smooth the whole trip, and then when you’re back home, they can grow back into those ghastly snarls without any itching or stubble.”

“I’m with Alice on this one,” Sylvie agreed. “I mean, unless I can do the time travel thing, maybe let’s clean those babies up for the trip.”

With a grunt, Marge glanced between us and then sighed. “I don’t want to wax. That sounds painful.”

Lifting a brow, I sat up. “Are you saying you’re *scared* to get a wax, Marge? Big, brave Marge is frightened of a little itty bitty pain? Pain that *I* can endure over and over again?”

Marge sat up straight, looking me square in the eyes. “Are you calling me yellow?”

I held her gaze. “If that’s what it takes to get you to agree, then you’re a canary sitting on a banana floating in a big tub of mustard you’re so damn yellow.”

Her lip stiffened. “I dodged bullets in ‘Nam without breaking a sweat. I’m not yellow.”

“Come with me now, and let’s wax those babies and prove it,” I challenged. “Or ... you could pass, and I’ll always know

you were too scared to handle a wee amount of discomfort. The kind I can endure while sipping on a margarita.”

Marge tightened her face. “I’m in.”

With a satisfied smile, I stuck out my hand, and she grabbed it, giving it a firm shake. “Deal.”

The server arrived holding a small tablet to take our order. “What can I get for you, ma’am?”

I narrowed my eyes. “First off, I’m not a ma’am. My mother was a ma’am. Second, I will need to hold off on drinks because we have to run down to the salon quickly. I’ll give you a hundred dollars to ensure no one takes our seats while we’re gone.”

The server’s eyes went big. “Yes, ma—” She stopped and swallowed. “I mean, yes, I will. Consider them saved.”

“Thank you.” I grinned and stood. “Okay, ladies. Let’s go to the salon and see if they have a wax strong enough to rip those babies out by the roots.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Marge grumbled, then followed behind me.

“This is gonna be fun! I should have them do my mustache,” Sylvie said. “I forgot to have it done before we left.”

As we strode across the vast deck, I exaggerated the sway of my strides to draw attention to my award-winning legs ... the properly waxed ones. The young men who had been filling the bars and seats all took notice of me while I moved past them, and I took notice of them, rating them in the order I wanted to meet them.

“See anything you like?” Sylvie asked as we left the pool area.

“Oh yes.” I grinned. “I’m going to tear my way through each and every one of them.”

“Oh, heavens,” Doris whispered.

With a smirk, I gave one last seductive glance to the twenty-something with the abs I intended to trace with my tongue, then the widows and I made our way to the salon.

“Hello,” I said to the attendant working the desk.

“Welcome to Serenity. I’m Ashley,” she answered with a smile. “How can I help you?”

I leaned onto the desk, the floral smells of massage oils and scented candles permeating every molecule of the air around me. “I don’t have an appointment, but I do have an emergency. Can you please squeeze us in for a quick leg wax?”

She pursed her lips. “Hmm. Our estheticians are all booked up for services today, but I could maybe squeeze you in tomorrow.”

“Works for me,” Marge answered, but I lifted a hand and stopped her.

“Well, it *doesn’t* work for me.” I pulled out a fifty and slid it across the sleek counter. “This is yours if you can just wiggle things around a bit. Just a leg wax. Shouldn’t take long at all.”

Her blue eyes moved over the money, then she reached forward and slid it out of sight. “I suppose I could squeeze you in, and our next client can just wait a little.”

With a wink, I touched her hand. “Smart girl.”

Or not. Should have held out. I’d have gone higher.

“Just have a seat, and I’ll have someone get you shortly. Can I interest you in some cucumber water?”

We all shook our heads and moved to the waiting area, barely sitting down before a handsome, toned, tanned man came out.

“Hi,” he said with a flashy smile. “I’m Antonio. I can take you back now.”

We all turned to Marge, and she slunk a little lower in her seat.

“It’s that one.” I pointed. “And you’re gonna need the super powerful stuff to make any headway. Maybe start with a weedwhacker.”

His eyes widened a flash, and then I saw him fight a smile. “I see. Well, I’m sure I can handle it.”

Marge leaned over and glared at me. “Watch it, Alice, or I’ll have him keep the hair he pulls off, and I’ll put it around you at night while you sleep. You’ll feel all warm and safe until you open your eyes and—bam!” She jumped forward, shoving her hands in my face. “Hair cocoon.”

I gasped and waved my hands. “Oh, God. Please don’t. I’ll jump off the ship.”

“I’m not coming in after you.” Marge waggled her brows.

I glanced at Antonio. “I’ll tip extra if I can watch you put the hair in the garbage. If even one strand ends up in my bed, I swear to God I’ll hunt you down and shove it down your throat.”

Antonio laughed. “You have my word. Now, are you ready?” He turned to Marge.

She twisted her lips, glancing at him and then the door out.

Sylvie pumped a fist. “You’ve got this, Marge.”

“You’ll be alright, dear.” Doris gave her a little pat.

With a grumble, she pushed out of her chair. “I can’t believe you’re making me wax.”

“It’s for your own good,” I answered. When she glared at me, I shrugged. “Okay, it’s for *our* good, but still necessary. Now, go get ’em, tiger.”

“You want me to hold your hand?” Doris started to get up.

“I’ll be fine, Doris. If that pansy Alice can handle this, I can do it in my sleep.” Marge shot me one last look then headed through the door and out of sight.

“Oh, boy,” Sylvie whispered as she leaned in. “It doesn’t hurt you much since you do it regularly. No one told her it hurts more if the hair is longer. Think we should?”

I slid my gaze to her, shaking my head softly. “Let’s not give her any more reason to back out. Those things are a visual hazard to everyone on this ship.”

Sylvie chuckled.

Doris sucked the air through her teeth. “I hope we’re doing the right thing. I don’t want poor Marge to feel like we put peer pressure on her.”

“It’s the right thing,” I answered, grabbing a magazine from the rack. “Well, it’s the right thing for me. I’m not spending my trip with those catastrophes blocking my view of all the young cubs awaiting me. Proper upkeep is imperative to personal hygiene. If you could see what I endure for my beauty regimen, you wouldn’t feel the least bit sorry for her.”

A beauty regimen that seemed to grow with each year. As gravity and time waged war on my body and face, I had to fight harder to hold them back at the gates ... a battle that admittedly got more exhausting as time passed. Wax, pluck, moisturize, tighten, inject, lift, cut. Repeat ad nauseam until all traces of my true age disappeared behind the veil my talented team of experts hoisted in front of me.

I crossed my legs the other way, and my foot throbbed the way it did at random these past months.

Well, my team erased *almost* all traces of my age, anyway.

My aching joints and tendons were no longer easy to ignore, and no makeup artist, esthetician, or even doctor could wave a wand and make them go away. It seemed, finally, my body had betrayed me, and there were no more injections or pills to make my bones and joints age backward. We’d tried everything under the sun, and still, the pain from years of dancing just continued to worsen. Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I carefully rubbed my foot against my leg and pressed, easing the throbbing pain for a bit.

A few moments passed as we waited, and suddenly a gut-wrenching holler came from behind the door.

“Holy cripes!” Marge shouted after another guttural roar.

I clasped a hand over my mouth, stifling a laugh.

“Ow! Crap on a cracker!” she shouted again.

Sylvie covered her face.

“Ho! Yowza! Son of a biscuit!”

Doris pressed her hands together in prayer.

Another howl echoed through the door, then she shouted, “Nope! Stop! I’m out. Screw this!”

A moment later, the door swung open, and Marge stormed out with a wax strip still stuck to her leg. “Nope. No, no, hell no, and no. That waxing shit is for the birds. I’ll take dodging bullets over this crap any day. I’m outta here.”

We jumped up from our seats.

“Marge! You can’t just stop mid-wax!” I shouted, hurrying after her.

She spun and turned to me. “You women are crazy to put yourself through this for some hairless legs. This holy hell is not worth proving to you that I’m not yellow. I’m not yellow, and I’ll show it to you some other way. But this? This is batshit. I’m outta here.”

“But ...” I pointed at her leg with the two smooth strips showing skin between the curly, black tendrils like some kind of reverse mohawk. “But you’re not finished! You can’t just walk around with a few waxed spots on your legs!”

“Can and will.” She crossed her arms and stormed away, ignoring my pleas as I hurried after her.

“Marge! Wait!” I called, but she just kept walking. I finally stopped when I heard Doris and Sylvie come apart behind me. I spun to see them clutching each other tight, tears pouring down their faces as they laughed.

“The wax strip is still on there!” Sylvie howled with laughter.

“Oh, poor Marge!” Doris said between hysterics. “She’s never gonna forgive you, Alice.”

I glanced at the door Marge had just stormed through.

Great. Now I had to spend my trip with a partially waxed Sasquatch.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Look at the buffet! It’s so fancy!” Doris pointed to the extravagant spread in the grand ballroom as we filed inside. “And the chandelier! Wow! Everything is so beautiful.”

“They certainly went all out for our welcome dinner,” Sylvie agreed. “I’m glad you convinced us to dress formally. I had no idea it would be like this.”

Smoothing a hand down my short, black, sparkly gown with the plunging neckline, I lifted my chin. “It’s always better to overdress than underdress. But I’d say we dressed exactly right for the ball. We look fabulous.”

The three women walking alongside me all smiled. Doris and Sylvie each wore beautiful dresses that flattered them well, and Marge had dressed up as much as she would allow in a nice pair of slacks and a button-down shirt.

I glanced at her pants. At least her legs were covered.

“Table seven is us.” Sylvie pointed at the card in her hand, then craned her neck, finally pointing when she saw it. “Over there. We’re at that one.”

I smiled when I saw the four handsome young men already seated at our table, and I threw up a silent thank you to whoever had organized the seating chart. They seemed to have dispersed all the young cubs between the tables, matching everyone up with an even number to start things off on our first night. I hid my grin behind pursed lips when I saw Jessica Rabbit and her friends at a table nearby, and their cubs weren’t nearly as attractive as the four studs waiting for me just ahead.

“Oh, man. Do we have to sit with those meatheads?” Marge grumbled. “Better let them know I’m taken right away. Don’t want any misunderstandings.”

“We’re all taken but Alice,” Sylvie said. “I hope they aren’t disappointed that only one of them has a chance of getting lucky.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Says who?”

Doris flushed an unnatural shade of red. “Oh, Alice! You wouldn’t!”

“Have and would.” I grinned, then strode toward them, narrowing my eyes into seductive slits. “Hello, gentleman.”

They all stood, each clamoring to pull out my chair. When the one with the bulging biceps won out, I smiled softly and slid into my seat.

The widows all introduced themselves, quickly saying they were all in relationships. I rolled my eyes and waved a hand.

“Don’t mind them. They are just here to keep me company. Me, who is definitely *not* in a relationship.”

All their attention spun to me ... just the way I liked it.

As our server came around to take drink orders, I listened to each man’s quick intro, then rated them in order of preference of who I’d like to get to know first. John, the construction worker from Ohio, quickly shot to first place with his flashy smile and vibrant eyes.

“Oh, we forgot to put on our name tags.” Marge pointed at the tags on our table. “Here. I’ll fill them out.”

“I’m not wearing a name tag.” I rolled my eyes.

She grinned, wrote something with the marker on each tag, and then handed them out.

Sylvie and Doris laughed as they held up their tags that said “taken,” and Marge did the same. They clipped them on with the magnets, smiling wide as the four guys at our table joined their laughter. Finally, Marge stood up and walked behind me, sliding a hand over the strap of my dress.

“What are you doing?” I wafted at her hand, but she just tightened her grip on my strap.

“Quit struggling, or I’ll accidentally rip this strap off, and you’ll be flashing your tatas to the whole table.”

“I don’t think Alice would mind,” Sylvie teased.

“I wouldn’t, but I don’t want this dress ruined. It’s Versace. Just hurry up, Marge, and don’t damage the fabric!” I gave up

my fight and allowed her to slip the tag into place, securing it with the magnet on the back.

When she finished, she stood up and planted her hands on her hips. “There. Perfect.”

I craned my neck to read the tag, then nearly tumbled out of my chair.

Single and Horny.

“Marge!” I laughed and started to take it off, but Alec, the cub at my side, stopped my hand with a gentle touch.

“I think you should leave it,” he said in a slow, sultry tone, his azure eyes pulling me in. “I mean, if it’s true, I think you should leave it. I like it.”

“Oh, it’s true,” Marge answered. “Very true.”

I didn’t argue and instead held his eyes while he pulled my hand into his.

“Very well. Single and horny it is.” My eyes locked with his in that oh-so-familiar dance I’d tangoed many times. The one with promises I absolutely intended to keep.

The emcee hopped on the stage, introduced himself, and welcomed us to the cruise. We listened to his spiel while the servers brought around drinks, and I desperately wanted him to stop talking so I could get back to my cubs. But when he finished with an introduction to a band and some dancers, my attention suddenly locked onto the stage like a heat-seeking missile.

Dancers? Were they any good? As good as me? *Better* than me?

“Oh! Dancing, Alice!” Doris leaned over and squeezed my thigh. “Bet you want to get up there, don’t you?”

My heart said yes. Oh, God, please, yes. Let me on that stage. Nothing made my soul sing louder than dancing in front of a crowd. But my body ... my aching, aging body begged me to keep my toned ass glued to the chair.

I just smiled at Doris and watched the dancers filing out, critiquing them in my mind and noting that though they were decades younger than me, I could dance circles around each one of them.

“They ain’t as good as you,” Marge whispered.

I turned to her, waiting for the snarky comment that usually followed, but saw nothing but her eyes glued to the stage.

“Thank you, Marge.”

“I’ve seen you dance enough that I know you could whoop any of these little snot-nosed baby dancers up there. You should get up there and show them what you’ve got.”

A tight purse of my lips contained the smile I wanted to beam. “Well, obviously, but I’m not going to just get up on stage and start dancing.”

Sylvie grinned. “Why not? We did it last year, and look how well that turned out.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Indeed, it did turn out splendid. But stealing the stage was a one-time thing. Now, I’m a renowned dancer of my own accord, and I no longer need to steal the stage. People beg me to dance on it.”

“You’re a dancer?” Eliot, my cub with the soft, wavy brown hair asked, leaning forward. “Get out of town.”

Pride pushed my chin higher. “Yes. I’m the star of my own show. The Las Vegas hit, *Gammy*. I’m a showgirl.”

It had been almost a year since my show had debuted, and it never got old saying those words out loud.

The star of my own show.

It may have taken fifty years longer than I expected to own those words, but I did. And nothing in my life felt more valuable than my ability to say them.

“Wow! Freaking awesome.” He grinned a toothy smile. “I sure would love to see you dance.”

“Me too,” John agreed. “I’d really love to see your ... moves.”

The thinly veiled sexual innuendo didn’t go unnoticed, and I twitched a painted red lip in a smirk. “I bet you would.”

“I want to see the show too,” Alec said, stealing my attention from John.

I glanced back at the stage, and though my feet still throbbed with the pain that seemed unrelenting these days, my heart whispered at them to be quiet and let me back up on that stage where I belonged.

“Maybe I’ll just let the emcee know that I’m here on this cruise, and if they want me to put on a quick show, I can. I mean, it won’t be like my shows in Vegas with the costumes, lights, and choreography, but I’m sure I can throw something together that’s better than this.” I waved a hand at the girls dancing behind me.

“I think that’s a great idea!” Doris clapped her hands. “I do love watching you dance.”

“Do it,” Sylvie agreed. “Go talk to him.”

With all the eyes at the table encouraging me on, I tipped my head in a quick nod and excused myself. Having an impromptu dance on the stage would be an excellent way to set myself apart from the other cougars out hunting for cubs. I could wow them all in one fell swoop and obliterate my competition.

I glanced at Jessica Rabbit. *Look out, hussy. You may be younger, but I’m the one they’ll all be clamoring to.*

When I got to the emcee, I extended my hand and introduced myself. The moment he heard my stage name, his eyes lit up.

“You’re Gammy? Oh, man! What a treat! We all saw you a few months ago during a company outing in Las Vegas. Wow! I can’t believe you’re here on this cruise. You truly are a talent.”

I dipped my chin in a modest nod. “Thank you. I appreciate the kind words. And I just wanted to let you know that if you would like me to do a little showcase during the trip, I would love to hop up on stage for a few spins. I’m barely away from my own show and already itching to get back up there.”

His eyes went big. “Really? You’d dance for us here?”

“I’d be happy to. Anytime.”

He glanced at the stage. “This set is done in a few minutes if you want to hop up. I know it would be a real treat for the guests.”

I passed a glance around the room, noting all the handsome young men who would leave here interested in meeting me. “Yes. That sounds lovely.”

His smile nearly broke his face. “Fantastic! Just let me know what you’d like the band to play, and I’ll get them cued up for you. Do you need anything else? There are some costumes and shoes in the back. Of course, nothing as fancy as what you’re used to, but you’re welcome to go back and sift through the outfits we use for the other shows.”

I glanced down at my gown, noting how the flared skirt I chose to showcase my legs tonight would allow all the high kicks and leaps my little heart desired. “Wonderful.” I grinned. “My dress and shoes will be just fine, but I could use a different pair of bottoms under this dress, though.” I leaned in. “Unless you want me high-kicking in a thong. Either way works for me.”

A pink blush swept across his cheeks. “I think the dancers have extra bloomers in the back. This way.” He gestured to a door behind the stage, and I followed him back.

After being introduced to the handful of performers getting ready for their set, I grabbed a new pair of tight, brief-style bottoms to slide over my thong and under my dress. After making sure I was ready for my debut, I stood behind the curtain, waiting for Jake, the emcee, to announce me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very exciting treat for you tonight. The star of the hit Las Vegas show, *Gammy*, is here with us on our cruise, and she’s agreed to dance for you all tonight! Let’s put our hands together for *Gammy*!

The sound of applause flooded into my soul as I waited for the curtain to open. When it did, and the light hit me, all the pains in my feet and knees faded away as my body moved in the steps it knew by heart. I leaped and spun out to the front of the stage, relishing every second in the spotlight. For so many years, I had craved its heat, desired the brightness nearly blinding me, and now that I had it back, I never wanted to step out of it.

The audience cheered as I danced, and though the spotlight made it hard to see into the crowd clearly, I made out enough faces of hot, young cubs staring at me in awe. Jessica Rabbit watched with her lips squished into a tight, white line, and I had to keep from flashing her a special smile.

As I finished up a five-minute set that had everyone oohing and aahing over my moves, I leaped into a spin from a high kick. When I landed, I cursed the fancy heels strapped to my feet, and for a moment, I wished I was in Marge’s honkin’ orthopedic kicks. In my youth, I could dance in stilettos, but now, whenever I came down in them, it felt like I’d strapped razor blades to my feet.

“Why the hell can’t they make fancy and comfortable dancing shoes?” was the last thought that registered before the crippling pain shot through my left foot, stealing my breath as it radiated through me. I collapsed onto my other foot. The quick movement to relieve the agony sent me a hefty step forward ... a step out past the front of the stage.

My eyes flashed wide when I felt the open air underneath me. As I began my plummet to the ground, I caught the horrified faces of the widows staring back at me.

Holy. Shit. I’m falling off stage.

The horror! A dancer’s worst nightmare. A nightmare worse than Freddy Krueger coming to life and slashing me to pieces with his fingertip scalpels. No. That was nothing

compared to this. Falling off the stage was the greatest nightmare of all ... a nightmare that was now happening to me.

It seemed like time slowed to a stop as I careened toward the black and white tiled dance floor below. Pure horror and embarrassment overtook any fear I had of injury upon landing from the five-foot drop. But instead of smashing into the ground in front of an audience filling the room with their gasps, my fall stopped short when I landed in a pair of strong arms.

“Whoa,” a deep, Spanish voice said as he pulled me to his chest. “You okay?”

Embarrassment like I’d never known flooded through me. I struggled to gain my bearings and process how I’d fallen from grace in such a horrific and public way.

But then ...

Then I looked up into the most beautiful pair of amber eyes on the face of a gorgeous, tanned-skin man. My stunned gaze traveled to his chiseled jaw and salt and pepper hair, then down to the ship’s uniform covering what felt like a muscular body beneath it. My breath trapped in my throat as my heart stalled out while feelings I’d never known awakened inside me.

“Are you okay?” he asked again.

“I, uh, yes ... I, uh.” Words stuck on my tongue as I struggled to form any sort of coherent response. The beautiful man clutching me to his chest left me too stunned to form words.

“That could have been quite a spill,” he paused and looked at my chest, then his eyebrows rose to his hairline. “Single and Horny.”

Now it was my turn for my eyebrows to shoot up. “Excuse me?”

“I said, that could have been quite a spill, Single and Horny.” He pointed to my chest. “Or is that not your name?”

I peeked down at the nametag I'd forgotten to take off, and my cheeks flamed with heat. "Oh. That. Uh, a joke."

"So, do you have a name then, or should I just keep calling you Single and Horny?"

"Alice," I answered quickly, glad my tongue had finally loosened up in the presence of the Adonis of an older man clutching me tight. "My name is Alice."

"I'm Captain Alejandro," he responded, his Spanish accent more noticeable as he said his name.

"Captain?" I asked as he started to set me down.

"Yes. I'm the Captain of this ship. And lucky for you, I stopped in to introduce myself to the guests and just happened to be by the stage when you fell."

As my feet touched the ground, I was pulled from the intimate bubble he'd created by rescuing me from certain injury. Suddenly, I was back on the ship in a room full of spectators, and I'd just fallen off the stage in front of them.

"Alice!" Doris called as she hustled toward us with the other two widows in tow. "Are you hurt?"

My horrified gaze swept across the shocked guests, pausing on the smirking Jessica Rabbit before coming back to the widows now arriving beside me.

"Um, yes. I'm fine." I lifted my chin. "I'm not used to such a small stage. And the ship hit a wave, I think," I lied loudly enough I knew most of the diners could hear.

The truth was we hadn't hit a wave, and it wasn't the size of the stage. It was that my body had betrayed me once again, and the realization of what that meant sent a wave of anxiety through me even stronger than what I'd felt knowing I'd fallen from grace in front of all the cubs and women still staring at me.

And in front of *him*.

I looked back up at Captain Alejandro, and my knees went weak when I locked eyes with him again. And this time, my knees weren't going weak from the arthritis settling in.

Emotions I didn't even know I possessed awakened inside me as I stood captive in his hypnotic gaze.

"I'm sorry about the extra motion that caused you to fall," he said, his eyes holding steady on mine as he lied to protect my pride. "You'll get your sea legs in a day or two, and you'll have no problem kicking those legs up as high as you want. Until then, perhaps stay on the ground."

"My sea legs. Yes," I agreed, grateful for the extra ammo to regain my lost pride. "I didn't take the movement of the ship into account. I'm not used to my stage tipping beneath me."

"You sure you're okay?" Doris passed a motherly check over me.

I waved her off. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Cripes. Thought you were gonna break your neck on the fall, and we'd have to get you a helper monkey to feed you for the rest of your life." Marge blew out a puff of air.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I don't need a *helper monkey*. I am just fine, thank you very much. Captain Alejandro here broke my fall. Thank you, Alejandro." I gave him my most alluring smile, hoping it would erase all memories of my embarrassing fall from grace.

"Always happy to help a damsel in distress." He grinned back, tipping his chin. "It was nice to meet you, Single and Horny. I mean, Alice."

I caught his sly smile just before he turned and walked away, and I took a moment to appreciate how his white uniform clung to his impressive physique ... especially the round ass I couldn't tear my eyes away from. He had to be in his late fifties and yet had more sex appeal in his little finger than every twenty-something musclebound cub on the ship.

"Yum," Sylvie whispered in my ear, noting my locked gaze. "Not exactly the young cub you've been hunting, but damn. He's a fine specimen."

As I stared at him until he disappeared from sight, I took a moment to process all the emotions he'd shaken awake inside

of me. I felt like a young, excited girl again with her very first crush on the cute new boy at school. But I was no young girl, and he was no boy.

I shook my head and looked back at Sylvie with a smile. “No. He’s not a cub at all. That man is a lion.”

A lion I wanted to tame.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Caribbean sun warmed my skin while I sat poolside with the three widows sprawled in their chairs beside me.

“Now, this is the life,” Sylvie said with a sigh. “I could just live on a cruise ship and call it a day.”

“People do that, you know.” Marge turned, her oversized sunglasses hiding her eyes. “I saw a special on it once. Retired people sell all their stuff, and for about the same price as owning a home and paying for all your food, you can live on a cruise ship.”

“Really?” Sylvie straightened up. “I wonder if I could convince Tom to be a permanent resident of a cruise ship.”

“I don’t think I could do it,” Doris fanned her face from the sun’s heat. “It’s been two days, and I still haven’t found my sea legs. My anti-nausea patch still hasn’t kicked in. I don’t think I’m made for the high seas.”

We’d been on this ship for two days ... two days since the welcome party where I’d last seen Alejandro.

I passed a glance around the pool, my gaze ignoring all the hot, young men splashing around it and searching for the only one who now had my attention.

Nothing. No sign of him.

My head had been on a constant swivel since that night, just hoping for a chance to see him again. I’d even found reasons to parade around near the command center, hoping to catch him coming or going from inside it, but I never snagged another glimpse of my lion.

“I bet Roxie would love living on a cruise ship.” Marge crossed her legs, and I cringed against the visual of the hairy limbs with the one smooth strip breaking apart the forest.

“Pants, Marge. You need pants. Or like one of those old-style swimsuits they made ladies wear for modesty. I think those covered the legs.”

Marge arched an eyebrow and uncrossed then crossed her legs again, this time slowly and bringing the horrific offender close to me in the gesture. “I think they look cool like this. I’m setting a trend. Like a reverse mohawk.”

“That is *not* going to be a trend.” I waved a hand to get her legs away from me.

“Quit yer bitchin’. Just be happy I shaved my face because it ain’t pretty with these Italian genes. Getting worse as I age. I swear I’d look like Dumbledore if I didn’t shave every morning. I love *Harry Potter*, and I love me some Dumbledore, but even I have a limit to what I’ll allow. No beards for me unless I get invited to Hogwarts to be a wizard. Then maybe I would sport one.”

“Oh, man.” Sylvie sat straight up. “I’m so glad I’m not the only one getting a hairy face! I swear, every day, I have a new hair pop up. I’m on a wax schedule now that has the little buggers under control, but why didn’t I know about this part of aging? It’s mortifying.”

“I have them too,” Doris admitted. “I spend at least a half hour a night just tweezing away.”

They all looked at me. I arched an eyebrow. “What? I don’t have facial hair.” I spat out the lie. “Disgusting.”

“Oh, really?” Marge leaned forward. “None, huh? Not even a straggler?”

I reached for my cocktail, slipping the martini glass stem between my fingers. “Nope. Not a one.”

Her lip twitched. “Interesting. Then what exactly is that long, curly, black thing spouting out of your neck?”

My eyes bulged out of my head as I slammed my drink back on the table and covered the side of my neck she pointed at. “What? Where?”

“It’s been there for days.” Marge grinned. “I’ve been calling it ‘Hairy Potter’ just waiting for you to notice it.”

“Marge!” I screamed, heat flushing my face as I imagined it blowing in the wind as I’d talked to all the young men

who'd approached me. "You didn't tell me?"

With a snort, she shook her head. "And ruin this moment of letting you know that you've got a boar hair sticking out of your perfect neck after you've spent days on a cruise ship with it? After what you put me through with the waxing, not on your life."

My wide eyes met Sylvie and Doris. "Did you see it? Is it really there?"

"I didn't notice it if it makes you feel better," Doris comforted.

"Me neither. But I don't tend to notice those things. My daughter came home with her nose pierced, and it was a week before I saw it."

"Is it really there, Marge, or are you lying?" I looked back at her, hoping for the latter.

"Move your hand and I'll look." Sylvie craned in closer.

"No! If it's there, I'm not letting anyone else see it!"

Marge clucked her cheek. "It's there. Swear to God. My friend, Hairy Potter, is a long sucker too. Been growing for a while. Weeks at least. Maybe a month."

I made a mental note to slaughter my waxer when I got home. Even though I'd never admit it aloud, just like the other widows, the older I got, the more coarse hairs sprouted out of my chin and neck. It was the ultimate horror in this nightmare of aging I was battling so hard against.

"Oh, my God!" I jumped up and ran through the pool area, my neck covered like I had a gaping wound and would bleed out if I removed my hand. As I beelined toward my room to find my trusty tweezers, I turned the corner and slammed into a man coming toward me. The force of my speed against the wall of solid muscle sent me flying backward with a shriek.

"Whoa!" his deep voice said just before he caught me around the small of my back, yanking me against him and preventing my fall. "Are you okay?"

As I looked up, my knees weakened when my eyes connected with his.

My lion.

I didn't respond, my lungs filling up with the air the shock of his presence trapped inside them.

"We have to stop meeting like this, Single and Horny. I mean, Alice." He grinned, and the flash of straight, white teeth and those dimples that deepened with his smile finally pushed the air out of my lungs with a girlish sigh.

"I'm so sorry," I finally managed out. "I was in a hurry."

"I'll say." He softened his grip on me and set me back up on my feet. "Where's the fire?"

Instantly, I remembered why I was running. I gasped and slapped a hand across my neck, hoping my rogue hair hadn't been waving in the wind like a flag announcing my progressing age and capturing the attention of those amber orbs staring back at me.

Did he see it? Oh, God. He saw it. What if he saw it the other night? Maybe that's why he didn't track me down like I expected! I'm a monster. He thinks I'm an old, disgusting, hairy monster.

The voice in my mind ran wild as I struggled to answer him.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt your neck?" he asked, reaching for my hand. "Let me see."

"No!" I shouted too loudly, taking a hefty step back and out of his reach. "I'm fine. It's ... a bug. Something bit me."

"Do you want me to check it out?" He stepped toward me again.

I stepped back, this time hitting the rail separating me from the ocean below. "I'm fine. It's fine. I just ... I need to get to my room."

"Careful." He gestured to the railing. "Don't go falling overboard now. If I have to jump in and save you, there won't

be a Captain on the ship.”

I glanced behind me, still holding my neck tight. “Thanks. I ... I won’t. Okay. Gotta go. Nice to see you, Alejandro.”

I started to hurry off, but he caught me by my arm and spun me around. “Wait. Hold on there.”

The force of his grab pulled my hand from my neck, and I had visions of the hair breaking free and taking his eye out. I quickly tucked my chin to my chest, hoping to trap it. Then, realizing how many chins I’d just created, I slapped my hand back on my neck and lifted my head back up.

“Yes?” I asked, trying to make my hand on my neck look as natural as possible.

It didn’t.

“I, uh ... I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me tonight?”

My eyes lit up with the question I was having trouble not screaming “*Yes!*” to. Instead, I pinched my lips and gave a casual shrug. “I had plans, but I suppose I could put them off. I would love to hear more about what it takes to run this ship.”

Alejandro’s sexy smile lit up my world. “Good. I’ll come by around six. What room are you in?”

I rattled off the number, happy it hadn’t fluttered out of my mind with all the other thoughts that didn’t involve the visions of a heated encounter on the controls of the cruise ship.

“I look forward to seeing you ... Alice.”

The way his tongue rolled over my name sent waves of tingles creeping down my spine right out my pink, painted toes. It was all I could do not to giggle and blush ... two things I couldn’t even remember the last time a man had inspired me to do.

“Me too,” I answered.

He turned and walked away, giving me that impressive view of his backside that made even the gorgeous view of the tropical island we approached pale in comparison.

Feeling grateful he must not have seen the hair or he'd never have invited me to dinner, I blew out a breath and hurried toward my room to engage in all-out war on every stray hair that dared to take root on my body. I had to be perfect for my night with Alejandro. My night with a lion.

I couldn't remember a time in recent memory that I'd felt more nervous than when the three raps on my door broke the silence in my cabin.

He's here.

Stilling my breath, I counted to ten so I didn't seem too eager. After I was certain I'd left him waiting just long enough, I lifted my chin and pulled out the confidence I usually accessed so effortlessly. This time, I had to drag it up from the depths of me and hold onto it tight when I opened the door and saw him standing there. Something about him seemed to steal it from me, like the kryptonite to my cool, calm demeanor.

"Good evening, Alice," he said, giving a slight bow as he smiled, his thick Spanish accent making the simple greeting sound intoxicating.

"Good evening, Alejandro." I smiled back, extending my hand and hoping it wouldn't shake.

He took it gently, pressing a soft kiss to the back, sending a wave of shivers trickling across my skin. I nearly had to grab the doorframe to stay upright while I waited for his lips to part my hand.

"I hope you don't mind dining off the ship tonight. There is a great little restaurant on Nassau that I'd love to take you to."

"I thought we weren't allowed to go ashore until tomorrow?"

His smirk weakened my knees. "Passengers aren't allowed, but I'm the Captain. I get to come and go as I please."

The way he radiated power when he said the words only fueled the fire burning for him.

“Then lead the way, Captain.”

He took my hand and led me down the hallway, and I caught the three widows peeking out from Doris’s barely open door as we walked away. Three pairs of excited eyes blinked at me with their heads stacked one on top of the other like a little totem pole. I gave them a warning look not to say anything, and they all slipped behind the narrowing crack of the door as we passed them.

I’d told them of my dinner plans with Alejandro after returning from battling my neck hair, and they’d been over the moon to hear it. I’d passed it off as just another date like it would be with any of the cubs I’d come here for, but deep down, it didn’t feel like any other date, and Alejandro didn’t feel like just any other man. Something about him connected with something inside me, and it scared me more than I wanted to admit. Instead of opening up and telling them my feelings, I’d played it cool like I was trying to do now.

“This way.” After we made our way through the ship, he gestured to a door at the end of the hall. When we got there, several crew members gave him a salute and stepped out of the way. One opened the door for us, and I was surprised to see it took us to a small ramp that led to the dock.

“You get your own exit too?”

He grinned as he grabbed my hand. “I work extremely long hours on the ship, but I’m required to take a certain number off every day. It’s the law. And part of the reason I love being a ship’s captain is to see new places, so when we are docked and I’m off duty, I like to explore the lands as much as I can. We have these smaller entrances and exits for staff to come and go and prepare things for the passengers’ excursions.”

“I feel so special.” I smiled as I followed him onto the dock.

“This way.”

He didn't release his grip on my hand, and I wasn't complaining one bit. I couldn't recall the last time I'd held someone's hand simply for pleasure, as the intimate gesture wasn't the usual physical contact I craved when I was with a man. For me, it was about the sex and nothing but the sex. I loved the power I felt in bed with a man, but I was just as quick to end our interludes as I was to start them. With Alejandro, I didn't feel like I was racing him to the sack, and this experience felt new to me.

Unexpected.

Exciting.

We made our way down the dock, and several locals greeted him by name as we strolled to a small center-console boat bobbing in the water. When we got there, a young man with long dreadlocks handed him the keys.

"Here you go, Captain Alejandro. Enjoy your evening," he said with a thick Bahamian accent.

Alejandro helped me onto the boat, and I sat beside him while he put the key in the ignition.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he fired it up.

"My favorite restaurant is on a beach on the other side of the island. It's faster and more fun to boat around than to take a cab through the busy town. When I dock here, I always rent a boat from James and go for a cruise to get there."

"And do you always have a woman with you that you take to dinner?" I arched an eyebrow as he navigated the small boat through the marina.

"Never." He shifted the boat into a faster gear. "You're the first."

The first.

I loved being the first, but there was something special about being the first woman to accompany Alejandro to his favorite restaurant in the Bahamas.

I tried to conceal my smile, but I failed. He grinned back at me, and then we took off once we made it out of the marina.

The warm, salty air licked my skin as we skirted around the island, the soft moonlight guiding our way until we arrived at a small inlet. He guided the boat up to a dock, slowing to a stop and asking me to secure the bow line. I had boated enough times to know the basics, but I had him check my knot after he'd finished docking.

“You did perfect, Cariño.”

“Cariño?”

“Darling. It means darling.”

“Oh.” A soft smile lifted my lips as that girlish tingle lit up my stomach. “I like that.”

He took my hand and helped me onto the dock.

“So, you obviously speak Spanish. Where were you raised?” I asked as we walked along the wooden planks between the small boats bobbing beside us.

“Granada, Spain.”

“Spain?” I turned to look at him, and the moonlight hitting his bronze skin brought out the highlights from beneath it.

“Yes. Spain. It's beautiful there. Have you been?”

Memories of our Wilder Widows trip to Spain to run with the bulls flooded back to me, causing an eruption of laughter. He tipped his head.

“Sorry,” I said between chuckles. “Yes. I was in Spain. Last year, actually. And you won't believe it, but I actually ran with the bulls.”

He slammed to a stop. “You what?”

Nodding my head, I clucked my cheek. “Yep. In stiletto heels, no less. And in fact, I bought one. I am the proud owner of El Diablo, a fighting bull who now lives on a dude ranch with my friend, Doris.”

Alejandro stared at me, blinking, then burst into laughter. “I knew there was something different about you the moment I saw you. A fierce and fiery woman beneath the cool exterior.”

But this? This goes far beyond my expectations. I'm going to need to hear the whole story. Start from the beginning."

After a long exhale, I started from the beginning of the Wilder Widows club. We walked down the beach as I told our story, still talking when we made it to the small, rustic beachfront restaurant with the tables scattered throughout the sand. With amazement at our escapades, I told the story from the start, and Alejandro hung on my every word through our cocktails, appetizers, and entrees. We were at dessert when I finished with our arrival on his cruise ship.

"And that is where we are now." I lifted my martini and took a slow sip.

Alejandro blew out a long breath. "Incredible. What an adventure you ladies are on. If only more people were brave enough to follow their dreams like you."

"And you? Was being a ship captain your dream?"

His eyes lit up with the question. "From the time I was a boy and climbed on my first ship, I knew there was nothing else for me."

"And what draws you to it?"

"Everything." He flagged the waitress for another round of drinks. "The water is my home. Travel is my oxygen. As a cruise captain, I get to travel the world on the water, combining my two favorite loves."

"Tell me more about your travels," I asked, settling back into my seat to do something I hadn't done in years ... listen to a man talk.

Normally I didn't care about what their mouth was doing except for how good of a kisser they were, but every word out of Alejandro's perfect, full lips held me captive. His life was filled with adventure and excitement, and hearing how he spoke with such passion only deepened my already scorching attraction. And something else that hadn't happened to me with a man in countless years happened as we sat beside the ocean waves lapping at the shore.

I laughed.

I laughed from my belly. My body. My soul. I laughed harder with Alejandro than I had with any man in my past. His warm, charismatic ways softened my sharp edges, and I could almost feel my hardened armor being chipped away with every moment I spent in his presence.

Every smile, a little crack in my armor.

Every laugh, a little piece falling off.

And it felt amazing.

The only other people on the planet I felt this at ease with were the Wilder Widows.

We spent hours on that beachside laughing and sharing stories, and I couldn't believe how many hours had passed until I saw the last patrons from the bar filing out.

“Oops. Don't want to be ‘those people’ who make them work past close. We should get back, I suppose.” He waved to the waitress to bring the bill.

I hated the thought of going back and leaving this little magical place with him, but I knew our night eventually had to end. “This was wonderful, Alejandro. Thank you for inviting me.”

“All the tourists flock to the main attractions at port, but I like to find these little gems off the beaten path. The harder they are to get to, the more authentic they usually are.”

“I like that. That's a great travel tip.”

“Stick with me and I'll reveal all the secrets of the places we are going to explore.”

Stick with me.

Excitement fluttered inside of me about spending more time with him on our cruise. Since the moment I had landed in his arms, I'd had no interest in any other man on that ship. And now that I'd spent a romantic evening with him, I had no interest in any other man on the planet.

We took the boat back to the dock, and we walked back onto the cruise ship together. When we got back to my cabin's

deck, nerves he'd soothed with our talk crackled back to life.

Me? Nervous about going to bed with a man? Never.

But deep down, terror wound up inside me about spending the night with him. Unlike all my other trysts, I knew this would be more than just sex. And the scariest part? I wanted it to be.

But just before I took him back to my room, he slipped my hand in his and stopped me beside the rail of the ship.

“I love how many stars you can see down here. Don't you agree?”

I hadn't been paying attention to the stars, instead, my gaze was otherwise occupied admiring him.

I looked up. “They are beautiful.”

“As are you.” He turned to face me, slipping a hand across the side of my face.

The gentle touch of his fingertips sent a shiver crackling down my spine. I leaned my face into his hand.

“I had a wonderful time with you tonight, Alice.”

“Me too.” I breathed out.

We stood staring at each other, our electric connection crackling between us. Normally, I would take the lead, grab him by the face, and kiss those lips I wanted to taste, but I was too frozen in his gaze to move.

A warm breeze lifted my hair as he leaned down to me. I closed my eyes, the anticipation of his kiss nearly driving me mad. Finally, a soft brush moved across my lips, and I sighed as he captured my mouth with his.

The soft, sensual brush of his lips against mine deepened into an earth-shattering kiss that obliterated the thoughts of any man before him. My world tipped upside down as he pulled me against him, a strong hand embracing my lower back and holding me tight. I surrendered to the emotions swirling inside of me, begging to burst free. When he slowly broke us apart, I immediately felt the loss. For the first time in

my life, I'd been the one left unsatisfied. One explosive kiss wasn't enough, and it might never be.

Breathless and wanting more, I stared at him as he rose back to standing above me. My lion looked more powerful than ever after displaying such prowess.

"Can I see you again tomorrow night?" he asked, his hand still on my lower back, brushing softly against me.

Tomorrow night?

He wasn't coming back to my room?

I couldn't remember a time that a man hadn't pursued a night in bed with me, and though I was slightly mortified he was passing up on an evening of sweaty, mind-blowing sex, I fought through the disappointment and confusion and answered, "I would love that."

"I'll be done with my shift around six. I'll swing by and pick you up. I have another wonderful place to take you."

"I can't wait."

He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss against my skin. "Good night, Alice. Sleep tight."

Still struggling to process I was going to bed alone after what I'd thought was such a perfect night ... and amazing, electric connection ... I stood on the balcony alone, grasping the railing and trying to get ahold of the senses he'd stolen from me as I watched him walk away.

What the hell just happened?

Was I not attractive enough? Was I too old? I hadn't told him, or anyone for that matter, my true age, but he must have figured out I was significantly older than him. But I'd had men half *his* age fawning over me just today.

I gasped and clutched my neck.

The hair. Oh, God. He saw the hair earlier. He knows I'm an old, bearded lady, and he's disgusted by me.

As my self-confidence took a swan dive into the ocean, I stood staring at his fit figure walking away. In all my life, I'd

never once doubted my attractiveness ... until recently. The aching feet. The rogue hairs. The extra units of Botox now needed to smooth away the lines trying to carve their way onto my face. It hit me like a Mack truck that even though I'd been fighting a valiant battle against the clock, I couldn't stop the hands of time from ticking away.

I was getting old.

And apparently, Alejandro wasn't interested in me.

My heart sank as if I'd tossed it overboard, but just as I'd hit the deepest depths of despair over my current realization that I couldn't stay sexy and young forever, Alejandro stopped and turned around.

"I can't wait to see you again tomorrow, Cariño. I have so much to show you, and I can't wait to learn everything there is to know about you."

With a soft kiss blown my way, my self-confidence came flooding back. He wanted to see me again. If he weren't interested in me, surely he would have rushed away without another word, never to be seen again. But that wasn't what was happening. My heart lifted with the realization he wasn't disgusted by me and my aging carcass ... it was romance. A gentleman interested in getting to know more about me than what I looked like without my clothes on.

Part of me was wild with disappointment that we weren't spending the night together, but the other part of me was wild with building desire ... desire I knew would only amplify by not taking him home tonight. And deep down, I didn't want to. I wanted to draw out this strange connection with him as long as I could.

Savor it.

Feeling shocked it hadn't even occurred to me that romance and manners kept him from dragging me back to bed, I stood stunned for a moment before I lifted my hand and returned the kiss, blowing it off my fingertips.

My wish had been to go on a Cougar Cruise to meet sexy, young studs and have hot, meaningless sex, and yet somehow,

it had transformed into a different kind of adventure.

Romance.

A wish I hadn't even considered, but one I was now thoroughly ready to explore.

CHAPTER SIX

I shrieked into my snorkel when a colorful fish darted right in front of my mask. With a quick burst of power, I pushed away and popped out of the water.

“Yuck! I almost got hit by a fish!” I shouted after I spit the snorkel out of my mouth.

“You okay, dear?” Doris peeked over the edge of the glass bottom boat she refused to leave. Her paralyzing fear of sharks kept her glued to the seats all day while the other three widows and I paddled around on our Cozumel snorkeling excursion.

I pulled the hideous goggles off my face. “I’m fine. But I’m done. Since they won’t let us cocktail until we’re finished snorkeling, I want back on the boat to enjoy the booze cruise part of the tour.”

Knowing Marge and Sylvie were safely snorkeling somewhere nearby, I paddled to the ladder and hoisted myself up. The tour guide took my gear, and when I told him I was done snorkeling for the day, he stowed it away and gave me the drink options that were included with our package.

“We have Rum Runners, Hurricanes, Bahama Mamas—” he started, his Mexican accent struggling over the words.

I cut him off. “I’ll take the one with vodka. Then hold the rest of the ingredients.”

Furrowing his dark brow, he scratched his head. “So, just ... vodka?”

I clucked my cheek and winked. “Exactly. And chilled.”

“Coming right up,” he said with a shrug.

I settled down beside Doris, who wore an oversized life jacket and looked like some strange orange Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

“You know you don’t need the life jacket *in* the boat, Doris. They’re for the snorkelers who aren’t the strongest swimmers.”

She peered over the edge to the small drop below, pointing at the clear water. “There are sharks down there. I just know it. And if I happen to go overboard, I figure this will help protect my vital organs from the bite.”

With a sigh, I waved a hand. “Doris, you’re not going overboard. And if you do, there are no sharks anywhere around here. This is a safe area. That’s why the guides picked it. I was just out there for an hour and didn’t see a thing.”

Her eyes went big. “That’s because you won’t! They can swim so fast, by the time you even know what’s happening, you’re already clamped up tight in the jaws of the beast!” She slapped her hands together in a dramatic gesture akin to a jaw snapping shut.

I was about to argue back at her, but a shadow formed beneath the glass bottom of the boat.

“Shark!” Doris squealed, clutching the railing tight.

Tipping my head, I leaned forward and gazed at the cerulean water below. Marge appeared swimming beneath us, lifting her middle finger as she grinned and backpaddled away.

“Oh, that Marge!” Doris tsked as I burst into laughter while she exhaled a sharp sigh.

The water beside the boat churned, and with a big blow of water out her snorkel spout, Marge popped up beside us.

Doris and I leaned over the edge.

“Did you see me flip you the bird?” Marge smiled wide as she bobbed in the water beside us.

“Yes.” Doris rolled her eyes. “You’re so vulgar sometimes, Marge.”

“Don’t be a ninny. It’s just a finger, Doris. All I did was show you the lovely middle finger gifted to me by the big guy upstairs. How is that offensive?”

Knowing better than to argue with Marge, Doris pursed her lips and let out a soft, “Mmmhmm.”

“Where’s Sylvie?” I scanned the waters surrounding us.

“Right here!” Sylvie answered as she swam up from the opposite side. “Wasn’t that amazing? I thought it was so incredible, all the fish and coral. Like a whole other world hidden beneath the surface!”

They swam to the ladder and climbed on, big fins slapping the bottom of the boat as they settled in. The tour guide brought me my drink, and I thanked him with a smile.

“You should have come, Doris. It truly is a wonder. There’s still time to go for a little bit if you want.” Sylvie pulled off her gear and offered it to Doris.

“No. No way.” Doris waved her hands. “I’m not getting in any water that could possibly have a shark lurking below. I grew up in Minnesota on a completely shark-free lake, and the only water I’m swimming in other than pools.”

“Sharks are harmless.” Marge rolled her eyes. “Literally millions of people a year swim in the ocean and, what, like two get turned into shark food annually?”

“Four,” Sylvie answered. “Worldwide, sharks kill about four people a year. Your chance of getting killed by a shark is about one in three million.”

We all looked at her, perplexed.

She shrunk a little. “Sorry. I Googled it before we booked the excursion. I’m not going to lie, I’m pretty scared of sharks, too, and the data helped me feel better.”

Marge jutted a thumb at Sylvie. “Well, there ya go. Encyclopedia Britannica here says it’s safe.”

“I mean, they do attack more people than that, but most aren’t fatal,” Sylvie added.

“See!” Doris pointed at the water outside Cozumel behind us. “I could be attacked!”

Marge scoffed. “So, you lose an arm. Big whoop. You can live with one arm. Don’t worry, we’ll wipe your ass for you.”

As Marge’s taunting grin grew, Doris swatted the air at her. “Oh, Marge! You’re disgusting. And I don’t want to live without an arm!”

“Just swim next to Marge,” I interjected. “She’s slow. You can push her in front of the shark and make a clean getaway.”

Marge’s mouth dropped. “Is *that* why you stayed right next to me all day? You were gonna push me in front of a shark?”

I just shrugged. “Well, can you blame me? I was hoping if one came, it would bite off those hairy ass legs of yours so I don’t have to stare at them anymore.”

Marge narrowed her eyes at me, and a sinister smile lifted her lips. “You just wait. If we see any real sharks, I’m gonna shove your bony ass right at it. You may not have enough meat on your bones for a meal, but it can use your legs as toothpicks.” While I gasped and touched my enviable stems, she turned back to Doris. “I’m just saying, I think sharks are amazing, and I would love to see one up close. You’re not in any real danger of getting eaten by a shark. They are terribly misunderstood creatures. In fact, you’re probably far more likely to get mauled by a cougar ... like this one.”

She pointed at me, and everyone burst into laughter.

“You know.” Sylvie put her finger on her chin. “Now that you say that, I find it interesting that we’re on day eight of our cruise, and in fact, Alice hasn’t cougared at all. If I’m not mistaken, when she’s not with us, she’s spending *all* her time with Captain Alejandro.” She said his name in a sultry Spanish accent.

Three sets of penetrating eyes all turned to stare at me, and I felt a girlish flush creeping up my cheeks.

“I do not,” I lied.

They weren’t wrong. In the eight days since I’d gone to dinner with Alejandro, we’d been nearly inseparable every moment he wasn’t captaining the ship. I spent my days with the widows exploring the beautiful ports along our voyage and lounging by the pool. But after the sun went down and Alejandro got his scheduled time off, I slipped away from my widows and into his arms.

Tender touches. Passionate kisses. Endless laughter. Each moment spent together was pure magic. He showed me all the

secret treasures at each port—a magical world hidden off the beaten path he knew so well. Being so well-traveled, he seemed to have discovered every nook and cranny of the places he'd been, and I loved how excited he was to share them with me.

“Oh, come on. We know exactly where you're going when you sneak away. To *Alejandro*.” Sylvie closed her eyes and started making kissy faces. The other widows burst into laughter.

“More like, ‘Bow chica wow wow!’” Marge sing-songed, thrusting her hips in an awkward motion.

I scrunched my face. “Don't ever thrust your crotch like that again, Marge. I'm going to have nightmares. It's gonna be worse than the nightmares those legs of yours are giving me.” I pointed to the hairy legs still sporting the naked stripe down the middle of one.

“Don't change the subject.” Marge sat her ass back down. “You've been cagey about talking about Alejandro ever since that first date. What gives, huh? Come on, Alice. Spill! What the hell is going on with you two?”

“Nothing.” I straightened taller. “He's just showing me some hidden spots around the ports.”

“It's not nothing.” Sylvie narrowed her eyes in a challenge. “You haven't been yourself since you met him. I don't think I've seen you so much as ogle one single man. Not even the hot bartender by the pool who always flirts with you. And that man is ...” She stopped and bit her fist. “I mean, come on, Alice. Before Alejandro, you'd have climbed him like a tree half a dozen times already and horrified us when you overshared about whatever strange, kinky sex you were having. What is going on? Have you fallen for Alejandro?”

Doris gasped. “Oh, my! It's a miracle! Alice is in love!” She made the sign of the cross and pressed her palms together.

“Don't be ridiculous.” I snorted. “I'm not *in love*.” With the roll of my eyes, I shrugged off the accusation on the

outside, but on the inside, those simple words nearly sent me tumbling off the boat.

Was I?

My feelings for him were so foreign that I couldn't even identify them. Was it possible it could be love? I knew it was illogical. I wasn't some starry-eyed teen who thought they were in love with every boy who sent them a smile. No. I was a woman. A worldly and wise woman who knew love didn't just happen in the blink of an eye. But what else could it be? It wasn't lust. I had lust for him, of course, but it wasn't *just* lust. I knew lust better than anyone, and I'd spent my life embracing it. I wasn't ashamed by lust and sex and my carnal needs like some people. I owned them, so I never needed to hide my lust under the guise of love to make myself feel better about taking a man to bed. No. I knew lust, and this wasn't that. This was lust on fire.

Which was, perhaps, love?

I'd never been in love. Not truly. I'd been gaga for Harry Hayes, but that was more for the prestige of being a major celebrity's girl. And my husband, Ed, I had cared for, but if I hadn't gotten pregnant, I never would have married him. He was a good husband. A provider. He took care of me, and in turn, I was his charming, beautiful wife to impress his friends and schmooze all his business contacts. It felt more like we were business partners than true loves. He provided me with a nice life, but what I felt for him was nothing compared to the feelings inside me that erupted whenever I even thought about Alejandro. And when I was in his arms, tasting his kiss, all those sappy songs about love I'd never understood suddenly made sense.

Marge shook her head. "Well, if you're not in love with him, why aren't you entertaining any of your other gentleman callers? God knows they've been hitting on you like a stubborn nail that just won't go in."

"I've just been ... busy."

"Bullshit," Marge countered. "You're not *busy*. You're with Alejandro. And the fact you've been out with him more

than once is astounding on its own. You haven't been on a date with a man twice since we moved to Las Vegas. You treat men like disposable napkins, but for some reason, Alejandro has got himself an opened-ended ticket to the Alice show. You're really not going to tell us what gives?"

For a moment, I almost opened my mouth and let the truth of my confusing feelings pour out. But instead, my mouth clamped tighter shut. Why couldn't I just open myself up and talk to them about my feelings? These were my Wilder Widows, my best friends, yet I still felt too insecure and guarded to ever share such a vulnerable part of me. Rolling over and showing my soft underside seemed too risky by far. I still didn't trust anyone not to take a swipe at it. Since I'd spent my whole life protecting myself from people who envied me and wished me ill, I didn't know if I'd ever be able to let my guard down. Not even with them.

"There's nothing special going on with me and Alejandro. I'm just having fun with him. That's all."

"I don't believe you," Sylvie said, and the way her knowing eyes probed mine made me shrink back a little. "I think you care about him."

"Psht." I chuckled. "He's handsome and interesting. But I don't do relationships. You know that. In fact, I'm having dinner with someone else tonight," I lied, hoping it would throw the love-sniffing bloodhounds off my trail.

"You are?" They echoed.

"With who?" Doris asked.

"You'll see," I answered with a smile, making a mental note of all the men who had asked me out since I'd set foot on the cruise ship ... all the men I'd said no to because the only man I cared to see was Alejandro. But if going out for dinner with another man would get the meddling widows off my back about the feelings I didn't want to discuss, I knew I could make it through one dinner with a cub when all I would be thinking about was my powerful lion.

“The last snorkeler is climbing on board, so we’ll be heading back,” our tour guide said, and I shot him a grateful look for breaking up the conversation I didn’t want to be having.

“Thank you,” I responded, quickly standing and moving behind him. “I’ll just get one quick refill of my drink if you don’t mind.”

“I can bring it to you,” he said, but I shook my head.

“Don’t be silly. I have legs. Nice ones. I think I’ll stretch them and get it myself.”

I hurried away after him and didn’t look back, but I knew three sets of probing eyes watched me go.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jake, my date for the evening, ran a hand through his sandy blond beach waves. “And then, I was like, just fighting my buddy, Cal, in Halo, and then *bam!* The Xbox actually started smoking! Freaking thing caught on fire I was playing so hot! Oh man, it was wild. You know?”

All three widows and I stared at him in silence as he finished the story he’d spent the better part of ten minutes telling—a story I was certain none of us understood by the dumbfounded looks on our faces.

At least I didn’t. Every word out of his mouth sounded like gibberish. The generational gap may as well have been the Grand Canyon based on all the youthful lingo he’d just spewed that I’d never even heard before.

“Uh, wow,” Sylvie finally said. “That was ... quite a story.”

“I feel like I lost ten points off my IQ,” Marge whispered out the side of her mouth.

“I think my grandson has one of those Ybox thingies,” Doris said, and the sweet expression on her face told me she was trying to make this horrible evening with him less awkward.

“Xbox,” he said back, biting the straw from his cocktail and holding it between his teeth.

“Oh, yes. Right the Xbox.” Doris pinched her lips and twisted her cloth napkin in her lap. “That’s what I meant. Well, it was indeed an interesting story. Thank you for sharing.”

“Right on.” Jake grinned that pretty white smile he’d flashed at me every time I’d seen him since we came aboard. A smile that would have had me crooking a finger to invite him to bed at any other time in my life. With his sexy, wavy hair, chiseled jaw, and abs I imagined were chiseled too, he was exactly what I would have gone for if it hadn’t been for the one big thing that had changed in my life.

Alejandro.

Now it was all I could do to endure another minute with the man who wasn't the one every molecule in my body screamed out for me to run to. As one of the most handsome cubs on the cruise, I'd thought inviting Jake to dinner would make me miss Alejandro less, but instead, it just made me miss him more.

It's just one dinner, I reminded myself. One dinner to show them I'm not hung up on Alejandro. I can go find him later tonight.

With those encouraging words, I stiffened up and forced my ass to stay in the seat next to him instead of catapulting me up to run off and find Alejandro that very second like it wanted to. My desire to launch out of here was so strong it felt like I was sitting on springs.

And then, I saw him, and that desire to bolt grew to mythical proportions.

Alejandro stepped into the elegant dining area, and his presence was so profound that nearly everyone in the room paused to look at him. Men. Women. Everyone. He was a lion among cubs and cougars, and it seemed I wasn't the only one who knew it.

His smile flashed at the people greeting him as he strolled in, his neatly pressed uniform looking so good on his body that my mouth practically watered. Those golden eyes traveled around the room, and suddenly, they landed on me. He grinned widely and started toward me.

"You need a drink, babe?" Jake asked, reaching over and stroking a hand along the exposed skin on my shoulder. "Your martini is almost empty. I can flag the waitress if you're ready for another."

I ignored his question. My attention was squarely on the man who looked at me with shock, stopping in his tracks instead of coming to me like I wanted deep down.

"Oh, shit," Sylvie leaned over and whispered. "He looks pissed you're here with another guy. What did you tell him?"

“Nothing. It’s none of his business who I’m with,” I answered, though the way he looked at me made me feel about as tall as the olive in my empty martini glass. I tried to remind myself that we weren’t in any exclusive relationship, so it *wasn’t* any of his business, but if roles were reversed and I saw him at dinner with another woman, I’d have been wild with possessive rage. No, we weren’t anything officially, but with how strong our connection had become since that first night we met, it felt like cheating to be here with another man.

Guilt started to sink deep into my gut that I’d blown him off tonight without so much as a word. I’d ignored the message he’d left on my cabin phone to meet up, and I’d hoped I would make it through this dinner without seeing him. But it seemed lady luck had failed me because here he was, and Sylvie was right. He didn’t look pleased at all to see me with another man.

“Babe? A drink?” Jake asked again.

I glanced at his hand on my shoulder, gently shrugging it off. “Uh, yeah. That would be great. But if you wouldn’t mind, I would love a martini from the top deck pool bar. They make them better there.”

He furrowed his brow. “You want me to go all the way up to the pool on the top deck?”

“Yes, please,” I answered quickly. “And tell them very dry, two olives.”

He sat for a moment, then finally let out a sigh. “Right on, babe. Uh, no problem, I guess. I’ll just be back in a bit.”

He stood up, and I let out a lengthy exhale when he walked away from the table. Alejandro’s golden gaze followed his movement, then slid back to me.

“You are such a liar,” Marge snorted. “A martini is pretty much vodka. I don’t know how one bar can make it better than another. You’re just as sick of him as we are.”

I didn’t waste my breath on a lie. “He’s dumber than a box of rocks, and I can feel my brain shriveling up with each word

out of his mouth. He may be gorgeous, but even I have my limits. Can you blame me?"

"No," they echoed.

"We definitely can't blame you," Sylvie said. "I was ready to jump off the ship."

"Same," Marge grumbled. "No life preserver or nothing. Just take me down to the silent depths of the ocean floor where I never have to hear 'bro' or 'right on' ever again."

Doris twisted her lips. "I'm sure he's a nice young man, but it was difficult to connect with him. I didn't understand anything he said. I was starting to feel like a nincompoop."

"The only nincompoop in this room was Jake." Sylvie shook her head. "A big ol' nincompoop."

Doris smiled a little. "Oh, good. I thought I was the only one struggling to understand him."

"Nope." Marge stared at the space he'd disappeared into. "You don't speak stupid, and neither do the rest of us. Just count your blessings."

"Every day." She smiled softly. "I thank the Lord for all my blessings every single day."

My gaze moved back to Alejandro, my heart sinking when I realized he'd walked the other way, the distance between us growing now instead of closing like I wanted. I wanted to leap up and run after him, explain that I'd only been with Jake to throw the widows off our trail, but I couldn't find the courage or the words to do it.

While I sat there trying to will my body to get up and go to him, a flash of red moving toward him captured my attention. Red as in the red hair of Jessica freaking Rabbit as she closed in on my man.

He was too far away to hear, but I gasped when she reached him, her hand brushing across the Captain epaulet on his shoulders. No ... *my* shoulders.

That hussy was touching *my* shoulder of *my* man.

She twirled her hair, her gaze flitting to the ground, her dark lashes covering her playful gaze before flicking open to catch his gaze. A move I knew well. Hell, a move I practically invented.

A smile.

He smiled.

She made him smile.

Rage and jealousy wound through me like snakes, squeezing my insides as I watched the interaction going down. Her hair flipping while she tossed her head back in an overexaggerated laugh. The extra touches she gave him. His arm. His shoulder. His hand. Touching him. Why was she touching him?

And why was he laughing back?

“Whoa. You okay?” Marge leaned into my line of sight. “You look like you’re either shitting your pants or having a heart attack. I was a nurse for a long time. I know well that the two looks can be quite similar.”

I wanted to open my mouth to answer, but my jaw was locked shut with the rage causing my muscles to clench like I’d contracted tetanus.

“Oh, boy. I see what’s wrong.” Sylvie lifted a finger toward Alejandro and Jessica Rabbit. “Someone is trying to take Alice’s toy.”

Marge and Doris followed her finger, nodding their heads as they joined together in an “Oh.”

“Oh, yeah. That’ll do it.” Marge clucked the side of her cheek.

“Oh, my. She’s really flirting with him.” Doris furrowed her brow. “Look at how she’s pushing her cleavage at him. Doesn’t she have any modesty?”

“Yeah. She’s really giving him a show.” Sylvie’s eyes widened at Jessica Rabbit’s obvious cleavage display. “Wow. Doesn’t her back hurt hauling those things around? And the way she’s arching it so much to show them off? Ugh. Makes

my own back ache. Thank God I've got smaller tatas. That just looks like I would need to buy stock in Ben Gaye if I was built like her."

"I bet she works at Hooters. Although those things are probably too big for serving. Constantly in the way of the tray, I bet. Oh, hell. I bet she just uses her *boobs* as the tray!" Marge burst into laughter, and the others joined.

But not me. I couldn't laugh. I still couldn't move. Or even breathe. As I watched her captivating him with her curves and youth, I couldn't do anything other than die a little inside.

Marge bumped me with an elbow. "Cat got your tongue?"

More like rabbit got my man.

My man.

I didn't think I'd ever uttered those words before, even in the privacy of my own mind. Despite being married, I never thought of Ed as "my man." He was my husband, sure, but I didn't have this primal possessive desire for him like I felt for Alejandro. Hell, I'd been the one to suggest swinging with Ed, and I'd been happy to share him while I got my kicks elsewhere on those few occasions we'd done it. But the thought of another woman touching Alejandro made my blood boil.

She touched his arm again, and it wasn't just my blood boiling watching Jessica Rabbit's hands on him. Now it felt like a volcano of anger would erupt at any moment.

My. Man.

Mine.

"You okay, Alice?" Sylvie asked. "Why don't you go talk to him? I'm sure he would be happy to talk to you."

"No. He's busy. Obviously," I finally managed, my words tipped with venom.

"Somebody a little jealous?" Doris asked innocently. "You shouldn't be. You're much prettier than her. I'm sure he wishes it was you he was talking to."

I scoffed. “Right. Have you seen her? She’s like a walking, talking sex doll—a walking, talking sex doll with perfect, porcelain skin. I mean, we’ve been in the Caribbean for eight days. What is she using? SPF 6000? Or hell, maybe she’s a freaking vampire.”

“Then she couldn’t go in the sunlight, dumbass.” Marge scoffed.

“Some vampires can,” Sylvie defended.

“What, you think that glow she has is vampire sparkles?” Marge chuckled.

I answered quickly with the truth. “No. It’s youth. It’s just freaking youth. And I want to rip her skin off and wear it like a body suit.”

Marge’s eyes bulged big. “Whoa. Okay then, Buffalo Bill. Someone get that girl some lotion and toss her in the pit.”

My jealous gaze narrowed into a laser-sharp glare. “Jessica Rabbit is perfect with her perfect skin, perfect hair, and perfect curves. And her perfect youth.”

“Jessica Rabbit?” Doris asked.

“That’s what I’ve been calling her. She’s been my nemesis this whole trip, and since day one, when I first saw her, I knew she was a threat. I’ve been calling her Jessica Rabbit since then. And now here we are, and she’s moving in on my turf. On purpose.”

“Whoa!” Marge palmed the table. “We have a nemesis, and we didn’t even know it? Why the hell didn’t you let us know we had a nemesis? I live for this shit. We could have been helping you take her out!” She tightened her hand into a fist. “You just tell me where to aim this baby.”

“Well, I didn’t need any assistance with her before. But she hadn’t moved in on my turf until now.”

Sylvie’s eyes sparkled. “So. He’s your turf, huh? I thought he didn’t mean anything to you.”

Freaking Sylvie and her constant astute observations. It must have been hell being her daughter and trying to get away

with shit growing up. Sylvie never missed a damn thing.

“No,” I lied, ignoring the way her eyes bore into me. “I just meant that she knew I was spending time with him, so she’s, of course, doing this just to piss me off. She’s still mad I stole her pool lounge.”

“Oh!” Marge sat up. “Do you need a ‘taken’ tag? I can make you one!”

I stifled a smile. “I don’t need a ‘taken’ tag. It’s nothing serious.”

“You sure?” Doris asked. “I think you may want a ‘taken’ tag like us.”

“Alice.” Sylvie leaned forward. “Enough is enough. Cut the tough girl act. You’re hurting right now. I can tell.”

“I’m not hurt.”

“Yes. You are.” Sylvie reached out and touched my hand. “You need to tell us how you’re *really* feeling about Alejandro. Talk to us, Alice.”

I bit my lip, hoping my teeth could keep the truth and my embarrassing feelings from spilling out.

Marge sighed. “Alice. For the love of Pete. We’re your friends. Just talk to us.”

A small lump formed in my throat as I looked between the three sets of concerned eyes staring at me. And it was *real* concern—a look I was unfamiliar with before the Wilder Widows had come into my life. Before, the vapid housewives I’d called “friends” would only want to know such details to have ammo to talk about me behind my back. None of them truly cared about how I was feeling.

But then I reminded myself my Wilder Widows weren’t those women from my past. They were my friends. My trusted, beloved friends. We’d been through hell together and come out stronger on the other side.

After several long moments of enduring their probing stares, I admitted, “I ... I don’t know ... how.”

Doris pinched her brow. “What do you mean you don’t know how? We’re your best friends.”

I breathed out my hesitation on a long exhale. “Well, I’d never had those before. For most of my life, the only “friends” I had were other trophy wives, and the only thing we talked about was where to get the best massages and mani-pedis.”

Sylvie softly shook her head and sighed. “Well then, it’s time to start learning how to be open with your friends. We’re here to support you. To help you. We love you, Alice, and we want you to be happy. Just tell us how you’re feeling, and we’ll help you figure out what to do. That’s what girlfriends are for.”

Marge responded with uncharacteristic sympathy. “Yeah. I know I give you a lot of shit, but that’s just how I am. We’re always here for you. So, tell us what’s going on and whose ass I need to kick.” She jutted her chin at Jessica Rabbit. “Because even if that skin of hers is because she’s some immortal vampire, I’ll still kick her ass for you. I can bust apart this chair and make a wooden stake, no problemo. Just say the word.”

“I’m in too. We can take down an immortal for you.” Sylvie flexed a muscle. “We’ve got your back, Alice.”

“There’s holy water in the chapel on the ship. I’ve been going to mass. I know where it is. I can get some of that.” Doris smiled, and I smiled back.

Even though we were just joking about Jessica Rabbit being some mythical vampire, I knew that the heart of their comments meant they truly had my back when they said they did. Why had I been so incapable of opening up to them? These were my widows. My best friends. And then I realized the true problem.

I had no idea what to tell them.

I looked at Alejandro, and those butterflies took flight. Then I looked at Jessica Rabbit and the snakes of rage gobbled them up and coiled tighter in my belly. “I want to tell you,

girls. I do. But I don't know how I'm feeling. That's the whole damn problem!"

Sylvie placed her napkin beside her empty plate and leaned forward. "Okay then, let's help you through this. How do you feel when you see him?"

Like a million butterflies take flight in my stomach.

But instead of embarrassing myself with those cheesy but accurate words, I answered with a shrug. "Excited, I guess."

"Liar." Sylvie rolled her eyes. "If you want to have real girlfriend talk where we *actually* help you, then you need to be honest. I saw your eyes light up when you saw him. That was better than 'Excited, I guess.' So, tell us. How do you feel with him?"

For a moment, I held my breath, trying to trap the embarrassing truth in my chest, but finally, I blew out a slow breath and let it free. "Like my whole world tips upside down. Like all the air has been sucked out of the room, and I can't breathe. Like I ..."

Sylvie arched an eyebrow. "Like you're in love."

"Is ... that what it's like? Love? I've never felt this way before. I honestly don't know what it is."

They all smiled softly, then Marge answered, "Yes. You have basically just described exactly what it feels like to be in love. When I see Roxie, it's like the whole damn world stands still. I get the butterflies. The air gets sucked out. The fluttering heart. Yeah. I'm not too proud to admit I get it all. And that, my friend, is love."

Doris made the sign of the cross. "Praise you, Lord Jesus Christ. You have helped bring Alice into the light."

"Well, let's not go that far." Marge chuckled. "I mean, I don't think getting the dirty dirty on with her handsome Spanish lover is exactly getting her a ticket straight to the big place."

I bit my lip and felt the heat flush my cheeks.

“What was that about?” Sylvie pointed at me, her probing gaze needling out the truth.

“I, uh ...” I paused, horrified to admit the truth. “I haven’t slept with him yet.”

Their gasps were so loud they pulled the attention of the tables surrounding us.

“Praise you, Lord Jesus Christ again!” Doris pressed her hands together.

Sylvie and Marge just blinked back at me.

“What? Okay. Yes. We haven’t done it yet. Lots of kissing and making out, but we haven’t gone all the way. I’ve just been enjoying his company so much. We laugh, we talk, we hold hands. That kind of stuff. Just no sex yet. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal?” Sylvie launched forward. “You mean to tell me that you care about him enough that you haven’t even slept with him? All this time you’ve been spending with him is because you enjoy his *company* and not just his sex skills? Oh, man. You’re more in love than I realized.”

“I’m ... I’m really in love?” I asked, shocked by the thought and realization there truly was a word to encapsulate my feelings.

They nodded in unison.

“It sure sounds like it.” Sylvie smiled. “And it’s wonderful. I’m so happy you’ve finally found someone to make you feel that way. The way I feel with Tom.”

I saw the sparkles in her eyes flicker on. But this time, instead of wanting to gag at the sight of them, I understood the reason behind them. They were the same sparkles I knew twinkled in my eyes every time I looked at Alejandro.

Shit. They were right. I was in love.

And I’d blown it.

Now panicking that I’d driven away the only man I’d ever loved, I clutched my chest. “What do I do? I totally blew off

his messages tonight, and then he saw me with Rico Suave, and now he's clutched tight in Jessica Rabbit's claws. I ruined everything."

Marge lifted her lip in a cocky half-smile. "Alice, my dear. Rabbits don't have claws. You know who has claws? Cougars. And you, my friend, are a cougar. The *Queen* Cougar. Now, you get over there, swat that bunny down with your big, lethal cougar claws, and sink them deep into that man. You're gonna march that bony ass over there and talk to him. Quit being a chicken shit and just tell him how you feel."

"Even if I can find the words to tell him how I feel, I can't just go over there and get in between them. I'll look desperate. The *Queen* Cougar does not make herself look desperate."

Sylvie lifted a finger. "She has a point."

"Then I'll clear the battlefield." Marge cracked her knuckles. "Sergeant Margarita Moretti is on the mission."

Worry lines formed on Doris's forehead. "What are you gonna do?"

She tipped her head and thought, then smiled. "I got it. I'll crop dust her."

Now it was me tipping my head. "You'll what?"

"Crop dust her. I'll walk behind her all nonchalant and let a little gas bomb out as I pass by. By the time they smell anything, I'll be long gone. He'll think she ripped one. It'll be game over. Crop dusting. Boom."

Doris's mouth dropped open like a broken hinge. "Marge! You can't walk by someone and ..." she leaned forward and whispered, "*pass gas.*"

"Sure I can. We're in Mexico. I've been eating burritos all day. My crop dusting ammo is locked and loaded. All I need is to open the chute."

I shook my head. "No way. What if you make a noise? Then he'll know it's you, and he knows you're with me. It's too risky."

Marge frowned. “I can’t argue that it isn’t a valid risk. There’s always the chance of a sonic boom.”

“So, no crop dusting.” Sylvie crossed her arms. “But then what?”

Marge stood. “Just trust me. I’ll handle Jessica Rabbit. Alice, you just wait for the moment and keep those claws sharpened.”

“I don’t know, Marge. Maybe we should just wait until they’re done talking. I’ll just find him later.” I flicked my gaze to Jessica Rabbit. Her voluptuous curves seemed more amplified than ever in that tight, red dress. Curves that would be even more appealing to a sex-starved man like Alejandro was since we hadn’t slept together yet.

Not that he’d pushed. He seemed as interested in spending time with me as I was with him. Not once had he tried to get me into bed ... another first, I realized. All men were trying to rush me to the sack. But not him. Alejandro was interested in my thoughts and stories. He was interested in more than my body. Just maybe that connection we’d built could withstand the pull from the bombshell flirting with him so hard I thought her neck would break from all the hair tossing.

“Oops.” I heard her say faintly before I watched her bend over in front of him to retrieve the clutch she’d “accidentally” dropped. The way she arched her back and rose in slow motion would have even the strongest of men weak at the knees.

“Mayday! Mayday!” Marge whispered. “She’s doing the bend and snap. It’s the bend and snap! Well, a slow-motion version, at least. Which I think is actually worse. I’ve heard of this trick before! No man can resist it! We need to get in there. Now!”

“Go, Marge! Go!” I practically shouted, giving her a push.

“I’ve got this, soldier. You just get ready to get in there and get your man back. No bend and snap is gonna steal him away.”

Marge spun on her orthopedic shoes and marched away like a soldier heading off to battle.

“Get ready,” Sylvie said. “You don’t want to lose this man.”

Lose this man.

Suddenly, those three words sounded like the scariest ones on the planet. I used to think “I love you” were the most terrifying words of all, but now, “lose this man” were taking their place.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Clenching my teeth like my jaw was soldered shut, I watched Marge stalk across the ballroom floor. I had no idea what she had up her sleeve, but what I did know was no matter what it was, I trusted her.

Trust.

I trusted her. I trusted all of them. I didn't think there was anyone else in the world I could have used that word to describe until I met my Wilder Widows. A huge weight had lifted off my shoulders when I'd admitted my truth, and I wished now I'd trusted them with it sooner ... trusted myself with it sooner. It wasn't easy for me to express my emotions, much less share them, but I promised myself right then and there to try my hardest to open myself up to them more. Lean on them. Trust them. And in doing so, hopefully, learn to trust in my emotions.

"Oh, my. What do you think she's doing? You don't think she's—" Doris leaned in, "—crop dusting her, do you?"

Sylvie chuckled. "I don't even think Marge knows Marge's plan at this point. But I do know if anyone can get rid of that Jessica Rabbit vampire, it's Marge."

"Oh, this is too nerve-wracking. I don't think I can watch." Doris covered her eyes with her hands.

I couldn't take my eyes off Marge, watching with bated breath as she finally moved in.

Images of all the ways she could rip Alejandro from the vampire's clutches flashed through my mind, but none of them ended without him knowing Marge had instigated it—that *I* had instigated it. But just when I was ready to jump up and flag Marge back, she pivoted on her little cushioned shoe and hip-checked the server passing by with the champagne tray. She hit him at just the right angle that he flew into the back of Jessica Rabbit, champagne exploding all over her as she gasped.

My hand flew to my mouth as I watched my rival squealing, the server scrambling to stay on his feet. And like a stealth ninja, Marge spun herself into the crowd, her short height helping her disappear instantly like she'd never been there to begin with.

"My dress! It's ruined!" Jessica Rabbit squealed.

"Oh. My. God," Sylvie breathed through the hand covering her mouth. "Did she just ..."

"Yes. Yes, she did." I smiled. "She vanquished the vampire." My happy little heart palpated as I watched Jessica Rabbit run for the exit, no doubt to try to salvage her dress. I caught sight of Marge continuing through the crowd toward the exit. She turned back to give me a little wink and a salute.

"Holy shit. She did it." Sylvie grinned. "That vampire has been slayed. This is it. Now go get your man, Alice."

Instead of jumping up and running toward him like I wanted, I sat frozen in my seat.

"What are you waiting for?" Doris gave me a nudge. "He's alone now! Go tell him how you feel!"

Fear like I'd never known glued me into place. "I ... I can't."

"Yes, you can." Sylvie reached out and grabbed my hand. "We Widows started this adventure to do things we'd never done before, and your wish may have been a cougar cruise, but this, falling in love with a man, is the real adventure you've never gone on. It's time to muster up the courage we've used to conquer all our other challenges and push yourself to conquer this new one. Go, Alice. Be vulnerable. Be open. Tell him how you feel. *That* is your real wish. I know it."

Alejandro stood alone for a moment watching Jessica Rabbit scamper away. Then, with one last glance tossed in my direction, he turned and started out of the room.

"Go, Alice! You can do this!" Doris pressed her hands together. "Go!"

Finally, my body responded, and I pushed out of my seat. One step and then another, I moved toward Alejandro.

What was I going to say? Just blurt out I love you? Tell him I was falling for him? Say nothing? I'd never been in this situation before, and I hadn't the foggiest idea what would come out of my mouth when I reached him.

"Oh, man." Jake stepped in front of me, hoisting my martini like a trophy. "It took me forever to get this thing back down here. Martinis are like super hard to carry without spilling. Ya know? I had to go back twice to get it remade. But I made it. Ta-da!"

I stopped and looked at him, then watched Alejandro disappear out of the room. The simple interruption seemed to have broken my trance and shaken me from my newfound confidence. I stammered as I grabbed the drink.

"Thank you, Jake. I appreciate the extra effort." I looked back to where Alejandro had disappeared, and that last bit of newfound hope in me started to drift away.

"Oh, no! Move it or lose it, mister. She's on a mission, and you're not getting in the way!" Marge appeared from out of nowhere and stepped between us.

"Huh?" He tipped his head.

Marge ignored him and turned back to me. "Forward, soldier. Always forward. You put one foot in front of the other, and you go find him. No guts, no glory. Now go! Time to earn you a 'taken' tag!"

Her giant shove nearly sent me to the ground, but it was exactly what I needed in the moment.

I took off running out of the ballroom and down the halls, calling his name as I ran.

"Alejandro!" I shouted as I raced outside, scanning the deck for any sign of him and finding none.

I grabbed the bottom of my skirt and raced to the stairs leading to the upper deck and his private cabin. When I

reached the top, I saw his white uniform like a blazing beacon against the night sky.

“Alejandro!” I shouted, and he turned to face me.

“Alice?”

I didn’t answer, instead rushing across the distance separating us and crashing into his arms. He wrapped them around me, pulling me against him the way he always did when he first saw me.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I spit out. “I didn’t want to go on a date tonight, but my friends were picking on me that I’d been spending all my time with you, and I wanted to prove them wrong. So I went. And it was a terrible mistake. And I hope I’m not too late and you’re leaving me for Jessica Rabbit. I’m so sorry, Alejandro. Can you forgive me?”

He grabbed me by the arms and pushed me back but kept his tight grip on me. “Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he soothed. “Slow down, Cariño. What are you talking about? I’m not angry at you.”

“You’re not?” I felt something starting in the back of my throat—a strange tightening.

“No. Was I happy to see you with another man? Of course not. But I also know that you and I have not had the conversation that says you belong to me, and I belong to you. It is not my place to be angry with you.”

“And do you?”

“Do I what?”

I swallowed over that strange tightness I soon identified as the start of tears from the way my voice broke. “Belong to me. Do you belong to me, and I belong to you?”

His eyes locked with mine, burning into me with their fiery passion. Instead of giving me an answer, he released his grip on my arms, snaked an arm around my waist, and bent me backward in a kiss so deep we could have touched the bottom of the ocean below us. I sank into him, and into the feelings he

evoked in me that I knew no one else ever would. My feelings for him that felt a lot like love.

The feelings that *were* love.

When our kiss finally softened, he whispered against my lips, “I have always belonged to you, Cariño. And I always will. The only question is, do you belong to me too?”

“Yes.” I breathed. “Very much, yes.”

He smiled, and I felt it against my lips as he kissed me again.

“I’m scared, Alejandro,” I finally admitted after our kiss broke apart, pressing my forehead to his. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what?”

“Fallen for anyone.”

He brushed the pad of his thumb against my cheek. “Then hold my hand, Cariño, and we can fall together.”

He captured my sigh with his kiss, sweeping me up in his arms and carrying me the last steps to his cabin. That night, under the Caribbean sky, I did something else I’d never done before.

I made love.

My eyes flitted open, and it only took a few seconds to remember where I was. The weight of Alejandro’s body cocooned around mine caused me to sigh as flashes of our night flickered across my mind like a vivid slideshow.

The kissing. The passion. The love-making. The romance.

Oh, the romance.

I never knew romance like this was possible. But I supposed falling in love amplified the joy of sex. At least it had for me. Until last night, I’d never felt anything as incredible as standing in the spotlight and feeling its heat envelope me ... the feeling of knowing I was the star. But last

night with Alejandro had shined a light so bright on me that I knew it would never dim. There would be no curtains closing on my feelings for him, leaving me standing alone in the dark. No. This spotlight we'd turned on last night would burn forever.

Last night we'd talked about our life together. Alejandro worked three months on and three months off. We would spend his three months off together in Las Vegas, where I could do my show, and for his three months on, I could cruise the world with him and spend my nights in his arms under the open ocean sky. It all seemed too good to be true, but my heart knew the feelings we had for each other were real. They may have come on quickly, but they were as deep and true as if we'd known each other forever.

As I lay there in his arms, basking in the glow of our night, all the emotions churning inside warmed me to my core. I was in bed lying in the arms of my one true love ... a man I didn't ever think could exist. But as I processed that truth, I also processed something else ... I was lying in bed with my one true love in the morning ... with my hair undone, my makeup likely a mess, and God knows I must have horrific morning breath.

I covered my mouth, carefully peeking over my shoulder to see my lion sleeping peacefully behind me. He was so beautiful even in sleep, and I envied that he didn't have hours of prep work to find his beauty like I needed. He didn't need injections and waxing of straggling chin hairs. He didn't need breast lifts and chin tightening and eye lifts. He didn't need an hour of makeup and an hour of hair just to head out for the day. No. He was perfect in all his natural glory.

Suddenly, terror started to wind its way into the nooks and crannies inside me. What if he woke up and saw me like this and the spell was broken? Would he still love me if he knew I didn't wake up looking like the woman he'd taken to bed? Or that I had chin hairs that needed tweezing or sagging skin that needed lifting? Would the magic fade away?

Panic tightened inside of me, and a feeling I wasn't familiar with joined it. Rejection. As I lay there in his perfect

muscular arms, I worried that he would reject me. The real me. The me I'd never let anyone see before, but that me was impossible to hide from someone I was in a relationship with.

It was easy to kick men out of my bed at night so they'd never see me without the smoke and mirrors that made me look twenty years younger. Made me look the age when I hadn't had to worry about such things like I wouldn't be attractive enough to a man. Back then, I was beautiful no matter the time of day. But with age came the hardships of fighting against the clock, and the battle grew more difficult each year. I'd even been able to hide it from my husband for most of our lives, and he'd passed before the reality of my age had really caught up with me.

But now I lay beside Alejandro trying to process how this would work. Separate bedrooms for the rest of our lives? But the thought of not waking in his arms pained me so greatly that it nearly split my heart in two. Sneaking out of bed every morning before he woke so I could put on some makeup and fix my hair to something not resembling the rats nest our love-making created? No. That wasn't sustainable, either. I had only one choice if I was going to really do this thing with Alejandro.

I had to show him the me without the makeup and clothes. The me who had to soak her aching feet every night or she couldn't walk the next morning—the imperfect me.

The real me.

The me who became increasingly real every day as age picked away at my natural beauty. Its fragility had become more obvious to me in the past year since moving to Vegas with the constant supply of young, beautiful women flocking to the city every day. On Wilder Lane, I'd been the most beautiful woman around, but now, even though I could run circles around women my age, I couldn't hold a candle to the firm-skinned, shiny-eyed beauties surrounding me. Whenever I encountered one, envy worked like a siphon to my unwavering confidence until the tank was all but dried up. For the first time in my life, even with all the extra makeup, creams, injections, and work, I didn't feel like the most

beautiful woman when I stepped into a room, and it felt like I was losing my oldest friend.

My beauty.

My identity.

It had been a part of me always, and I didn't know who I would be without it or if Alejandro would run for his life when he opened his eyes and saw the stunning woman he'd taken to bed replaced by the old lady in his arms.

Taking a stilling breath, I had to decide between laying there in his arms like I wanted, knowing he would wake up soon and see the real me, or slipping out of bed to rush back to my room and fix my hair and makeup enough to be presentable. Perhaps buy myself some time before I let Alejandro see behind the curtain. I glanced back at my handsome lion and decided I wasn't quite ready to let him see me without all the magic. Maybe I would show him a little at a time and hope it wouldn't send him running the other way after realizing I wasn't some young, beautiful woman like the ones closer to his age. Or younger.

Jessica Rabbit's face flashed through my eyes.

Nope. Not ready. I was going to have to drag this part out.

Very carefully, I slipped the covers back. Gently, I wiggled my naked body to get out from under his arm so I could make my getaway and get back into bed before he woke. But as I shifted my hips, I felt a small wet spot on the bed.

My heart plummeted to the ground.

Another curse of my losing battle against aging. My overactive bladder sometimes caused me slight urinary incontinence at night. It hadn't mattered how many Kegels I'd done after giving birth to Celeste, some things never quite snapped back to normal. As I got older, the occasional leak became more frequent. And now I had leaked in bed beside the beautiful younger man who had no idea what he was getting himself into falling for a woman my age.

That tightness in my throat returned, and I closed my eyes against the moisture burning behind them.

It had been more years than I could count since I'd felt the hot sting of tears streaming down my cheeks, but as they started their descent, I gave up my fight against them. I lay in his arms, silently crying beside him. Crying for my lost youth. Crying for my lost dignity. Crying for the lost love I would have to endure as I realized now ... I could never let him see the real me. I could never let him behind the curtain, for once he peeked behind it, his love for me would fade as fast as my looks were. And the one thing harder than leaving him would be watching him leave me.

No. Being left by the one man I'd ever loved was something I knew I couldn't endure. I wouldn't survive it. I closed my eyes and squeezed out more hot tears as I realized what I had to do ... accept the only solution. Be the one to go. End this now before I lost any more of my dignity. Leave him before he realized who I truly was and left me.

Leaving my broken heart shattered into a million pieces in the bed beside my love, I slipped out from beneath his arm, quietly gathering my clothes and pausing at the door to look at him one last time.

"I love you, Alejandro," I whispered before I walked out the door and out of his life forever.

With tears spilling down my cheeks, I rushed back to my room. After a quick shower, a quick fix of my hair, and applying enough makeup to go out in public, I rushed down the hall knocking on all the widows' doors. One by one, they opened, each grinning widely when they saw me.

"There you are, you old hound dog!" Marge knocked me on the arm. "I didn't hear you come home last night. I take it things went well."

"I am *dying* to hear! You have to tell us everything!" Sylvie practically bubbled out of her skin. "Did you say it? Please tell me you said it!"

"Oh, dear Lord, please let her have a 'taken' tag." Doris squeezed her eyes shut.

I lifted my chin high, pushing down the agony threatening to tear me apart and pulling out the strength I'd used to carry me through all the years of my life before this. It had gotten me through many ups and downs, and though this felt like the lowest down I'd ever, or would ever, encounter, I knew I would make it through. "I have news."

"You're getting married!" Sylvie screamed, and the other girls whooped along with her.

I swallowed over the lump in my throat, forcing it back down. "No. I'm not getting married. I made some calls, and guess what? We're getting off the ship and staying in Cozumel!" I faked my enthusiasm, hoping they would take the bait, but instead of whooping like they did before I dashed their hopes about my impending wedding, they just stood there, blinking.

"What?" Doris asked first. "I don't understand. We still have to cruise back to the States."

"I don't get it." Marge scrunched her brow. "Why are we getting off the ship here? And *can* we get off the ship here? That doesn't seem like a thing."

"Of course, it's a thing. It's no different than flying to Mexico. As long as we have our passports, we're fine. I checked this morning. People get left behind on cruises every day. We're just choosing to get left behind. It's going to be great. I booked us rooms already at the InterContinental. It's the nicest hotel in Cozumel. We can stay there for a few days while we work out the next wish. It's going to be great, ladies. Pure luxury all the way. So, pack your bags, and let's get off the ship before it pulls out in an hour."

I started to turn and head back to my room, but Sylvie grabbed my arm. "Whoa, there. Not so fast. What the hell is going on, Alice?"

"Nothing. Nothing is going on. We're just getting off the ship. Now. That's all."

She tightened her grip. "Alice, I think we should just stay on the cruise, and let's take some time to work things out with

Alejandro. Whatever happened last night can't be that bad. I'm sure you two can talk—"

"I want to get off the ship," I spit out too fast and harshly. It was the only way to get the words out before my voice cracked with the tears threatening to come.

She stepped forward and softly said, "Did Alejandro do something? Did he not reciprocate your feelings? Did he—hurt you?"

The concern in her eyes was mirrored in Doris and Marge's eyes too.

"If he hurt you, I swear to God, I'll find myself a potato peeler and skin his balls one painful layer at a time," Marge ground out, her little fist tightening with each word. "What the hell happened last night?"

I lifted my hands. "Okay. Now who's Buffalo Bill? And no. He didn't hurt me. Everything is fine, I promise. I've just decided this isn't for me. And I want to get off the ship. Now."

"Alice, are you sure?" Doris asked softly. "I don't know what happened last night, but if you love him, I don't think you should leave without trying to work things out. You should at least talk to him ... or something."

Another wave of heartbreak tore through me, and this time, I couldn't stop the tear it pushed out. "I need to get off this ship. Now. Please. I'm begging you all not to make me explain and not to fight me on this. You all promised you'd have my back. We need to go. Now."

This time they didn't fight, and when I wiped the tears from my eyes, I saw the concern in theirs.

"Of course, Alice. Of course," Sylvie said quickly. "If you want off this ship, we're off it. Now. Aren't we girls?"

Marge crossed her arms. "I'll swim you to shore myself if I have to. We're outta here."

"Anything for you, Alice," Doris agreed quickly. "I'll go pack my bags."

“Thank you,” I breathed out. “I appreciate it. Just get your bags packed, and let’s go. I’m going to head down to the main level and wait for you there.” I didn’t want to risk a run-in with Alejandro coming to my room, so I knew I could hide out and avoid that.

“Alice?” Sylvie asked. “Are you okay?”

“I will be,” I answered honestly.

“Do you want to tell us what happened, dear?” Doris asked.

“No. Not now. Not yet.” I shook my head. “I will when I’m ready, but for right now, all I want is to get the hell out of here.”

“You got it, soldier. Ladies, move out!” Marge commanded, spinning her finger in the air.

With a sigh of relief that they weren’t going to argue, I started toward my room, but a tug on my arm pulled me to a stop.

Sylvie stared at me with concern brewing in her eyes. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, and I swear none of us will pressure you or ask, and you’ll tell us when you’re ready, but I just need to do this quickly, then we’ll go on pretending everything is normal like I know you want.”

“Do wh—”

I didn’t get to finish. Sylvie pulled me in for a hug. The moment her arms wrapped around me, I stiffened against them, but she squeezed me tighter anyway. A moment later, Marge wrapped around us, and then Doris joined. As I stood in the hall with the three of them wrapped around me, I fought the tears again.

But this time, they weren’t tears of sadness threatening to spill out. They were tears of joy that I had three of the best friends in the whole world to support me. With a sigh, I sank into their hug, letting their warmth soothe away some of the heartbreak I knew would never truly heal.

“We’ve got you, Alice. No matter what,” Sylvie said.

“Wilder Widows for life,” Marge said.

Doris sniffled. “I love you, ladies, with all my heart.”

“Thank you for understanding and supporting me. I love you all too.” I squeezed them back and then broke apart our hug. “Now, hurry your asses up, and let’s get the hell out of here. Cozumel awaits!”

With the swoosh of my arm, I ended with a flourish. They all scurried inside their rooms, and I went back to mine. The concierge arrived a moment later and took my bags to the exit. I hid discreetly behind a large palm tree on the off-chance Alejandro came down this way. I couldn’t face him after what had happened in that bed. Perhaps it was small enough he hadn’t noticed, but if he had, I could never look him in the eyes again.

And I didn’t want to. Because the moment I looked into his eyes, I knew I’d never be able to leave him. And I loved him too much to saddle my young, virile lion to the decaying old lady I’d tricked him into loving. The old lady I’d hidden beneath the veneer of youth. As much as it pained me to say it, I hoped he would find someone else. Someone young and full of life to spend it with him.

I saw Jessica Rabbit in the distance.

I glared at her from behind my oversized sunglasses.

Anyone but her.

“We’re ready!” Sylvie sing-songed and I was grateful she was keeping up her promise to pretend everything was fine. I wanted it that way. I didn’t want the rest of our trip to be cloaked in sadness. That wasn’t my way. Chin up and fake it ‘til you make it. That was how I rolled, and lucky for me, my widows understood.

“Does everyone have their passports?” Marge passed a glance between us. “You don’t want to get off this ship and realize you forgot your passport. I heard it’s a real bitch to get home without one.”

We all double-checked.

“Got it.”

“Good.” Marge gave a sharp nod with her chin. “I don’t want to have to find a coyote to sneak us across the border. Now, let’s get off this ship and go have some Wilder Widows fun. Get the tequila ready, Cozumel, because here we come!”

“I’m not drinking tequila.” Doris puckered her nose.

“Oh, we’re drinking tequila, Doris. Lots and lots of tequila.” I slung an arm around her shoulder.

We walked down the ramp together and onto the docks. One by one, we filed farther and farther from the ship that would carry my love away.

“Oh! I have an idea!” Sylvie said, dropping her bags and then digging inside her tote. When her hand emerged, it clutched our colorful knitting basket. “Since Alice’s wish to go on a cougar cruise is officially complete, I say we start this next leg of our journey by drawing the next wish.”

Doris clapped and jumped up and down. “Oh my! I hope it’s mine! I remember what it is this time!”

“Alice, you finished your wish, so you pick the next one.”

My wish was over. My hope for a new love was over. I glanced back up at the cruise ship, hoping, and not hoping, to see Alejandro one last time. He wasn’t there, which made me both happy and devastated all over again. I thought about my choice one last time. As much as I loved Alejandro, I felt deep in my gut that I was making the right decision for both of us. And even though my heart ached so badly I thought it might burst, I didn’t need a great love in my life.

I pulled my gaze from the ship and looked at the widows beside me.

I already had three. And they were more than I would ever need.

They stood staring at me, smiling and waiting for me to kick off our next big adventure. With an answering grin, I stuck my hand in the basket and pulled out the little piece of paper.

“Marge,” I read the name written on the outside.

“Aw, yeah!” She raised her hands above her head and shimmed her hips. “Get ready, ladies. This is gonna be awesome!”

Sylvie crossed her fingers. “Please don’t it be something crazy like running with the bulls.”

Doris pressed her hands together. “Oh, yes. Please, Lord Jesus Christ. No running with the bulls again.”

“It’s not,” Marge answered, but the glimmer in her eye and the smirk on her face told me it may not be running with the bulls this time, but we weren’t gonna be knitting.

Carefully, I opened the card, and my eyes bulged when I read it.

“Really, Marge? Are *all* your wishes about animals trying to kill us?”

She just grinned.

Sylvie shot forward. “What? Oh, God. Now what is trying to kill us? How bad is it?”

“Well, that depends,” I answered.

“On what?” Doris asked.

“On if you’re scared of sharks,” I answered, looking at Doris, then turning the paper around to show the words “Cage diving with sharks” to the ladies.

“Noooooooooooo!” Sylvie shrieked, drawing out the “O” so long I worried she’d pass out. But it was Doris who almost went ass over teakettle as she screamed so loudly she nearly ruptured my eardrums.

Marge tossed an arm around the shoulder of the shrieking ladies beside her. “Get ready, ladies. This is gonna be awesome.”

MARGE

CHAPTER NINE

“Ahhh.” I smacked my lips, savoring the salt from the rim of my margarita. “Staying in Cozumel was a great idea. And dinner here out on the ocean, also a great idea.”

I gestured to the sandy beach surrounding us, lit with torches and scattered with tables throughout the sand. It was a fine dining restaurant right out on the shore.

“I thought you ladies would like this,” Alice answered. “I know we’ve been on a ship surrounded by ocean for over a week, but sitting on a beach is different. I’m really appreciating the feeling of land beneath me.”

“Me too,” Doris agreed. “I never truly found my sea legs. I mean, I loved the cruise, don’t get me wrong, but I think I prefer dry land.”

“I’m just happy anywhere I can get drinks this good.” Sylvie lifted her craft cocktail made with fresh jalapenos, grapefruit juice, and a bunch of other flouncy ingredients I couldn’t remember.

“And the hotel is beautiful. My room is fit for a queen,” Doris added. “Thank you for booking it, Alice. I slept like a fairytale princess last night.”

“Of course. If we’re staying somewhere, we’re staying in style.”

We’d stopped arguing and stopped feeling bad about Alice footing the bill for all the first-class travel. The other widows and I had enough money from life insurance, inheritances, and savings to live comfortably without working, but none of us could afford the luxury Alice demanded when she traveled. So, she upgraded us all so she didn’t have to slum it, and we got to enjoy a little taste of the rich and famous life she lived every day.

I took another sip of my Cadillac Margarita, smacking my lips again as I savored the upgraded ingredients from the ones at TGI Friday’s I was accustomed to. Roxie and I usually went

there at least once a week, and we always split an extra-large one, drinking it with two straws like Lady and the Tramp.

Roxie.

I smiled at the thought of her, as I always did. It had been a year since I found her, yet every day still felt as exciting and new as the first time I'd seen her in that casino in Las Vegas. The day my life changed forever.

Our romance had been a whirlwind, and after going back to Wilder Lane for a few weeks to get my stuff, I'd flown back to Vegas to be with Roxie. It had been so easy moving in with her and starting our life together. Like we'd been an old, married couple for years. I loved every second I spent with her—the love of my life.

Roxie *was* the love of my life, but I still felt Percy was my soul mate, and I'd never regret the decades we'd spent married as best friends. Even though part of me wished I'd found Roxie sooner, I wouldn't have traded a minute of my life with Percy. Instead, I only wished he'd been alive to meet her. He'd have loved her, and I knew he'd be happier for my newfound love than anyone. I only wished that he'd have gotten the same second chance I had and found a love like mine.

Alice flagged the server down by lifting her empty glass. Even though it seemed impossible she could drink any more than normal, since we'd gotten off the ship, she hadn't gone a second without a drink in her hand. My tongue itched to tease her about it, but I held back because I knew she was hurting. We had no idea what had happened with Alejandro, but we all agreed Alice hadn't been herself since she'd returned from her night with him. It pained me to see the light in her eyes had dimmed.

“Two olives, extra dry,” she said to the server when he arrived. He gave a slight bow and took her glass, moving across the sand back to the main restaurant just off the beach. She turned her attention back to us and then focused on me. “So, we need to discuss your wish.”

“Nothing to discuss. I made my wish. We're going cage diving with sharks.”

The color in Doris's face drained again when I said the word "sharks."

"Cage diving, though?" Sylvie asked. "Isn't that a bit extreme? We don't even know how to scuba dive. Maybe we can just go to a shark park or something, and you can get in the water with them. There must be a shark petting zoo somewhere in the world."

"Nope." I crossed my arms. "Cage diving. In the ocean. That's the wish."

Doris whimpered.

"Marge," Alice started. "We want to support your wish, but we just think it may be too extreme."

"None of you pansies have to get in the water, you know. I can go in by myself."

They sat silently for a moment, then Sylvie shook her head. "No. We've always done the wishes together. When one goes, we all go. And if cage diving with sharks is truly your wish, then you go, we go."

Doris whimpered again.

"We'll be okay, Doris," Sylvie soothed. "I'm not exactly a fan of this either, but I did look today, and no one in history has ever died cage diving. That means it must be safer than it looks."

"I hate sharks!" she cried, clutching her linen napkin tight. "I can't do it!"

Alice pursed her lips. "We'll do it. We won't like it, but we'll do it. We all will. I'll just give us all some Xanax before we go in. We won't be scared of a thing."

"No Xanax for me." I lifted my hand. "I want to feel every moment of the thrill."

"Oh, I'll take the Xanax." Sylvie nodded. "Two Xanax."

"I don't know what that is, but I'm still not going." Doris stuck out her lip in a pout.

"How does the cage diving thing work?" Sylvie asked.

“Well, I was planning on having us go to Australia to cage dive with the great whites.”

Doris let out a little squeal. “Great Whites? Aren’t those the biggest and scariest ones!?”

I grinned. “Yep. All the more thrilling for my adventure.”

Her lip quivered.

“Me and Percy always watched Shark Week together, and we both thought that cage diving with Great White was the ultimate adventure. Now I’m going to do it, and I’m doing it whether you ninnies are with me or not.”

“We’re with you,” Sylvie said decidedly. “We’ll be on Xanax, but we’re with you.”

“So, Australia?” Alice asked. “That’s where we’re headed next?”

I lifted my finger. “Actually, we kinda lucked out. I did some looking this morning, and it turns out that Guadalupe Island down here in Mexico is one of the best cage diving experiences around. I actually watched it on Shark Week, and we got lucky. This time of the year is called the “Time of the Titans” because the biggest Great Whites in the world migrate right through Guadalupe Island. We can swim with them!”

Doris made the sign of the cross.

“Three Xanax, Alice. I’m gonna need three Xanax,” Sylvie stated.

“Screw that. I’m taking the whole bottle,” Alice snorted.

“Ah, don’t be worried. The boat I found today is high-class all the way. They’ve got luxury suites, a hot tub, and, you’ll like this Alice, a bar.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“And they use a hookah system for diving, so we don’t even need to learn how to scuba dive. It’s very safe and top-of-the-line everything. I think we should book with them.”

“As long as they have a bar, I’m in. Just send me the details, and I’ll make the booking,” Alice agreed.

“Awesome. It’s four days, three nights—”

“Whoa!” Doris lifted her hands. “You mean this isn’t just an hour-long excursion of terror? We’ll be on a boat surrounded by sharks for *days!*?”

“It’s a hike-on boat over to Guadalupe Island. Four days and three nights is the shortest trip they offer. But you don’t have to be in the water the whole time. I mean, they offer endless dives, so I’ll be swimming with the sharks as much as I can, but you ladies can just sun yourselves on the upper deck if you don’t want to keep going in.”

“I’ll be at the bar,” Alice said just as the server arrived with her martini. “Marinating myself in these babies.”

I bit my lip instead of firing off the snarky comment that usually would have come.

“What?” Alice tipped her head.

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat.

She set her drink down so hard it nearly spilled her precious vodka. “Okay. Enough.”

“Enough what?” Sylvie asked.

“Enough of the kid gloves. Since we got off that ship yesterday, you’re all treating me like some China doll held together by Scotch tape. All day at the pool, you fawned over me like a child. I’m fine. Things didn’t work out with Alejandro. It’s no big deal. Now stop acting strange around me, or I’m going to pack up and fly home. I’m not spending this trip like some weeks-long funeral procession.”

“We’re just worried about you is all, dear.” Doris puckered her lips.

“Well, don’t.” Alice lifted her eyebrows along with her chin. “I’m fine.”

I knew she wasn’t. We all did. Alice may be tougher than any other broad I’d ever met, and she was doing a damn good job trying to hide it, but there was no concealing the sadness brewing inside her blue eyes. But as someone who also didn’t like sharing my ooey gooey feelings, I understood her need for

us to carry on like nothing had happened. If that's how she wanted to handle whatever the hell had gone down with Alejandro, then we owed it to her to respect it.

I lifted my chin. "Okay. Fine. We'll stop treating you differently."

"Good." She crossed her legs. "Now, what were you going to say that I know you stopped yourself from saying?"

I quirked a smile. "Well, if you must know, I was going to say, 'At the rate you've been drinking since we got off that damn ship, you'd better make sure to alternate drinking hands, or your right arm is gonna look like The Hulk's.'"

She stared at me for a second, and I worried maybe I'd said something to hurt her even more than I knew she already was, but instead, she burst into loud, belly laughter.

"Now that's what I'm talking about." She grabbed her drink with her left hand and did some arm lifts with it up to her lips. "This is how I want you all to treat me from now on. Don't hold back. Absolutely nothing has changed. Capeesh?"

"Capeesh," we all echoed.

"So, now that's taken care of, let's get back to enjoying our stay here in Cozumel. We need to enjoy as many moments here as we can before we all get eaten by sharks."

The color pooled out of Doris's face again, and I held back my snort.

We finished our dinner, and as we walked through the resort back to our rooms, the rhythmic sounds of a mariachi band caught our attention.

"Oh! Where is that coming from?" Sylvie spun in circles. Finally, she found the source of the music. A bar beside the pool had a party with live music, colorful lights, and a crowd of dancing tourists. Sylvie grabbed my hand, tugging me behind her. "Come on, ladies. We're going dancing."

"Dancing?" I dragged my heels, but she pulled harder. "I don't dance."

“We’re dancing. We’re in Mexico, and there is a live mariachi band. We’re dancing.” She didn’t slow down, and I glanced behind me to see Alice and Doris hustling to keep up.

When we got to the bar, Sylvie pulled me straight onto the dance floor and started shaking her hips, swinging my arms back and forth.

“I’m not dancing,” I argued as I stood in the center of the dancing crowd.

“Oh, come on, Marge,” Alice said as she shimmied beside me. “Loosen up. Dancing is good for the soul.”

She broke out in some fancy moves that caught the attention of the crowd surrounding us.

“Whoa!” Doris hooted as she jumped in beside Sylvie, shaking her hips and spinning around.

“Come on, Marge!” Sylvie grinned. “Dance with us!”

The salty, tropical air. The smell of coconut drinks and suntan lotion. The sound of the music. As much as I didn’t want to dance, the atmosphere started to coax me out of my shell. The music started thumping through me, and to hell if my toes didn’t start tapping along. Then my leg, then my hip, and finally, I said, “Screw it!” and tossed my hands in the air and joined them.

The four of us held hands and danced in circles, sheer joy radiating off us as we lost ourselves in the music. We danced until everything ached, then we collapsed onto the stools along the bar.

“Four tequilas,” Alice called to the bartender.

“Oh. I said no tequila.” Doris chewed her lip.

“You’ll be fine,” Alice soothed. “Just don’t drink the worm.”

Doris’s eyes bulged. “A worm!?”

“There is no worm. You’ll be fine.” Sylvie craned her neck around and secretly scolded Alice with a frown. “That’s mezcal that has the worm, not tequila.”

“You’re sure?” Doris watched the bartender pour the bottle intently.

“I’m sure.”

“Well then, I better order some mezcal and get Doris some extra protein.” Alice grinned.

“Alice!” Sylvie scolded on a laugh.

The bartender arrived with our four shots, and as he placed them in front of us, the young, handsome man locked eyes with Alice. The way his hungry gaze roved over her caused the tiniest flicker of life to crackle back on in her eyes.

“Aquí tienes, hermosa.”

She furrowed her brow as she grabbed the shot. “I don’t speak Spanish.”

He leaned in, his deep, husky voice whispering, “I said, ‘Here you go, beautiful.’”

“Oh,” she said, and a soft smile lifted her lips. “Thank you.”

As he walked away, he cast a glance over his shoulder, and we all recognized the invitation he shot to Alice. We’d traveled with her long enough to know what that look meant.

I bumped her with my elbow. “Getting back on the horse?”

She looked at him and then gently shook her head. “No. Not yet, but it was nice to be called beautiful.”

Those simple words set me back. Did Alice doubt her beauty? That seemed impossible, yet I could see how she swelled up a bit at the simple phrase from the handsome bartender.

What the hell happened to her?

“Well, here’s to us.” Alice lifted her shot glass before any of us could press her. “To the Wilder Widows!”

“To the Wilder Widows!” we cheered, clinking our glasses together and then downing our tequila shots.

CHAPTER TEN

“No. I can’t do this. I’m gonna sit this wish out.” Doris pulled back against my grip while I tried to drag her up the gangway to this ship. “You girls have fun. I’ll just go back to the resort and wait.”

“Quit yer griping, Doris. You’re coming. We Wilder Widows stick together, dammit.”

“Marge, I can’t! I’m too scared!”

Sylvie stepped in front of us. “Doris, you ran with the bulls. Ran. With. *Bulls*. Just us scootin’ along with loose, aggressive Spanish fighting bulls trying to trample us into dust. And you know what? We survived! You did it, and didn’t it feel good to have accomplished it?”

She chewed on her lip. “Yes. I suppose. I mean, it did bring El Diablo to me. And I do love him.”

“See.” Alice chimed in. “You faced your fear, and wonderful things happened. Now we’re all going to face this next fear. Together. Because that’s how we Wilder Widows roll. We take Marge’s death-defying, horrifying, awful wishes head-on.” She slid a glare in my direction with a soft head shake. “None of us want to get in the water with the damn sharks.”

“I do,” I said quickly.

Alice rolled her eyes. “The *rest* of us, the *sane* widows, is who I’m referring to, Evel Knievel.” She looked back at Doris. “But if we fulfill this wish, we will survive and be all the better for it. Just like we did with the running of the bulls. And that was far more dangerous than getting in a highly protective cage in the water with sharks who have no interest in eating us.”

“Well, not you, at least. You have no meat on your bones. I have meat!” Doris jiggled her hips.

Sylvie chuckled. “Doris. You can do this. You can at least come on the ship with us, and if you truly decide you don’t

want to do the cage diving, you don't have to."

"I don't?"

"No. You don't," Alice answered.

I furrowed my eyebrows. "Hey, wait a minute. She doesn't? I thought we all had to do the wishes together."

"She *doesn't*." Alice gave me another sideways glare. "We do all the wishes together, but we're never going to force someone to do something against their will. We *hope* Doris will swim with us, but if she is too scared, no one is going to make her."

"You promise?" Doris's scared eyes passed between us. "You promise you won't make me go if I'm too scared?"

"No one is pushing you in, Doris." Sylvie stepped up and slid an arm around her shoulder, gently guiding her past me and up the gangway one step at a time.

"Don't make promises I'm not gonna keep," I whispered as I stepped behind them.

"What?" Doris slammed to a stop, but I nudged her up the rest of the way, keeping my body between her and the gangway to make sure she didn't bolt back off.

Finally, Doris stopped darting her gaze between the dock and the cabin we guided her toward. Once we got her inside, I finally quit preparing to tackle her if she bolted for freedom. We got settled into our rooms, which were far nicer than I'd expected on a shark diving trip, and finally, I felt the ship pull out. I walked with the widows up to the top of the ship that would cruise us out to Guadalupe Island.

"Why did it have to be sharks, Marge?" she whined as we stood on the top deck watching the shore disappearing. "Why not dolphins? Can't we go swim with dolphins?"

"Sorry, Doris. Gotta be sharks. That was the dream me and Percy had. It's up to me to go live it. For me and for him."

"I love that you bring Percy into your wishes," Sylvie said as she settled onto the bench seat beside me.

I smiled softly. “Yeah. I miss him every day. I love Roxie, don’t get me wrong, but Percy was my person. My best friend. My other half. Life just isn’t the same without him at my side. So, doing these little wishes that I know he would enjoy makes me feel closer to him again.”

Sylvie sighed. “I think the relationship you two had was so special. I wish Bruce and I would have had that.”

“Well, you have it with Tom now,” I said. “And that’s not nothing.”

“No. It’s not nothing,” she agreed, but then she paused and chewed on her lip.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Doris asked.

Sylvie looked between us, then let out a long breath. “Am I a terrible person for just running off with Tom right after Bruce died? I mean, his body was barely cold in the ground before I ran back to Tom. I know I had no love for Bruce at the end, and he was a real jackass most of the time, but still. I’m feeling like a heartless asshole for not even taking a moment to grieve the man I spent the majority of my life with. It’s really been messing with my head lately, and it’s getting worse the closer I get to the wedding.”

“You don’t need to feel bad.” Alice shook her head. “Bruce was a terrible husband. And even if he wasn’t terrible the entire time, Tom is, and always will be, the love of your life. You spent decades without him, and we’re not getting any younger. There’s no sense in sitting around in fake grief, wasting even one minute of what’s left of your life mourning your dead husband instead of spending it with your true love. We only live once. No sense in squandering a chance at happiness.”

Sylvie’s eyes flashed wide. “Wow. That was surprisingly astute, Alice. Thank you.”

“I have my moments.” She lifted her gaze from us to the man standing behind the small bar at the edge of the deck. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I was promised a bar, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

She walked away and left the three of us sitting together.

“Do you think she’s okay?” Doris whispered. “I’m worried about her.”

“Me too,” Sylvie agreed. “I just wish she’d open up and tell us what happened so we could help her.”

“She will when she’s ready.” I looked over at Alice. She sat tall and proud at the bar, her air of authority dimmed but still visible. “We just need to give her time and respect her wishes not to treat her like glass.”

Sylvie nodded in agreement. “Definitely. It’s hard to pretend she’s not hurting. She admitted she was in *love* with him. Alice. In love. Whatever happened must have been bad, and I just wish she’d share the load with us. But if this is how she wants to deal with whatever happened, then I’m on board. Her choice.”

“I’ve been praying for her,” Doris said. “Hopefully, it will help ease whatever pain she’s in.”

“That’s sweet, Doris.” Sylvie tapped her thigh. “I mean, don’t ever tell her that or she’ll work you over, but it’s sweet. Keep praying for her.”

Doris winked. “I pray for all of you.”

“Well, if you’re gonna pray for me today, pray this Montezuma’s Revenge passes quickly. Damn it. I gotta go again.”

My intestines burned, and the urgency caused me to jump up and hurry toward the bathrooms below deck.

“I told you not to drink the water!” Sylvie called after me. Her laughter comingled with Doris’s and was the last sound I heard before I made it down the stairs.

She *had* told me not to drink the water. I, on the other hand, had told her I was no pansy and my stomach could handle whatever I threw at it. It seemed I was, in fact, very wrong.

After I finished up in the bathroom, I wandered around the boat until I found the widows all sitting in their seats in the

dining area listening to the safety lecture I'd forgotten was scheduled.

"What did I miss?" I asked as I slipped in next to Alice.

"Don't get eaten," she deadpanned.

"There's more than that," Sylvie said with a chuckle. "I'll fill you in later on what you missed."

I looked up to see the man giving the speech at the front of the boat. "Whoa," I said. "I'm not one to ogle a man, but that is one handsome instructor."

"Right?" Sylvie bumped me with her shoulder. "Dr. Tremblay. A Marine Biologist from France. He's our main instructor and divemaster. Holy handsome, right?"

I blew out a quick breath. "Yes indeedy." I glanced over at Alice and got ready to say what I normally would have, then bit my tongue. But quickly, I remembered her request not to hold back, so I leaned in and whispered, "I bet you could toss a saddle on him and ride him like a dolphin."

As I waggled my eyebrows at her and she didn't quip back immediately, I started to panic that I'd gone too far. But a moment later, she lifted an eyebrow.

"A saddle? Please. Saddles are for amateurs. I can stay on bareback."

We shared a quick look, and I caught the 'thank you' in her stare before we burst into laughter. Our loud outburst stopped Dr. Tremblay, and he glanced at us.

"Sorry," I grunted out between chuckles. "Go on."

He smiled, and his gaze traveled to Alice, lighting up when it locked with hers as all men's seemed to. "So, as I was saying," he went on, and this time, we sat quietly and listened to his spiel about the sharks and our safety.

When he finished his presentation, the widows and I, along with the other twenty guests, followed him up to the top deck where we gathered for cocktails and appetizers for the meet and greet. We met a couple from Amsterdam, a pair of Sisters from Scottsdale, and a variety of world travelers here just for

this experience. As we mingled and gathered, Dr. Tremblay worked around between us, answering questions and telling us all about his incredible shark experiences.

But even though he spread his attention between everyone, his eyes were always traveling to Alice.

“I think he likes you,” I whispered to her.

“Of course, he likes me. What’s not to like?” she answered, and it was the first time I’d heard her usual confident comebacks since we’d gotten off that cruise ship. It sounded good to hear them again.

“You gonna go for it?” I asked.

She paused, then shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

I had to keep my eyes from bulging out of my head. A handsome, young doctor was interested in Alice, and she wasn’t going to take him for a spin.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked. “I know we’re acting like nothing happened, but if you change your mind and want to talk about it, the door is always open.”

“Thanks, Marge.” She smiled. “I will be fine. But for now, I think I need a little break from men. I’d rather just focus on having fun with you girls for the rest of the trip.”

“Well, we are more interesting than any man, I’ll give you that.”

“Exactly. As of this moment, I’m on a man ban.”

“Hey, I’m on one too. A permanent one. And if you ever decide you want to give up on men and switch teams, I know plenty of ladies who’d love to have you.” I grinned wide and waggled my eyebrows.

Alice laughed. “Thanks, Marge. It’s good to know you’ve got my back.”

With a wink, I answered, “Always.”

“How are you ladies doing tonight?” Dr. Tremblay asked, and his fancy French accent made the phrase sound very exotic.

Instead of flipping on her charm like she'd done countless times I'd seen a man approach her, Alice just smiled and said, "Good, thanks."

Dr. Tremblay made several attempts at flirtation with Alice, but instead of her usual sexy banter, she kept it cool and short. Finally, another guest grabbed his attention, and he moved away.

Part of me was thrilled to see Alice ignore a man's attention and focus inward, and the other part was sad to see her so down. Like a caged cougar with no life left inside, it had given up on all possibilities of being free again. I hoped one day soon she'd break down the cage keeping her captive and run wild and free again like she'd done since long before I'd met her.

As I paused and thought about how grateful I was that I'd never have to be single again and go through the heartbreak Alice was obviously overcoming, I realized just how lucky I was. Anyone who looked at me would never stop and think, "Wow. I bet she has everything." And yet, I did. First, I'd had a wonderful life with Percy, my very best friend. And then I'd lost him, and though I'd never stop missing him, the Wilder Widows had stepped in and filled the void. And then I'd met Roxie. Now I had a great love that rocked my world and made me feel like a kid again.

I wasn't the smartest in the room. I didn't have a fancy job or money. I certainly didn't have looks. To anyone who passed a glance at me, I was a nobody. But in reality, I was the luckiest woman in the world. I'd lived an incredibly charmed life, and the best part was that since last year when I'd started this adventure with the Wilder Widows, I felt like I had so much more life left to go.

Sylvie and Doris joined us, and I smiled as I looked at my three widows.

With friends like these, I truly had everything.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“A fin! I see a fin!” Sylvie shrieked and grabbed ahold of my arm.

“Where? Where?!” I ran to the widow, searching for the fin that had Sylvie squealing like a punctured balloon.

“Right there.”

She pointed, and I followed the trajectory of her finger until I saw it. “Oh, hell yeah! They really are here!”

We’d arrived at Guadalupe Island during the night, and they’d anchored us here where we’d be staying for the next several days. When I’d awakened and no longer heard the engines running, I’d been staring nonstop out into the sea searching for any signs of the sharks. We’d seen nothing for the first hour, but now, during our breakfast in the small dining area, we’d had our first sighting.

I pressed my face up to the window and squinted. Finally, I saw the sharp protrusion cutting through the dark blue water.

“I see it!” I pressed my hands against the window, smooshing my face in tighter. “I see it!”

“Where?” One of the other passengers shouted as he leaped up from his small table and hurried to my side.

“Right there.” I pointed, my heart pounding with excitement as I watched the fin swirling around, leaving a small wake behind it.

“Oh, wow! I see it too!” The man whose name I would never remember smiled as wide as I was. “Isn’t this amazing?”

“So amazing!” We looked at each other, our goofy grins matching. Then I turned to the widows. “Do you see it? Isn’t this awesome?”

“I don’t want to look. I want to go home.” Doris’s lower lip quivered.

“I’m not going to lie,” Sylvie said from beside me as she stared out the window, “I was feeling like I could do this, but

actually *seeing* the fin in the water?” She shuddered. “I don’t know if I have the balls to get in. This just made it very real.”

“I’m with you there, sister,” Alice agreed as she leaned over my shoulder to get a look.

With a grumble, I turned to face them. “Really? You big, bad ladies are scared of a little shark?”

“Little?” Sylvie’s eyes flashed wide. “Great Whites are not little sharks. They are *huge*, Marge. With *huge* teeth. And as you’ve pointed out several times, this is the Time of the Titans here in Guadalupe Islands. The time of the year that attracts the *biggest sharks in the whole entire world!*”

I shrugged. “Okay, so they aren’t little. But we will be safe. Won’t we?” I turned to the nameless man with the shaggy orange beard.

“Absolutely.” He nodded. “This is the safest outfit in the ocean. They have a perfect safety record and some of the best cages and technology in the world. You ladies will all be very safe in the water.”

“Ugh.” Alice moaned. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Atta girl.” I slapped her arm and she grimaced, rubbing the tender spot.

“Easy with the ‘atta girls.’ You’re gonna break my arm.”

I sucked the air through my teeth. “Sorry. Just super jazzed up over here.”

“Good morning, shark spotters!” one of the crew, Jerry, said as he burst into the dining area. “If you haven’t seen it already, we already have our first sightings of the day!”

“We saw. Can’t wait to get in with them!” I answered enthusiastically.

Jerry clapped once then pointed a finger at me. “That’s what I love to hear!” His energy matched his young age, maybe twenty-two at most. “We are setting up the dive cages now, and in one hour, we will start letting you all go down. Up to four at a time, plus the divemaster, who will go with you on

every dive. And after everyone gets a turn, you can go down as much as you want while we're here."

"I'm gonna live in the water," I breathed, my eyes widening with excitement.

Jerry laughed. "I like that energy. Now, go get yourselves ready and meet us on the platform behind the boat. We'll go over all the final safety notes, get you all fitted with suits and gear, and start swimming with sharks."

A few of the other guests milling around started clapping, and I wondered if maybe I shouldn't force the widows into the water and instead join one of the groups that were as excited about this as I was. But when I glanced at my widows, I knew it was worth trying to bring them on this adventure with me. Having this experience without them by my side wouldn't be the same. I was already missing Percy deeply today, knowing how much he would want to be there with me, and he'd be chomping at the bit too. But I didn't have him. I had *them*, and I wanted to see the wonder on their faces I knew would appear if they would just suck it up and jump in. So today, I had to convince the widows to take the plunge and be by my side while I fulfilled this next wish.

"At least come down and get the gear on," I said to Doris while I tried to pry her fingers from the railing of the stairs that led to the dive platform behind the ship.

She shook her head furiously. "I can't. You said I didn't have to, and I can't."

"I said you don't have to get in the cage. But you at least need to get in the outfit so we can get one good picture of the four of us." I tugged at her again.

"What if I fall in?"

I gestured my hand to the huge platform below us—big enough that at least twenty people could stand comfortably. "The platform is secure, and you're not gonna fall in. Just come on, you big ninny. You'll be fine."

“It’s really sturdy!” Sylvie called up from the bottom. “I think you’ll be just fine, Doris. Just get down here with us!”

“Come on, Doris. If I have to wear the stupid suit and ugly mask, you have to wear the stupid suit and ugly mask,” Alice said, followed by a deep sigh.

Doris chewed her lip, then finally released her death grip on the rail and came down the stairs, one slow step at a time.

“You did it!” Sylvie cheered when she reached the bottom.

“Let’s just hurry up and get the suits on so I can get the picture and get back on the ship.”

While the crew members dispersed the suits and dive equipment to us, Dr. Tremblay stood on the edge of the platform gesturing to the sharks swimming around and talking about shark conservation, why they were drawn to this volcanic island every year, and the breeding habits of the Great Whites he loved so much. I listened intently while pulling on my suit, devouring every word he uttered like my own personal *Shark Week* episode.

I was so fascinated by the creatures swimming around us that each moment closer we got to getting in the water with them made my heart race faster and faster, like a race car picking up speed each time it lapped the track.

“Oh, God. That one looks big.” Sylvie cringed as a huge shark drifted past the swim platform, close enough that I could have leaned down and touched it.

“That one is Dotty,” Dr. Tremblay said.

“They have names?” Alice arched an eyebrow. “How can you tell them apart?”

“Oh, they all have names. Most of these sharks come here every year. There are over three hundred that have been named and identified. This one is Dotty on account of the dot on her dorsal fin. See it?”

We all looked.

“Oh, yeah!” Sylvie pointed. “I see it!”

“Dotty is a seventeen-foot female. And she’s especially excitable at feeding time. You don’t want to get between Dotty and her food.” He laughed. “All the other sharks know that too. She’s the alpha here. You’ll see in a minute when we throw the chum.”

“She won’t jump up here, right?” Doris blinked widely from behind the mask she’d just slipped on.

“No. You’re perfectly safe on the dive platform and in the cages. I can assure you.” Dr. Tremblay smiled.

Doris still looked worried, but I was proud of her for pushing through her fear to come down and be part of this adventure, even if she didn’t want to get in the water for the actual dive.

“Okay, ladies. Let’s get a picture!” Sylvie handed her phone to Lance, a crew member, and hurried over to the three of us, now strapped into our skintight wet suits.

One by one, we put our arms around each other and squished together.

“Step back a little so I can get the fins in the background.” Lance waved his hand to push us back.

We all peeked backward and stepped closer to the edge.

“A little more.”

“I’m gonna fall in!” Doris screeched.

“You’re not gonna fall in. You’re fine.” I gripped her tighter, and we all moved within a few feet of the edge.

“Stay there, ladies. They are gonna throw the chum, and I’m gonna get a sick shot of the four of you with a shark jumping behind you.”

“They jump!?” Doris squealed.

“Not on the boat. You’ll be fine. Just keep smiling, and I’ll time the picture so it’s perfect.” Lance gave us the thumbs-up sign.

We stood together smiling wide, our masks covering our eyes as we waited for the ideal moment according to Lance.

“Oh, shit!” Jake called. “It’s Deep Blue! It’s Deep Blue! You guys, she’s back! This is freaking unbelievable!”

“Who’s Deep Blue?” Alice asked as our gazes followed his pointing finger to behind the boat.

My mouth fell open. I’d watched enough Shark Week to identify the majestic creature instantly. “She’s the world record holder for the largest Great White shark ever seen. Over two and a half tons of pure awesome. She’s ... she’s my unicorn. And she’s here.”

I felt the tears starting behind my eyes. When Percy and I first saw footage of Deep Blue years ago, we’d screamed our excitement at the TV. She was magnificent. We’d spent half the night sitting on the patio talking about how incredible it would be to see her, and though I knew she’d been spotted in these waters before, I’d never imagined she’d actually show up on the day of my dive. It felt like Percy had coaxed her here somehow, and his presence beside me was nearly palpable.

We’re gonna swim with Deep Blue, Percy. You and me.

And I would be with my beloved widows too.

“The largest in the *world*?” Doris gulped and started to move away from the edge.

“In the entire world,” Dr. Tremblay confirmed as he cupped his hands on his head. “I’ve been coming here for years hoping to spot her, and I’ve never been so lucky. I can’t wait to get in the water with her. It’s a dream come true.”

“Me too,” I said, and it was.

“Throwing chum!” A crewmember shouted as he stood on a high platform with a bucket of chopped-up fish.

“Get ready, ladies!” Lance waved at us to get together.

Doris whimpered, but she stepped back toward the edge with us. I tightened my grip around her shoulder as we all smiled wide and froze, waiting for the action.

Pieces of fish flew through the air, landing behind us. There was a flurry of sound, water breaking and crashing. I

tried to keep smiling to get the shot, but I had to turn around and see. I couldn't miss this feeding spectacle.

I spun around, my mouth dropping open as a shark lunged out of the water, its lips pulling back, revealing powerful, sharp teeth. When it reached its apex, I saw the dot on the dorsal. They hadn't been lying when they said Dotty fed with a flourish.

"Oh, my God!" Sylvie gasped as she spun with me.

"Holy shit," Alice breathed.

"Oh, my heavens," Doris whispered, finishing with a long sigh.

Dotty crashed back into the water with a huge splash, but a moment later, there was a smaller splash beside the platform. I spun my head to look for the shark that had gotten so close, and my heart stuttered to a stop when I didn't see a shark in the water at all.

I saw Doris.

My unconscious friend had fainted and now floated facedown like a wet rag beside the boat.

I glanced at the sharks snapping up the bait floating around her.

Holy. Shit. I killed Doris.

Again.

"Holy cripes! Doris!" I screamed as I jumped forward, kneeling to grab her. The waves from the feeding sharks pushed her body just out of my reach.

"Man overboard!" someone yelled, and Sylvie's blood-curdling scream ripped across the ocean.

"Get the hook!" Another voice shouted.

As I stared at my friend drifting farther from us and closer to the snapping jaws of the Great Whites, it took less than a split second for me to decide what to do.

“Hold on, Doris! I’m coming!” I launched off the ship’s side and plunged into the cold water. I popped up, sputtering for air as I reached for her, catching her limp arm and yanking her toward me.

“Hold on, Doris! I got you!”

“Marge, remain calm!” Dr. Tremblay called from the ship. “Don’t thrash, and don’t panic! That will attract them. Just keep calm, and we’re going to pass you the hook. Grab on, and we’ll pull you both back to the ship!”

As I held Doris against me, the reality of my decision started to sink in. While I knew swimming with sharks wasn’t uncommon, and I’d seen enough footage of divers with sharks to know it was usually safe, those divers weren’t in the middle of a chummed-up feeding frenzy.

I looked to the fins breaking the water all around me.

What the hell did I just do?

It wasn’t the first time I’d dove into peril to help a friend, and I’d gone headfirst into danger several times back in ‘Nam to help my friends or my patients, but as a shark swam at us and bumped me with its nose, suddenly I wished for bullets instead of bites.

“Hold on, Marge!” Sylvie screamed.

“I was kidding when I said I wanted a shark to bite off your legs!” Alice shouted. “I’m sorry! I was kidding! Don’t die, Marge!”

As I floated quietly, holding Doris above water, keeping my head on a swivel like I’d learned to do watching *Shark Week*, Doris started to move in my arms. Suddenly, her eyes blinked open behind her mask and locked with mine.

“Oh, shit. You’re awake. Uh, don’t panic, Doris. Okay? Whatever you do, don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic? Why...” As she glanced at her surroundings, her eyes went big, and her mouth opened, making way for a scream so loud I was sure it would have

scared off every shark in the ocean ... or perhaps drawn them to us.

“Ahhhhhhh! Shark! Shark! Ahhhhhh!” she screeched as she started flailing in my arms.

“Doris!” I grabbed her tighter. “I said *don't* panic! If you start splashing, you'll attract them! Don't. Move!”

“Help!” she screamed as she fought me. “Help!”

“DORIS!” I reached forward and slapped the side of her head. “Get it together, soldier! Don't freaking move, or you're gonna get us both killed! Stay. STILL!”

The stun of my blow snapped her out of her blind panic, and finally, her body softened in my grip.

“Marge,” she whimpered between panting breaths. “Help.”

“I'm helping. They're grabbing a pole. We're gonna be out of here in just a hot second. If you just stay calm, they won't attack, and we'll be just fine. You gotta trust me.”

Tears brewed behind her eyes, but she softly nodded her head. I looked at the boat and saw the crew scurrying around and a man running toward the edge with a large hook. It hadn't even been thirty seconds since we'd gone in, but it already felt like it was taking an eternity for them to get to us.

“See. Here they come,” I whispered. Then I looked left and saw a large fin heading straight at us ... the fin with the dot on it.

Dotty.

She leaped out of the water, shaking the chum as she splashed back down, then spun around and moved toward us. I saw a piece of chum floating nearby, and I cursed it as a small wave pushed it right at us.

“No.” I started blowing on it like my meager breath could push it away. “Don't you dare, you freakin' dead fish. You get your stinking carcass over there.” I blew harder, but the piece of ripped-up fish flesh bobbed closer.

Dotty's dorsal disappeared for a moment, then resurfaced, and my heart palpated when I saw its trajectory heading straight at us. And we were smack dab between Dotty and her dinner.

Holy shit. She's gonna freakin' eat us.

As her fin grew closer, I gripped Doris tighter, prepared to push her out of the way if Dotty decided I was an interloper for her supper, or worse, her supper.

"Marge?" Doris whispered. "It's getting closer."

"Don't panic, Doris. Please. For the love of God, don't panic."

"I'm panicking," she squeaked out.

Me too, I wanted to say, but I had to stay calm for my friend. I suddenly missed Percy so much it hurt and knew he'd have been right here beside me if he'd been alive, keeping me calm and helping me paddle out of the Shit Creek I was neck deep in. But Percy wasn't here, and it was up to me to be the person Doris needed to get her out alive since it was my damn fault I'd forced her down here in the first place.

Percy, if you're up there, for the love of God, get your ass down here and help us! I begged up into the sky as Dotty closed the last of the distance. *I miss you like crazy, but I'm not ready to see you again yet. Just please protect us so I can get home to Roxie, and then someday, far down the road, and hopefully not after meeting a grizzly end and having my limbs ripped from my body by a shark, I'll join you. But not now. Please, Percy. Help me.*

A soft bump moved our bodies, and I screamed with Doris when I instantly realized it was a shark pushing against us. I whipped my head to the right and saw the biggest fin of them all just inches from my body.

Deep Blue.

The largest Great White in the world was now circling us, and I was as exhilarated as I was utterly terrified.

Don't piss. It's a shark attractant. You'll get bit in the vajayjay, I thought as the urge to soil myself grew stronger.

Dotty lunged toward the bait beside us, but Deep Blue's huge body blocked the attempt, sending Dotty thrashing away in a fit of rage. Deep Blue continued her quiet circling, never once reaching for the chum or investigating our bodies bobbing just beside her. It was then I realized she was protecting us. I closed my eyes and whispered my silent prayer, knowing exactly why it was happening. I reached up and touched the dog tags beneath my wet suit.

Thank you, Percy.

He had brought her to me, and now, somehow, I knew he was there coaxing her to protect me, his best friend, while I protected my best friend.

"Grab the hook!" Dr. Tremblay shouted.

The huge metal hook appeared in front of me, and I carefully reached up and took hold. Slowly, we started moving toward the boat, and finally, we bumped against the side.

"Grab them!" Lance shouted, and suddenly hands gripped tightly on my arms and shoulders as I was hoisted through the air, still holding Doris as my hands refused to let her go. We spilled out into a wet heap on the platform, panting hard as we lay beside each other.

"Holy shit. We're alive," I breathed.

"You ... you saved me." Doris turned her head to look at me, those huge tears streaming freely.

"I wasn't gonna let you die and have to live with the guilt that I'd gotten your fainting ass killed." I grinned, though my mouth shook from all the adrenaline coursing through me.

"And Deep Blue saved you," Dr. Tremblay kneeled beside us, swiping a hand across his forehead. "She got right in between you and Dotty. That was incredible. A once-in-a-lifetime experience, even for a Marine Biologist."

It was Percy, I wanted to say, but I knew everyone would think I was crazy. But it didn't matter if they knew why Deep

Blue had come to our rescue. I knew.

“Thank God!” Sylvie dropped to her knees beside Doris, and Alice collapsed beside me.

We sat up together, the other two widows pulling us in for hugs and clutching us tightly in a ball of love that helped warm up my cold body.

“I thought you were gonna get your legs bit off to stubs for sure, and then I’d never live down the guilt that I put it out there. I’m officially retracting my comment. Don’t get eaten by sharks, Marge. Please, don’t ever get eaten by sharks. I’ve never been so scared in my life seeing you two floating there.”

“We’re okay,” I soothed her. “I’m not gonna lie and say that wasn’t scary as hell.” I let up on my hug and sat back a bit. Then a huge grin stretched across my face. “But what a freaking rush! I swam with Great Whites! Without a cage! Whoo-hoo! Told you I’m not yellow, Alice! I just jumped in with the sharks!”

I pointed at Alice, then pumped my fist in the air while everyone on the platform stared at me.

Finally, Jake pointed a finger and smiled. “I knew I liked this one!”

“You ladies sure were lucky,” Dr. Tremblay said as he pulled us to our feet. “Swimming in chum is not an ideal way to experience the Great Whites, but you did it. And you’re unharmed.”

“We did it.” I turned to Doris. “Even though you didn’t plan on it, you got in with the sharks. How do you feel?”

Doris lifted her mask off her head and looked out into the half dozen fins still circling. When she turned back to me, her teary eyes flickered with pride. “I did it. I swam with sharks, didn’t I?”

I tipped my head. “Well, more like floated lifelessly, but yes. You did it.”

“And praise Jesus, I’m alive!”

“I’ll second that,” Sylvie said.

“I bet you’re never going to do that again.” Alice chuckled.

“After what happened, we wouldn’t blame any of you for sitting out the dives,” Dr. Tremblay said.

“Actually,” Doris tipped her head and glanced at the cages bobbing in the water behind us. “I’ll do it. I’ll go in with you all.”

“What?” We echoed.

My eyes bulged. “You will? I thought this was going to send you screaming home!”

“It almost did, but I figure if I can survive being out there with them during a feeding frenzy, I can survive in the safety of the cage with you all. The worst is over, and God protected me. He’ll do it again. I’m doing it. I’m going in.”

“Wow. I’m proud of you, Doris!” Sylvie squeezed her. “I’m terrified to get in there, but I’m doing it anyway. That’s the whole point of these trips. To push ourselves to experience things we never would have otherwise. And it’s always the best if we do it together.”

“Now we’re talking!” I grinned. “Alice, what about you? You joining us?”

She cocked a neoprene-clad hip. “Well, I’m not gonna be the one sissy who won’t go in. So yeah. I’m in. Let’s do this before I change my mind.”

“Right now?” Dr. Tremblay widened his eyes. “Don’t you ladies want to take a minute and recover?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Deep Blue is here right now, and she could swim off any minute. I want to get in and see her under the water.”

“And I want to thank her.” Doris pursed her lips. “She saved us, just like El Diablo.”

“Don’t you dare get any ideas about dragging this shark home,” Alice said. “I’m not paying first class for a fish.”

We laughed, and Doris just smiled bigger. “I won’t. I want to get in and thank her too.”

Dr. Tremblay shrugged. “Well, I’ve always dreamed of swimming with her myself, so I’m happy to escort you ladies on your first dive. Whenever you’re ready.”

We looked at each other.

“We’re ready,” we all said at once.

“Then let’s go see some sharks, ladies.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nerves crackled inside of me as we stood at the edge of the platform over the metal cage bobbing below us.

“Are you ladies ready?” Dr. Tremblay asked from his place above the cage, holding the heavy line securing the cage to the ship.

The widows and I passed a glance, and all gave him a sharp nod.

“Okay. Just put in your mouthpieces, and down you go. I’ll be right beside you if you need anything. And this time, try to stay *in* the cage, please.” He gave us a teasing look, and we all chuckled.

With one last deep inhale, I popped the mouthpiece in and took a breath of the air being pumped through the lines from the ship.

“Who’s going first?” Jake asked as he lifted the lid to the cage.

“Well, normally, I *always* go first.” Alice waved a hand over her neoprene-covered figure, giving us a sly smile. “But, in this instance, since this is Marge’s wish, I think it’s only fitting if she’s the first in. I’ll be second. For once.” She winked, then popped in her mouthpiece and jumped in.

I smiled as best I could around my mouthpiece, giving her a wink back.

“Okay, Marge. You’re up.” Jake waved a hand over the chains suspending the cage, and I stepped forward, looking down at the metal bars that would separate me from the sharks this time.

With one last exhale, I jumped. The water splashed before I started sinking, the weights on my suit gently guiding me lower into the clear blue water enveloping me on all sides. I used the metal ladder to help push myself down, descending further from the sparkling sunshine above. It had only been a few seconds since I’d been on board, surrounded by people,

but in those few moments, I felt like I was in another universe completely. A school of fish twisted and turned, darting around the cage, seemingly unaffected by my presence.

Another splash caused the water to ripple around me, and soon after, Alice's long legs appeared beside me, and she settled in onto the bottom with me. I looked over, giving her a big thumbs up as she peered at me, looking worried from behind her big mask. She couldn't speak, but I knew her well enough to know she was saying, "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

Another splash and then another and another. One by one, Sylvie, Doris, and Dr. Tremblay descended to join us. Soft bubbles from our regulators floated around us, working their way back to the surface, which may as well have been a mile up from how distant I felt from the world above. I looked to Doris and Sylvie, and they both shared Alice's concerned expression, as best as it could be seen beneath their large swim masks. I gave them a thumbs up, thanking them with my eyes for coming on this experience with me despite their reservations.

A tap on my shoulder pulled my attention, and I turned to see Dr. Tremblay pointing. I followed his finger to see a dark silhouette moving toward us, and my little heart nearly exploded from the speeds it hit as the large, grey shark sauntered in.

I'd never thought I'd call a shark beautiful, but that was the first word that popped into my head as it swam past. Majestic and beautiful. I'd already been swimming with sharks, but that was lying there in a blind panic, wishing for it to end. Nothing but their fins and dark shadows just beneath the surface. This was different. The water was so clear that it looked like a technicolor movie how much detail I could make out on the giant fish gliding by. This powerful creature who could kill in an instant looked beautiful and peaceful as it drifted past us.

It was ... magical.

Another shark appeared, and then another, and soon we were surrounded by five. I saw Dotty, noting her spotted fin, and to hell if she didn't have a menacing look in those dark eyes. More menacing than the others. We would never know what would have happened if Deep Blue hadn't intercepted her. Maybe she would have bumped right past us to grab the chum, or maybe we would have been chum ourselves. It would always be a mystery, but I would be forever grateful to the queen of the ocean who got in her way.

I turned to check on my friends, and now instead of uncertainty in their eyes, I saw the same wonder that I knew filled mine. They watched the sharks in awe, barely moving as they stood holding the bars beside me. Doris turned to look at me, and her eyes glistened with excitement. After all the fuss, it seemed she was just as thrilled as me.

Another tap on my shoulder turned me to Dr. Tremblay, and I didn't even have to look to where he was pointing to know what it would be. The excitement in his eyes told me instantly.

Deep Blue was here.

I spun around to find her, clutching my chest when the behemoth of a shark came into focus. Her girth had to be twice that of Dotty and the others. Her length was almost four times my height. She looked like a monster, but I knew she was anything but.

I touched my dog tags again as if they were some beacon that would connect me directly to Percy. And for me, they were in a way. Anytime I needed to feel my old friend near, I touched them. When I wanted to share something with him, I touched them. When I missed him so much it hurt, I touched them. The simple touch connected me to him, and as Deep Blue swam within arm's reach of the cage, I wanted him here to experience it with me.

When someone grabbed my hand, I glanced down to see it was Sylvie. I squeezed her back, then reached over and grabbed Alice's hand. Alice wrapped her fingers around mine, looking over and smiling with her eyes as Sylvie took Doris's

hand in her other. Us four Wilder Widows stood together beneath the surface of the sea, holding hands while we experienced this moment together. The world's largest Great White just within our reach.

If I had thought this moment was magical before, it was nothing compared to how this new one felt.

We stayed down for another half hour before our time was up. One by one, we bid farewell to the sharks, and I silently asked Deep Blue to stick around so I could swim with her again. We had three more days of dives ahead of us, and I wasn't ready to see her go. After one last glance at the sharks drifting around us, I climbed up the ladder to the top of the cage, popping up through the opening and pulling out my regulator to take a deep breath of the fresh air.

"How was it?" Jake asked as he reached out his hand.

"That. Was. Incredible!" I shouted as he pulled me up. "One of the greatest things I've ever experienced. And I'm old as hell, and I've seen a lot, so that's saying something!"

"Awesome!" He held out his hand, and I slapped it as I passed onto the platform.

Alice came up next, her smile wide as she joined me. "Okay. I'm not going to lie. That was pretty amazing."

"Right? I told you you'd love it!"

"So cool!" Sylvie said after she popped up and pulled her regular. "Oh, my God. That was just sooooo cool!"

"I can't wait to go again!" I grinned. "We can go as much as we want, right?"

"As much as you want," Jake said.

"I'm just gonna sleep down there," I joked.

Finally, a few moments passed, and Doris's head emerged out of the water. I held my breath, waiting to see her reaction after so much fear and so much drama had prefaced our dive.

"Well?" I asked as she pulled off her regulator.

Her eyes bulged wide beneath her mask. “It. Was. Incredible! I want to go again!”

“You do?” I grinned. “Really?”

“Over and over and over!” she exclaimed. “It was beautiful, and I didn’t feel scared at all after a few minutes. They seemed almost ...”

“Peaceful,” I answered for her. “They seemed peaceful.”

She pulled off her mask, and her eyes crinkled at the corner from her smile. “Yes. It was peaceful.”

“Well, I don’t want to say I told ya, so, but—”

“Don’t,” Alice interrupted. “Don’t say I told you so, or I’ll dangle your hairy legs over the edge for Dotty’s dinner. If those unsightly rugs’ll even appetize her.”

“Deep Blue will save me.” I smiled.

And Percy.

He may not have been with me in person today, but he was with me in spirit, and I knew someday, when I found him in whatever afterlife awaited us, he’d be thanking me for taking him on the journey.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As the hot tub bubbles tickled my skin, I sat back and stared up into the sky, admiring the countless stars sparkling against the black canvas. After living in Las Vegas with all the light pollution muting the night sky, I didn't think I'd ever stop appreciating them whenever I got a chance.

"I can't believe it's our last night," Sylvie said with a sigh, tipping her head back and looking up with me. "I honestly thought I'd be begging the Captain to get us home faster, but now I don't want this part of our trip to end."

"I can't believe I'm saying it," Doris started from her seat across from us, "But I'm not ready to go back either. This has been such a wonderful experience."

Doris had been the biggest surprise since we'd had to drag her kicking and screaming onto the ship. She'd gone from gripping the railings and pleading for dear life not to get near the water to spending the past three days jumping into the shark cages as much as she could, always coming up with a face-splitting grin.

Alice spun her martini dangling between her fingertips. "It was rather remarkable."

"I'm so glad you ladies enjoyed my wish too. I can't thank you enough for doing this with me. It was a dream come true. Percy couldn't be here, but you ladies were, and that means a lot to me."

"That's what we're here for, Marge. To help make each other's dreams come true. Lord knows you all helped me with mine." Sylvie smiled. "And now I get to marry him in less than two weeks."

"Goodness gracious. Time is just flying, isn't it?" Doris shook her head. "I feel like we were just back on Wilder Lane picking out our first wish, and now we're halfway done."

Sylvie tipped her head. "Is it just me, or does time seem to go faster along with each birthday?"

“Not just you.” I snorted. “When I was a little tyke, I swear everything took forever to get here. I’d just be counting the days and hours until I was old enough to ride a bike or drive a car. Time seemed to move at a snail’s pace. But now ... now it seems like I blinked, and a year went by.”

“I second that,” Alice said. “It really does seem to be speeding up, and I’m just trying like holy hell to slow it down.”

“Too bad you can’t Botox life, right? Then it could go as slow as those nonexistent wrinkles of yours.” I wagged my eyebrows, and she just scoffed.

“Can it, Marge. Better to be botoxed than look like a bulldog.”

“Aw, I think bulldogs are cute.” Doris cooed. “I just don’t like the hair in the house, or I’d probably get one.”

“Cute or not, if anyone ever compares me to a bulldog, I’m going to sue the hell out of my plastic surgeon. His only job is to make sure that never happens, and I pay him a fortune each year to do it.”

“You’d be beautiful even with wrinkles, Alice,” Sylvie said. “We’ve all got some, and personally, I think they add character. Like little reminders of what an amazing life we’ve lived.”

I touched my forehead, feeling the lines that seemed to deepen each year. “If wrinkles are reminders of an amazing life, then mine must have been one hell of a ride because I could give a bulldog a run for its money.

Instead of a snappy comeback, Alice gazed out over the dark ocean. “I just want to look as old as I feel. I don’t feel old on the inside.”

Doris tipped her head. “You don’t look old on the outside either. You’re stunning, Alice.”

She snorted softly. “I’m no Jessica Rabbit.”

“No, you’re no Jessica Rabbit. You don’t have the tatas. Unless you want me to grab the oxygen tanks and pump those

babies up.”

Alice chuckled and shook her head. “I’m a dancer. Large tits are a curse, not a blessing. The only ladies with big tits in Vegas are the trophy wives and tramps. I don’t know a single dancer with a boob job.”

“Ugh. Vegas.” I wrinkled my nose.

“What does that mean?” Sylvie grabbed her glass of wine. “Do you not like it there? I thought you were so happy with Roxie?”

“I am.” I let out a long sigh, finally ready to admit my truth. “I’m *so* happy with Roxie. I love every single second with her. But Vegas? Oh, man. I freakin’ hate that place more than ‘Nam. And that’s saying something.”

“You hate it?” Alice sat up straighter than an arrow. “What the hell do you mean you hate Vegas?”

“I mean, I *hate* it. I hate the people. The crowds. The lights. The traffic. I hate the flashing signs. I hate the tall buildings. The glitter. The glitz. I’ve always known I didn’t like it there, that I don’t fit in, but I didn’t realize how much until we got on this trip away from it all. I really, truly hate that town.”

“Marge.” Doris touched my arm. “I’m so sorry to hear that. What are you going to do?”

I shrugged. “What can I do? I love Roxie, and Roxie lives in Vegas. I may hate looking out the window every morning and curse that stupid town, but then I just look over at Roxie, and I know it’s worth enduring the hell of getting accosted by a singing Elvis when I head out to get my morning bagel.”

“Marge. You shouldn’t have to live somewhere you hate,” Sylvie said. “Have you ever told Roxie how you feel?”

My eyes bugged. “And risk her leaving me? No. Hell no. I spent a lifetime wondering what it would feel like to experience the kind of love and passion I have with her, and I’m not going to do one thing to risk it.”

“Love is about being open and honest, Marge,” Sylvie said. “You have to tell her how you feel. Maybe she would be open to moving?”

“Roxie? Leave Vegas?” I shook my head hard. “She was born and raised there. She loves that Godforsaken town.”

“It’s a magical town.” Alice tipped up her chin. “Don’t diss my baby.”

“Yeah. For you. You’re a famous showgirl. You fit in. Me?” I waved a hand over my body. “I don’t fit in Vegas. But I also love Roxie, and I would live in the fires of hell if it meant getting to be with her.”

“That’s so sweet, Marge.” Doris sighed. “But I do think you should at least talk to her about it.”

“I agree,” Sylvie said. “Tell her how you feel. Maybe she’ll surprise you about being open to moving or at least finding somewhere a little quieter in Vegas to live.”

The longer we were on this trip, with all the open air and peaceful moments, the harder I knew it would be to return to Vegas and keep up the façade that I loved it there. Maybe they were right. Maybe I needed to trust my love with Roxie more and open up about my feelings. The thought of being open with my emotions scared me, but the thought of her telling me to leave without her scared me more.

“I’ll think about it.” I leaned back on my elbows, the warm water still bubbling around me. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Good. I think you really should. We want you happy, Marge. *All* the way happy.” Doris sat back as well, leaning her neck on the headrest.

“So, we have two weeks to finish our wishes and get Sylvie to the altar,” I said, changing the subject to one that didn’t drive anxiety deep into my gut. “There are two wishes left. I think that we should draw the next wish tonight so we can hit the ground running toward our next adventure. We don’t want to make Sylvie miss her wedding.”

“Oh, I’m not missing my wedding.” Sylvie laughed. “I have waited so many years ... so many decades ... to call that

man mine. I'm getting down the aisle, come hell or high water. If our wishes are running over our time limit, we'll just have to finish them when I get back from my honeymoon."

"Well, let's go get the basket and draw now!" Doris smiled, then crossed her fingers. "Oh, I hope it's mine! I'm so excited since I actually know what I wished for this time!"

"So, it's not having a hootie again?" Alice smirked.

"Oh, stop!" Doris waved a hand at her. "No more hootie talk. It's not a hootie."

"Well, I'd hope not now that she's got Axel. If she's not getting hooties on a regular basis, we need to have a talk with that cowboy."

"Stop!" Doris flushed red. "I'm just fine in the hootie department, thank you very much. Now stop talking about my hooties, and someone go get the basket!"

"I'll grab it!" Sylvie shot up out of the water and hopped out. After quickly toweling off, she hurried off the deck and disappeared down the stairs toward our rooms. A few minutes later, she reappeared holding our colorful little knitting basket.

Careful to keep the basket from getting wet, she held it over her head while she climbed back in.

"Whoa. The last time we pulled a wish in the hot tub, it was to find your true love. And now you're marrying him."

Sylvie sighed. "I still can't believe we found him."

"I can," I said, "because together, we widows can do anything."

"Cheers to that!" Sylvie agreed, grabbing her wine glass and holding it out.

We all clinked them together, took a sip, then turned our focus to the basket.

"Okay, Marge," Alice said. "Time to pick. Let's find out where we're going next."

Sylvie and Doris shared an excited look while I stuck my hand in the basket. When I pulled it out, I saw the name on the

front of the folded paper.

Doris.

“Oh! It’s me! It’s me!” She bounced up and down in her seat.

“What is your wish?” Alice asked. “And don’t let it be to visit it a nunnery. That thing would burst into flames the moment I stepped inside.”

“It’s not that.” Doris rolled her eyes.

I opened the piece of paper and saw the words she’d written.

“Doris wants to fly,” I said, holding it up for everyone to see.

“Fly?” Sylvie asked. “Like in a plane? We’ve flown a bunch on our trips?”

“Not on a big plane,” Doris said. “On something smaller where I really feel like I’m flying. Like a bird. I love birds, and I just want to feel what they feel once.”

“Skydiving!” I whooped and pumped a fist.

“NO!” Doris screeched and shook her head fiercely. “*Not* skydiving. That’s not my wish. I don’t want to jump *out* of the plane. I want to be *in* the plane.”

“I second that,” Alice said. “I have no interest in jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.”

“Well, that we can certainly arrange,” Sylvie answered, a sly smile tipping her lip. “You leave it to me, and I’ll plan the next leg of our journey where we’ll make sure you get to fly like a bird.”

Doris squealed and clapped. “I’m so excited!” Then she stopped. “But *not* jumping out of the plane.”

“I promise.” Sylvie grinned. “We aren’t jumping out of any planes.”

Doris blew out a breath. “Okay, good. Then I can’t wait!” She clapped again.

“Well, this is our last night at sea, then we’re off to our next adventure, ladies.” I lifted my glass and gestured for them to do the same. “Thank you for making my shark diving dream come true. It was everything I’d dreamed of and more.”

“We’re glad we could help you accomplish this wish.” Sylvie touched her wine glass to mine.

“And I can’t wait to help you two accomplish yours.”

“Here’s to the Wilder Widows.” Alice brought her martini glass in.

“To the Wilder Widows!” We clinked our glasses together, and I couldn’t wait to start the next leg of our journey.

DORIS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We waved goodbye to the crew one last time, then grabbed our bags and started down the dock toward the waiting cab.

“What an adventure,” I said as I pulled my pink-wheeled suitcase behind me. “Wasn’t it an adventure? I can’t believe we did that. We swam with *sharks!*”

“And you and Marge *really* swam with sharks.” Sylvie glanced over from beside me, lifting her brows. “You almost got eaten by sharks.”

I thought I’d known what fear was having El Diablo breathing down my neck in Barcelona last year, but that had been nothing compared to the terror I’d felt when I’d awakened in the water surrounded by sharks.

Pure. Panic.

I knew there was a God, and I always trusted him to keep me safe and guide me down the right path, but there’d been a moment as I’d floated there that I’d felt like he’d forgotten me completely. Why on Earth would he allow me to fall into such peril ... to be helpless and vulnerable while the thing that scared me most in the world surrounded me? I’d cursed him. Well, I *could* have cursed at him in that moment, but of course, I hadn’t done it. As angry and scared as I’d been, after a few moments of blind panic and after Marge had slapped me silly, I’d succumbed to his will.

And in that moment, the safety I’d found in Marge’s arms comforted me. I’d realized the Lord had put me in that horrifying position to remind me that I had friends I could count on, no matter what, and that even when faced with my greatest fear, my friends and God would keep me safe.

And they had.

I’d emerged from that water like a new person. Suddenly, I’d felt like I could do anything. My trust in God and my friends was so absolute now that I’d been able to get right back in that water and face those sharks again. And what an

experience it had opened up for me. A whole new world just below the surface of the sea that I'd been privileged enough to glimpse.

Beautiful. Life was just beautiful, and today I walked a little lighter after having conquered my greatest fear and lived to tell about it.

We got to the cab, and Sylvie turned to me while the driver grabbed our bags. "What do you think Axel is gonna say when you call him tonight and tell him what happened?"

I blew out a breath. "Oh, I think he's gonna be shocked to hear what I did. He knows how scared I am of sharks. And then to find out I fell in with them?" I covered my mouth. "He'll probably tip right over and faint like I did!"

"I still can't believe your pansy ass fainted." Marge chuckled. "One little shark jumping out of the water, and it's lights out for Doris."

"Did you see its teeth? I saw its teeth and those lifeless eyes," I paused while I shivered, remembering the giant shark launching from the water and scaring the dickens out of me, "and it was just more than I could take. I opened my mouth to scream, and the next thing I know, I'm in the water with Marge."

"You're lucky Marge went full GI Jane and jumped in with you," Alice said as she ducked into the back of the cab. "I love you, Doris, but there's no way in hell I was jumping in the shark-infested water after you. Risk a chunk getting taken out of these babies?" She gestured to her legs as she scooted inside. "Not a chance."

"Marge is my hero." I pursed my lips together, smiling as I looked at my faithful friend. "She dove right in without a thought, I'm told."

"Yeah. The thoughts didn't kick in until *after* I realized what the hell I'd done. Then I wished I'd have stayed on the ship and watched you turn into ceviche."

Shaking my head with an eye roll, I let out a sigh. I knew she'd never admit it out loud, but Marge would have jumped

in after me over and over again. And I'd be forever grateful to her for it.

“Alright, girls. Get your asses in here, and let's get to the resort. I need a cocktail.” Alice waved us into the back seat with her.

One by one, we filed in, squishing together tight. Sylvie told our driver the name of the resort, and luckily, he seemed to know exactly where to go based on how enthusiastically he shook his head. As he pulled out, he said something I didn't understand, but Marge answered back in enough broken Spanish that he seemed to get it.

“What did you say?”

“I'm not a hundred percent sure,” Marge answered. “I think he asked if we had been on the shark cruise, and I think I said we had and that we had fun.”

Alice lifted a brow. “You think? So, he may have asked if we're prostitutes looking to party, and you may have said yes, and we'd love some drugs too?”

Marge paused, then shrugged. “It's possible.”

“Oh, Lord.” Sylvie laughed as we started through the Mexican streets.

I pressed my face to the window, absorbing all the vibrant colors that seemed to be everywhere. Their culture was so different from ours, and I couldn't stop staring while I soaked it all in. Another incredible place my journey with the Wilder Widows had taken me. Last year had been Las Vegas, Paris, Barcelona, and then to the dude ranch I now called home. This year we'd been all over the Caribbean, and each port we hit got me as excited as the last. For a girl from Minnesota who had barely left her little hometown, all this travel was more than my wildest dreams.

We finally arrived at our resort Alice had booked from the internet when we got within cellular range this morning. When we pulled up, several young women came out to greet us, welcoming us to the fancy schmancy retreat.

I looked at all the finery around us. “Oh, Alice. I’ll never stop feeling guilty you spend so much money on our accommodations. I really think you should start using an AARP card.”

“Don’t feel guilty.” She got out and stretched. “I don’t need an AARP card, and you don’t have to worry about how much money I spend. I have more than I know what to do with. I spend the money so *I* can stay in the manner to which I’m accustomed. It wouldn’t be fun if I were here slipping around on silk sheets while you ladies were fighting off bed bugs at the Super 8.”

“Well, regardless, I appreciate it. I hope you know that. It never ceases to amaze me how luxurious life can be. I had no idea there were so many fineries in life. I was always thrilled with a night out to TGI Fridays.”

Alice pulled a face. “Blech. Not when I’m around. And tonight, we are dining at a five-star restaurant I’ve heard rave reviews about. The shark boat may have had decent accommodations, but they certainly didn’t have the fine dining I’m accustomed to. Tonight, we splurge.”

“As long as it’s not seafood.” Sylvie puckered her face. “We’ve been eating nothing but freshly caught fish the last few days, and I’m fished out. I need a steak.”

“They’ll have that.” Alice gestured for the valet to grab her bags. “I don’t often eat red meat, but I think I may join you and get a nice filet tonight. I’m seafooded out as well.”

“As long as it’s dead, I’ll eat it.” Marge shrugged. “I’m not picky. Hell, I ate live bugs in ‘Nam, so I guess it doesn’t even need to be dead.”

Alice gagged. “You’re a savage.”

“At least I could survive if shit hit the fan. Zombie apocalypse?” Marge jutted a thumb at her chest. “I’m your girl. I’ll lead our group to safety. I’ll be bashing heads and foraging for food like a pro. Nuclear disaster? I’ve got a year’s worth of MREs at home and everything we’d need to hunker down through the fallout. Marooned on an island? I’ll make

Swiss Family Robinson look like chumps with how sweet I'd get us set up. That's right. You may love your fancy restaurants and fine dining, but you'd last all of two seconds in the wild alone."

Alice's smooth skin wrinkled with the way she scrunched her face. "If I'm stuck alone in the wild away from the comforts of home, I wouldn't want to last two seconds. That sounds like hell. I'll just lay down and wait for the end."

"Ah, don't worry. I'll find you and take care of you, ya big pansy." Marge slung her arm around Alice's shoulder, giving her a squeeze.

Alice squeezed her back. "Good to know, and in that case, I'll take care of you tonight and buy you a big ass steak I hope you'll remember if I ever get lost in the wilds."

Marge grinned. "Now we're talking."

Sylvie thanked the man taking her bag. "What do you say we all go settle into our rooms, then meet in the lobby in an hour for dinner? Then we'll have an early night to rest up for tomorrow's big adventure."

"There's an adventure planned already?" I asked, excited. "What is it?"

Sylvie shook her head. "I'm going to keep this one a surprise. I think it will be more fun that way. I've done some Googling and found what I think would be a great way to accomplish your wish. I'll get all the bookings and scheduling figured out today. Then tomorrow, we go for it."

I clapped my hands, jumping up and down. "I'm so excited!"

"Just *no* skydiving." Alice pointed a painted finger at her. "I'm too valuable to fling myself out of a plane. My producer would bring me back to life and kill me again if I died doing a foolish thing like skydiving."

"No skydiving. I promise. I have no interest in that either."

"Phew," I blew out. "I really don't ever want to do that."

"Pansies," Marge snorted. "I'd do it."

Alice arched an eyebrow. “Then you have yourself a great time. We’ll be the little ants below waving at you as you plunge to your death.”

Marge opened her arms like an airplane, grinning as she flew off behind the man carrying her bags. “I’ll see you pansies at dinner!”

We all chuckled as we watched her go, then I followed my valet to my room, oohing and aahing over the luxurious décor while I got settled in. Though my eyelids were already heavy and needed sleep, I forbade myself from napping so I wouldn’t sleep through dinner.

Instead of taking a nap, I pulled out my phone and dialed Axel. We’d had no phone service the few days we were out at sea, so I had so much to tell him about our shark diving adventure. But when the phone went to voicemail, I glanced at the clock, doing a quick calculation and realizing he’d be out feeding the herd right now.

Darn it.

I missed him.

But just hearing his voice on the voicemail made my little heart happy, so I left him a message to call me when he got in.

It still seemed surreal I had a husband again. Before we’d gone on our adventure last year and I’d realized my life wasn’t just biding time until I got called home to Heaven, I’d never have believed the new life I was living was possible. With Harold dead and my children grown and gone, I’d so desperately wanted someone to care for again, and now I had not just Axel to dote on, but his sister, his nephews, all the ranch hands, and all the tourists who came during the summer to experience the ranch life.

It was bliss for someone like me who needed to be needed.

And Axel made me feel needed. Always.

Though he was supportive of my yearly adventure plans with the girls, it made me as happy as a kid at the confectionery that he’d been so devastated in the days up to my departure. How much he’d be missing me helped me

realize I was not just someone to raise kids with and have a family. I was loved. *Really* loved. The kind of passionate love I'd always thought was just in the fairytales.

But every day, I felt like a Disney princess with my very own Prince Charming to call my own ... even if my Prince Charming wore cowboy hats instead of crowns.

I finished my message with "I love you. I'll talk to you soon," then hung up.

With a sigh, I laid back on the pillow-soft bed and dreamed about what adventures tomorrow would hold.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Marge, would you quit trying to speak Spanish?” Alice scolded as the taxi wound through the streets. “I think we’ve established at this point you’re terrible at it. Last night you ordered for us in Spanish, and instead of ordering steaks, you got us fish. The one thing none of us wanted.”

Marge furrowed her brow. “It’s not my fault I’m the only one who could read the words on the menu. You girls looked like you were gonna strain your necks leaning forward and backward trying to get the text to focus.” She started mimicking the way the three of us had been weaving, bringing the menu closer and farther, trying to read the words.

“I forgot my readers,” I pouted.

Sylvie sucked the air through her teeth. “Yeah. It’s about time I get some readers. Aging eyes are no joke. I feel like my grandma anytime I’m trying to read.”

Alice huffed. “Well, I don’t need readers. My eyes are perfectly fine, thank you very much.”

Marge snorted. “You were the worst of all!” She started telescoping her neck in and out, eyes bulging while she teased Alice. “Maybe we need to get you some Coke-bottle glasses.”

“The lighting was dim, and the type was unusually small,” she defended.

“Or you need readers,” Sylvie joined in on the teasing. “Don’t worry. You’ll look gorgeous in glasses.”

Alice arched an eyebrow, her jaw stiffening. “I don’t need old lady glasses. I just need menus that weren’t made for, you know, ants.”

Marge burst out laughing. “Well, when your pride realizes you’ll look much better in glasses than some kind of Yo-Yo necked menu reader, you just let us know. We’ll stop at Walmart and grab you a pair.”

Alice's lips nearly disappeared with how hard she pressed them together. "I don't need readers, and if I did," she said, lifting her finger and waving it at us, "which I *don't*, I would most certainly *not* get them at ...". She stopped, pulling a face and closing her eyes. "Walmart."

"Well, you're welcome for bailing you all out of your old lady eyes jam. And yeah, so I accidentally ordered fish. Make fun of my Spanish all you want, but without me, none of you blindies would have eaten. So there."

Alice propped her elbow on the door and looked at Marge. "Your Spanish sucks, Marge. Pretty soon, you're gonna try to speak Spanish and end up saying the wrong thing, piss someone off, and get us kidnapped and ransomed. You don't speak Spanish. And who knows what you just said to the driver. Stop."

"I was just trying to have a conversation with him." She crossed her arms and sat back against the taxi seat. "I think I did a good job. At least I'm trying to be respectful and use the local language instead of assuming everyone speaks English. We're not in America, you know."

"I actually do speak English," the driver said clearly, though his accent was strong.

"You do?" Alice sat up. "Can you tell me what she just said to you?"

He chuckled.

"Oh no. Is it bad?" Sylvie asked.

"Well, if she was trying to ask me if I put the blue dog in the toilet in a meadow, then she did great."

Marge pulled her lips back in a cringe. "Whoops."

Alice smacked her arm. "See! You don't speak Spanish! Stop saying weird shit to all the locals!"

Furrowing her brow, she slumped back. "Fine. But I thought I was doing a good job."

"You tried, dear." I patted her arm. "And it's the thought that counts."

Alice brushed a piece of her perfect hair out of her eyes. “Well, try harder to not say things that may get us kidnapped. That’s a thing you know.”

“Wait. It is?” I sat up straight. “We could really be kidnapped?”

“Oh, yeah.” Marge nodded her head. “Americans get kidnapped and ransomed every day. Few hundred a year at least.”

“What?” I spun in my seat to look at her, tipped my head, and tsked. “Wait. You’re just saying that to ruffle me up, aren’t you? Pulling my leg. That’s not true.” As I started to shrug off the silly notion of us getting kidnapped, I saw the cab driver grimace, and I gulped. “Or ... is it?”

“As long as you stick to the safe parts of town, you’ll be fine,” he said. “But yes. Unfortunately, it is true.”

With a gasp, I clutched my chest. Suddenly I missed my big, strong cowboy even more than I already had. I never felt scared with Axel, even camping out under the stars when there could be bears, wolves, or other wild animals around—something that would otherwise terrify me. But with Axel nearby, I knew I had nothing to worry about. I glanced around, feeling his absence even stronger now, and I suddenly felt nude down in Mexico without my husband to keep me safe.

“Why do they kidnap people? Are you sure we’re safe?”

“For money,” Sylvie said. “They hold people for ransom. As long as you can pay, you should be fine.”

“I’m loaded. I’ll pay our ransoms.” Alice smirked from beneath her big sunglasses.

Marge smacked her arm. “Let’s not go around Mexico announcing to everyone in earshot that you’re loaded and will happily pay our ransom. Then you *will* get our asses kidnapped.”

“Oh. Good point.” She grimaced.

Marge rolled her eyes in a huff. “You’re worried about *me* saying something to get us kidnapped when *you* should be the

one we're worried about."

"Oh, come on, Marge. Who is going to want to kidnap you? I'm the one who looks like a rich American. Which I am. If anyone is getting taken, it's me. So quit your bitchin'."

"If they take you, they'll take us all. Well, they'll try." Marge flexed a muscle. "But I'm not going down without a fight. And I got a lot of fight left in me." She started air boxing. "I dare 'em to try. Double dog dare 'em."

Worry about getting kidnapped and held against my will seeped into every part of me, and I clutched my purse tight in my lap.

"Maybe let's ease up on the kidnapping talk." Sylvie cocked her head toward me. "We're making poor Doris nervous. And today is her big day, so let's not go ruining it for her. Okay?"

She wasn't wrong. Now that I knew kidnapping was a thing, I didn't know how I'd relax and enjoy the rest of our stay here.

I miss you, Axel.

And I did. The moment I'd left to come on this trip, I missed him. So badly, I wanted to race back into his arms and feel his safe, strong embrace. But just as I sank into that feeling, I glanced to the widows beside me, realizing that I would no longer feel theirs when I felt his embrace. To be with him meant to part with them. When I was with him, I missed them so much that it pained me. When I was with them, my heart hurt, longing for my husband. It seemed there was no win unless I could convince all the widows to move to our ranch and start cowgirling with me.

I looked at Alice as she inspected her perfectly painted nails.

And that wasn't going to happen. I'd sooner get her to Sunday mass than back onto a cattle drive.

"You okay, Doris?" Sylvie asked. "You don't need to worry about getting kidnapped. We're only going to safe areas. Okay?"

I nodded, and instead of telling her it wasn't just fear of getting kidnapped turning my smile upside down, I just tapped her thigh and said, "Thank you."

My widows. My best friends. The sisters I'd always wished I could have. Every minute with them brought so much joy to my heart, and I would be forever grateful that they'd been placed in my path. I'd thought I was happy to bide my last years of life knitting away while I waited for my ticket to Heaven, but it turned out I had a whole world still waiting for me to enjoy. They'd helped me push my boundaries, face my fears, and opened me up in a way that I'd never thought possible for someone like me. The rest of my life wasn't just waiting quietly for my turn to get to Heaven anymore. While I was still excited to get there someday, this new chapter in my life was so much more than I'd ever imagined. No longer was I just a widow and an empty nester biding her time with knitting until the good Lord called me home. I was a wife again. A caretaker. A friend. An adventurer. Every day I felt needed again, and it warmed up my heart like the hearth burning in the cabin Axel and I called home on those cold winter nights.

"Oh! We're here!" Sylvie bounced in her seat.

I clapped my hands, shaking off the fear of kidnapping and the sadness over missing my husband. "Oh, goody! What is it? What are we doing? I'm so excited!"

My last wish had been a surprise since I hadn't remembered writing it down, but this time I understood my goal. I just didn't know how they planned to accomplish it. When the taxi turned the corner, and I saw the helicopter sitting on the pad, I covered my mouth with my hand.

"Ta-da!" Sylvie grinned. "We're going on a helicopter ride!"

"Oh, my!" I said, my hand muffling the words. "A helicopter! What a grand idea! I've never been on one, and I'll certainly feel like I'm flying like a bird!"

"You like?" Sylvie asked, grinning.

Nodding, I let my hand drop back to my lap. “I love it. I think it’s a wonderful way to experience flight and *really* feel like I’m flying instead of being up in those big planes where you can hardly tell.”

“Oh, hell yeah!” Marge punched into the air. “I haven’t been in a chopper since ‘Nam! It’s the best feeling in the world when you’re zipping and zooming around up there. Good freaking idea, Sylvie!”

She gave Sylvie a fist bump, and Alice just sighed. “I don’t suppose there is a beverage service?”

“You’ll survive without vodka for a few hours.” Marge groaned. “Cripes, you’ve probably still got so much in your blood from last night that you’ll be buzzed straight through until tomorrow.”

“Oh, I have vodka.” She tapped her bag. “I just wanted some ice. It’s warm out today.”

“Oh, Alice.” I tsked. “You really do need to drink more water.”

“Like I always say—”

“There’s plenty of water in vodka,” me and the other widows echoed the words we’d heard her often say when we scolded her for her excessive alcohol consumption.

“Exactly.” Alice winked, and the taxi pulled to a stop.

One by one, we piled out, and Sylvie hoisted the large backpack over her shoulder that she’d filled with snacks and water for the day. After paying the driver, we thanked him, then hurried toward the landing pad. When we got there, our pilot greeted us and gave us a short rundown of how things would work for our tour, as well as basic safety rules. Excitement and nerves charged around inside my body when I climbed inside.

Me. Going on a helicopter. Oh, if only my kids could see me now. When I’d returned from our first Wilder Widows trip, they’d barely believed my stories, though I’d left out the part about what we’d done on top of the Eiffel Tower. But even without that little naughty tidbit, they’d been stunned to hear

about their mother's exciting adventures. After knowing me as the cook, housekeeper, and wound kisser who'd spent most of their lives in an apron or with her knitting needles in her lap, finding out I had it in me to be so adventurous had been shocking. I think they were more stunned by my behavior than I was. I could already imagine their slack-jawed stares when I told them about this latest one.

"You ladies ready?" the pilot asked as we finished strapping on our headsets.

"I can't believe I have to wear this stupid thing," Alice said, her voice crackling into my headphones.

"Oh! I can hear you!" I pointed at my ears. "Can you hear me?"

"We can hear you, Doris." Sylvie smiled from her seat across from me. "Are you ready to fly?"

"Oh, yes!" I nodded quickly. "I'm a little scared, but if I survived swimming with Great Whites, I can survive this. I'm ready!"

"Swimming with Great Whites?" the pilot said into my earpiece as he started lifting us up. "I'm going to need to hear this story."

Though I was bursting to tell him every detail, words failed me when we rose straight into the air. My stomach dropped as I looked out the window to see the world below shrinking by the second. Inch by inch, we lifted, and my excitement grew with the heights we reached.

"Here we go!" the pilot said, then suddenly the helicopter sped forward.

"Oh!" I squealed as I clutched my seat arms tight. "We're flying!"

"This is awesome!" Marge whooped beside me, leaning over to look out her window. "And no bullets coming at me, so even better!"

"Okay. Another story I'm going to need to hear." The pilot chuckled.

Marge started rattling off battle stories as the helicopter swooped and turned, rising and falling as we sped over land and sea. I'd been a bird lover my whole life, my feeders always full and my bird baths always sparkling clean so I could entice them in, enjoy their beautiful songs and watch them flutter around. But finally, I could imagine what it felt like to be one, floating and fluttering over the beautiful world below.

Beautiful. The world below was just beautiful.

Life—my life—was beautiful.

I pulled my gaze from the scenery and looked across at my three best friends. How lucky I was to have them. How grateful I'd always be to them for making the sunset of my life so much better.

“Are you having fun, Doris?” Sylvie asked.

“Oh, yes!” I clutched my hands together. “This is exactly perfect for my wish. Thank you so much for organizing it.”

“It was my pleasure. I'm glad you're enjoying it.”

“I would be enjoying it more if it had a full bar. Just a note for the future if you expand,” Alice said to the pilot, who just nodded and veered the helicopter toward the mountains ahead.

“I'm having a marvelous time. It's exactly what I wanted. I feel like a bird.”

Marge grinned widely. “Being in a helicopter again makes me feel like I'm in my early twenties all over.”

The helicopter stopped moving forward and started to descend toward an opening on the side of the mountain.

“Are we landing?” My heart started racing as we dropped lower. “Or are we crashing? Oh, Lord Almighty. We're crashing!” A scream started crawling up my throat as I grabbed ahold of my seat, then realized I should be pressing my hands together in prayer instead of holding on for dear life.

“We're not crashing,” the pilot quickly responded. He passed a glance to Sylvie and winked.

“What’s going on?” Alice looked between them, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Sylvie grinned a smile so sinister I nearly blushed. “The helicopter ride is only part of the wish.”

“Part of the wish?” I asked. “I said I wanted to fly ... to feel like a bird. We’ve done that. This is my wish.”

Her eyes sparkled. “There’s one other way to feel a little more like a bird, and that’s what we’re doing next.”

Alice narrowed her eyes. “If you think we’re jumping out of a plane, you’re crazy. There’s not enough vodka in the world to make me do that.”

Sylvie shook her head quickly. “No. No skydiving. None of us want to do that.”

Marge lifted her hand. “I do.”

“None of us but Marge.” Sylvie chuckled. “No. We’re not skydiving, but we are going to do something else that will make us feel like we’re *really* flying.”

“What ... what is it?” I asked, my nerves crackling to life.

Sylvie grinned wider. “We’re going ziplining.”

My eyes bulged. “We’re what?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“What is ziplining? Why does Alice’s face look like that?” I pointed at Alice with her wide-eyed frozen stare while Sylvie continued grinning beside me.

“I am *not* ziplining.” Alice shook her head fiercely. “Forget that. I’m getting a lift back with the helicopter. You ladies have fun trying not to break your necks.”

“Break our necks? Wait. What? What is ziplining?” I asked again, now starting to panic based on Alice’s reaction.

“We’re not gonna break our necks.” Sylvie rolled her eyes. “It’s very safe. And this is one of the best companies in Mexico. *And* the longest zipline.”

“Oh, hell yeah!” Marge shimmied in her seat. “I have seen this on TV before. I am in! All in!”

“I knew you would be.” Sylvie slapped her open hand. “I’ve really wanted to do this too.”

I closed my eyes, tightening my hands into tight fists as I proclaimed loudly, “Someone, *please* tell me what ziplining is!”

“Oh, sorry, Doris,” Sylvie said. “It’s a very safe and fun way for us all to fly like birds. We get attached to special harnesses and then ride a line down the mountain.”

“Break our necks. We’ll break our necks.” Alice shook her head.

“We’re gonna break our necks? I don’t want to do this!” I still didn’t understand what they meant by “ride a line down a mountain,” but from Alice’s reaction, I worried it would be dangerous.

“I’ll break *your* neck if you don’t quit scaring Doris.” Marge cracked her knuckles.

“I’m just saying.” Alice shrugged. “You could break your necks.”

The helicopter touched down in a small field about halfway up the mountain. “This is it, ladies. Unless you want to ride back down to the airfield with me.”

“I’m riding with you,” Alice said decidedly.

“Oh, come on, you pansy ass.” Marge leaned forward and bumped her in the shoulder. “Even little kids go down the zipline. Are you telling me you’re too big of a baby to do something little kids do?”

“Little kids do it?” I perked up. “So, it’s safe then?”

“It’s perfectly safe, Doris,” Sylvie assured me. “Just ignore Alice. And Alice, I do hope you’ll come with us. It’s a whole adventure I’ve got planned. An ATV is waiting just over that hill to take us to the first ziplining platform. Normally, the tour starts at the bottom of the mountain, and customers get shuttled up this far, but we took a shortcut.” She winked at the pilot. “It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

Alice let out a sigh. “Fine. I’ll do it. But only because I want Marge to feel unquenchable guilt for the rest of her days when I fall and break my neck. I want her guilt to destroy her, and then I’m going to haunt her every night, shaking chains and asking, ‘Who’s the pansy ass now?’ when her hairy little legs run her off, screaming away from my ghostly torment.”

Marge lifted a shoulder and dropped it. “You can’t scare me. I’ll just call the Ghostbusters. We’ll suck you up in that little box and trap you in there, whining for all eternity.”

Alice stuck out her tongue, and Marge returned the gesture.

“Would you two stop it?” Sylvie chuckled and shook her head. “Now that it’s settled and we’re all in, we’ve got to get out and meet the tour. They should be arriving soon, and it will take us about five minutes to hike to the meet spot.”

“Sorry I couldn’t get you ladies closer,” the pilot said. “Didn’t want to risk the winds pushing us into the trees. But it’s just a straight shot through this clearing. Just head for that group of trees, keep going east, and you can’t miss the road

about two hundred feet past. When you hit the road, you'll find your group."

"We appreciate it, sir." Marge gave him a little salute. "Thank you for the ride. Really brought back some memories."

"You're very welcome. I hope you ladies have fun."

We bid him goodbye, then one by one, we filed out of the helicopter. I clutched my purse tight to my chest as I ran behind the other three. Fear I would get diced up like apples for a pie kept me hunched low as we scurried out from under the whirling blades.

"Oh man, I missed the feel of the air those babies push out!" Marge stood tall after we were clear, opening her arms and catching the last breeze from the helicopter as it lifted off.

"Okay, ladies!" Sylvie hiked her backpack up on her shoulder. "This way."

We walked single file behind her, heading in the direction the pilot had pointed. I tried not to let my worry about snakes and other unsavory jungle creatures get ahold of me, but when we reached the trees, a monkey screeched above me and I rushed forward and grabbed ahold of Marge.

"You scared of a monkey?" Marge looked up, pointing at the small creature sitting in the branches above us.

"Yes! They can be quite vicious, I've heard. Wild monkeys can bite and pass on terrifying diseases. And they ..." I leaned forward and whispered, "fling feces."

Marge snorted. "You live on a ranch full of shit. Horse shit. Cow shit. Pig shit. Chicken shit. Shit everywhere, Doris. Now you're worried about a little monkey and its turd?"

"Well, the animals on our ranch are tame, and they don't *fling* it at us on the ranch. It's easy to step around it. I just don't want to get feces flung in my face and contract some scary jungle disease. I can handle stepping around a little horse feces, but wild monkey?" I shuddered. "No."

“How does that work?” Sylvie asked from the front of our group. “Do you have to clean up the shit there?”

“Oh, no.” I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “I love cats, but I don’t even have one because I can’t imagine scooping poop out of a box. Yuck. I don’t do poop. That’s what the stable hands are for. Axel and Madeline run the ranch and do the overnight rides, but the stable hands do the mucking and chores. Madeline has two sons, Carl and Ted, who manage the staff and do a lot of the cattle ranch work, like branding and moving cattle. Axel helps too, of course, but he’s not a young cowboy anymore, so he lets the youthful men handle a lot of that stuff.”

“And you? What do you do?”

“Oh, I mostly cook.” I lifted my chin with a smile. “When tourist season is in full swing, I’m cooking for an army. I just love it. Three square meals a day plus extras like muffins and desserts. And trail mix. Now, I can make a mean trail mix that everyone raves about on the cattle drives. I’m busy day in and day out cooking up a storm during tourist season, which is May through September.

“And outside of tourist season? What then?”

My face fell a bit. “Well, this was my first winter on the ranch, and it was pretty quiet. There’s only a handful of people around to keep the ranch running while the cattle are pastured for the season, and it’s too cold for tourists. Not many people to cook for, but I like keeping Axel well fed. He jokes I’m trying to make him fat.” I giggled. “So, other than cooking for Axel and me, I did a lot of knitting.”

Alice glanced over her shoulder at me, arching an eyebrow. “You’re married to a silver fox cowboy. I can think of plenty of ways your hands could have been occupied other than knitting.”

“Oh, yeah.” Sylvie chuckled. “You can’t tell me you just knitted all winter. We all know what your husband looks like. No way you could keep your hands off him, even if they were busy knitting.”

A full-body blush warmed my skin as I thought about Axel and all the things we did to keep warm on those cold winter nights. It would be a vast understatement to say I'd found out what a hootie was and wanted them over and over again. After a lifetime of being a devoted wife and thinking sex was just something you did to procreate or relieve your husband's stress, I'd found out quickly with Axel that it was so much more. For the first time in my life, I felt passion. Real passion. The kind I had always thought was fabricated for movies or exaggerated in stories. But with Axel, I'd found out passion wasn't some fairytale that had no place in real life or marriage. It was real. And I got to experience it every single day.

"What happens in the marital bed isn't for sharing," I answered quickly. "It's special."

"Your face looks like a baboon's red butt right now, I don't think we need details to know you're doing more than knitting." Marge wagged her eyebrows, and my blush deepened.

"Doris finally gets why we wanted her to have a hootie so badly. See, Doris? Life is much better with a fulfilling sex life, isn't it?" Alice pursed her lips, awaiting my answer.

I didn't give it. I just blushed more.

I had loved my first husband, and we'd shared a wonderful life together raising our children, but what I had with Axel was so different. Without children to take up all our time and attention, we got to focus completely on each other. I'd never been a man's number one priority before, and now, I felt like the center of his whole universe. The depth of his love still shocked me, and on many days I felt guilty for indulging in so many carnal desires. Like God would be disappointed in me for using sex for pleasure and not for making babies. But then Axel would take off his clothes, I would get one glance at his muscular body, and I knew God wasn't going to blame me one bit for the lust that would overcome me. There was nothing sinful about sharing and showing love with my husband, even if that did come in some very creative ways.

I blushed harder, thinking about the things I couldn't believe I'd done.

“Whoa! Your face is gonna melt off if you blush any harder there, Doris.” Sylvie pointed at me, covering her mouth. “Seriously! You look like a fire truck!”

I wafted my hand at them. “I'm fine. Just keep walking, and no more talking about my private marital life. That's personal business. Let's talk about something else.”

Luckily, after they had pushed and teased me so hard in France that they'd made me cry, they stopped needling me when I asked them to. I didn't mind a little good-natured fun, but I didn't like to discuss the intimate details of intercourse like they did. They spoke of it freely with each other, even trading tips, but me? It was hard enough for me to come out of my shell with my husband, much less talk about it.

“Oh! I see the road!” Sylvie pointed and quickened her steps.

“Thank God.” Alice sped up to match her stride. “I was worried we were going to get lost in the jungle. End up on some unsolved mysteries type TV show where they try to figure out what happened to us when we disappeared in Mexico.”

“I already told you.” Marge puffed up proudly. “I can keep us alive in the jungle. Rambo ain't got shit on me. I'd get us all out of here safe and sound.”

“Well, we aren't lost in the jungle, so no need for a rescue, but thank you, Marge. Good to know we can count on you.”

“First Lieutenant Margherita Moretti at your service.” She gave a salute and marched on ahead to the dirt road.

Sylvie looked right then left, pointing when she saw the little kiosk just a short walk up the dirt road. “There. That's where we meet the tour and get the UTVs.”

“I hope that's not like an STD.” Marge snorted.

With a chuckle, Sylvie shook her head. “No. It's not an STD. It's an all-terrain vehicle. The bus with the tourists can

only come this far, and then we get in UTVs to take us the rest of the way to the start of the zip lines. I did a lot of research about this place. It's going to be fun!"

"I'm just glad I didn't have to ride the bus. I don't do busses." Alice pulled a face.

Sylvie nodded. "I thought the helicopter drop-off would be much better. Now we'll join up with the others. There. I see them."

I came around the bend behind her and saw the group of about twenty people standing beside a beat-up old bus. There were a half dozen UTVs all lined up beside them.

"You made it!" A man with a dark mustache and a toothy grin greeted us with a huge wave. "I'm Miguel. I'll be your guide today."

"Thanks for the special accommodations, Miguel." Sylvie grasped his hand and shook it. "We really enjoyed our helicopter ride here."

"And we're gonna have a great time today, ladies!" He grinned wider, his oiled mustache stretching across his tanned skin. "The four of you can take one of the UTVs. Just pick one and hop on in. I'll be around shortly to show you how to use it, and then we'll head single file the rest of the way to the zip platform."

"Thanks, Miguel." Sylvie smiled and waved at us to follow her.

We reached the UTVs, and after quickly greeting the other people on the tour, we made it to the last UTV in line.

"This one looks good." Sylvie patted the roof of the open-air vehicle.

"We have these on the ranch. I've driven them before. I can drive if you want."

"No!" they all shouted in unison, then glanced at each other and started laughing.

Sylvie jutted a finger at me. "The last time we let you drive, we ended up stuck on a fire hydrant. You're not

driving.”

My lips turned into a frown. “That was one time.”

“One time too many.” Marge snorted.

Alice rubbed her neck. “Yes. I think I got whiplash that day. Sorry, Doris. No driving for you. Get in the back. I don’t want you anywhere near the wheel.”

With a humph, I flopped into the back seat. Sylvie climbed in beside me. “If it makes you feel any better, the fact you crashed is why I ended up with Tom again. Who knows what would have happened if we’d kept driving that day?”

My heart lifted at her words. “Yeah. You’re right! It was a good thing I crashed. God works in mysterious ways. Perhaps it was He who grabbed the wheel that day.”

“Or perhaps we crashed because you forgot you were driving and ducked.” Marge glanced over her shoulder from the driver’s seat.

I shrunk a little.

Miguel arrived at our vehicle to take our belongings that couldn’t travel down the zipline with us, telling us they would get secured on the shuttle and be waiting when we arrived.

“My bag can stay with me. Got my passport in here.” Marge patted the small satchel strapped across her chest. She’d been bragging about her theft-proof Faraday bag ever since we’d arrived for the cruise. It locked, was slice-proof, and had some strange feature that stopped people from scanning her credit cards. “You ladies better give me yours so they don’t get stolen. They’ll be safe in this bad boy. You don’t want to be caught in Mexico without your passport. Pull out all your cash too. Credit cards can be canceled, but passports and cash can’t be trusted with strangers.” Marge looked at Miguel. “No offense. Just can’t trust anyone these days.”

“No offense taken. Your bags will be locked securely in the safe on the bus, but if you’d feel better keeping your cash and passports on you, by all means. Just no bags that can get caught on the way down.”

Marge insisted we keep our passports on us at all times since she was certain the little safes in our room would be robbed by employees like she'd seen on a television special some years back. Not wanting to get stuck here without them, we all followed her advice and toted them everywhere we went.

“Good idea.” Sylvie reached in the backpack and pulled out her passport and the small cash she had, giving it to Marge. Alice and I did the same, and then we handed Miguel our purses and Sylvie's backpack. Before he trotted off, Sylvie stopped him. “Our knitting basket is in there. So don't lose that bag.”

Only we knew why that knitting basket was so important, but he nodded his head. “Of course. I promise everything will be secure and awaiting you when your adventure is over.” He took our bags and headed to the waiting bus, handing them to the driver.

“You brought the basket?” I asked.

Sylvie nodded. “Yes. I thought we could draw the final wish, my wish, after we finish up this leg of the journey. Thought it would be a solid way to end the adventure.”

“Good idea!” I agreed. “I can't wait to see what you picked. Last time it was wonderful, and it brought me to my Axel.” My heart warmed as I thought of him.

“I think you ladies will love it,” she said certainly. “But I'm not telling you what it is. We'll pull it after we're done.”

“Deal,” we agreed.

Miguel returned to the group, addressing us all and giving us a rundown on the way the UTVs worked, which was exactly the same as the ones on the ranch.

Marge grunted her understanding, then Miguel went up front and hopped into the first UTV. When he started up the mountain on the narrow, dirt path, we followed behind the other camouflage vehicles pattering along in a line. The trail wound through the thick foliage, rising and falling over the

rough terrain we bumped along. When we got to a straightaway, our vehicle slowed down.

“What’s happening? Did we stall out?” Sylvie leaned forward, looking at the dash.

The engine pattered while we idled.

“Nope.” Marge grinned.

“Then what’s going on? Why are we stopped?” I asked, starting to get nervous watching the group disappearing around a turn.

“Just wait. You’ll see.” Marge smiled, her grip on the wheel tightening as she kept us immobile.

A few more long moments passed, and my nerves started to get the best of me. “Marge. We’re going to lose the group and get lost in the jungle! Hurry up and catch them!”

Marge looked over her shoulder and grinned. “Oh, that’s the plan. These SOBs are driving so damn slowly. I want to get a little room so we can see what this puppy can do.”

“Wait. You’re what?” Alice looked over, her flawless brows furrowed.

Marge’s smile stretched wider. “Just hold onto your hat, sweet cheeks. This baby feels like it’s been waiting to let loose.”

I whimpered. “Marge, I don’t think this is a good id—”

Before I could finish, the thrust from her stepping on the gas sent us all slamming into the back of our seats.

“Marge!” Alice shrieked, grabbing the roof and holding on tight as we surged forward, flying along the trail.

At first, our terrorized screams echoed through the jungle, then we hit the first bump and caught air. When we all crashed back down, our screams turned to howls of pain.

“My ass! I think I broke my ass!” Alice wailed.

“Well, if you ate more, you’d have more cushioning to protect you!” Marge shouted over the roaring engine while we

raced along the bumpy trail.

“Marge! Slow down!” Sylvie begged, her body crashing into mine as we took a tight turn.

She did, but only for a moment to make the corner without skidding into the trees. As soon as we were going straight again, Marge gripped the wheel and leaned forward.

“This baby has some balls!” she shouted, pushing the gas harder.

We hit another bump, and our screams meshed into one as we bounced on the seats, but this time, our panic started to transform into shrieks of laughter.

“You’re crazy!” Sylvie shouted, her voice cracking with amusement. “This is insane!”

“You love it! Admit it!” Marge shouted back, skidding us along another turn.

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face, the wind drying my teeth as we raced along the jungle path.

“Who!” Alice shrieked when we hit another bump. This time she used the roof to hold herself up for a moment to keep from landing back on her bony behind. “Hey! That helps! Hold the roof, ladies!”

Sylvie and I copied her actions, holding the roof handles tight and using them to cushion our landings over each bump that we hooted and hollered when we hit. We turned another corner and saw the small river separating us from the group who were now visible just across it.

“Oh shit, ladies. Looks like we’re getting wet!”

We didn’t even have time to argue with her as she floored it more, sending us sailing into the shallow river. Water sprayed up all around us, soaking our faces and filling my mouth as I howled with laughter. When we arrived on the other side, and Marge slammed us to a stop, the four of us choked on water and laughter.

Marge spun in her seat, her mud-covered face splitting with her grin. “Now *that’s* how you drive, Doris.”

I wanted to answer, but the water I'd inhaled still had me hacking.

"What happened?" Miguel appeared at the side of our vehicle. "Is everyone alright?"

"We, uh ..." Marge looked between us. "We just got a little stuck back there is all. We caught up, though. It's all good."

He gave her a contemplative stare, pursing his lips like he knew her answer was as far from the truth as we were from civilization. But instead of arguing, he just shook his head. "Glad you're okay."

"Yep. All good." Marge patted the wheel.

Miguel gave her one last judgmental look and then walked away. As soon as he was out of earshot, we burst into another round of chuckles.

"Oh, you are busted." Alice wiped the mud from her sleeve. "He didn't buy your story one bit."

Marge shrugged. "Well, nothing he can do about it now."

"Good thing I have traveler's insurance," Sylvie said, clearing the wet hair from her face. "If you broke this thing, it's on my credit card."

"It was worth it," Marge said decidedly, patting the dash. "And there's not gonna be any damage. This baby was made for off-roading. I just finally let it do what it was born to do."

"Okay, everyone! This way!" Miguel called.

The girls and I gave each other a quick exchange of smiles, then we climbed out and hurried to catch up to our group.

"Here we are!" Miguel said, waving his hand over the wooden platform in front of us.

I still didn't understand the logistics of ziplining, but it seemed we'd arrived. We followed him up the steps to the top of the platform, and as he started talking, I looked out over the sprawling drop below.

The jungle stretched as far as the eye could see, greens and other colors creating a beautiful canvas. Tall trees arched over

the four long lines that stretched through the clearing and well past my line of sight. A monkey flew across the twenty-foot divide, swinging from his tree, then clear over the lines and grabbing another branch across the gap with ease.

“More monkeys, Doris.” Marge bumped me with an elbow, whispering so we didn’t disrupt the start of Miguel’s speech. “Hope they don’t fling poop on you while you zip by.”

“Will they do that? For real?” I whispered back.

“She’s teasing.” Sylvie scolded Marge with a glare. “Just ignore her. Now, we need to listen to Miguel to know what we’re doing when it’s our turn.”

Miguel told a story about this area of the jungle, and he talked about the monkeys and how we would see lots of them on our way down. They enjoyed swinging along with the zipliners, seeming to race them through the trees.

“Race us? Will we be going fast? I still don’t understand how this is going to work,” I whispered to Sylvie.

“He’ll explain in a second,” she whispered back. “You’ll enjoy it. I promise.”

With a shrug, I kept on listening. When Miguel got to the part about our safety harnesses and how to slow down our speed, I furrowed my brow.

“Did he just say we’re going to be attached to that line?” I pointed to the never-ending line I’d been wondering about.

“Yeah.” Marge nodded. “We get hooked up to one of those lines, and then we zip down along the treetops to the next platform. Then we do it again.”

My stomach dropped as if I’d jumped straight off the mountain.

“Wait. We’re going to what?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“No. No, no, no, no, *no!*” I argued, pushing back against Marge as she shoved me forward toward the edge of the platform.

“You’ll be fine.” She tapped the helmet I’d just strapped on. “Like Sylvie said, and Miguel said six hundred times since you keep asking him, this is very safe.”

I shook my head so hard I got a pain in my neck. “I don’t want to do this. I’m too scared.”

“You said you wanted to feel like a bird.” Sylvie gestured to the sling she was now laying in, preparing to get catapulted out over the jungle. “This is how we’re going to accomplish your wish. While soaring down the zipline, you’ll truly know what it feels like to fly. It’s going to be amazing, Doris. You’ll see. And we’re going to be right along with you since we’re going side-by-side. One of us on each line. You won’t be alone.”

I whimpered as I looked back at the lines dangling over the jungle. I’d just watched the rest of our group go screaming down them, and as their forms had disappeared into the jungle, my fear only increased.

“What if the lines snap?”

“They won’t,” Miguel said as he helped Marge down on her stomach into her sling. “It is very safe. I can assure you.”

“Doris, I’m no more enthused about this than you are.” Alice waved a hand over the sling holding her snug in the row of widows now ready to go. “But the only other way down is back on the UTV and then a bus.” She soured her face. “I’d rather risk the neck-breaking now than get on a stinky bus. If I’m going, you’re going.”

I whimpered again, and then I looked at the three women staring at me with expectant eyes. The three women I trusted most in this world. If they truly believed this would help me

accomplish my wish, then I had to muster up the strength to do it.

“Okay,” I forced out.

Sylvie’s eyes lit up. “You’ll do it?”

“Yes. Fine. I’ll do it. But let’s hurry before I change my mind.”

“You heard the woman!” Marge boomed. “Strap her up and send us down!”

Sylvie clapped as Miguel walked me forward, my steps slowing as I got closer to the edge.

My stomach flipped and flopped when I peered into the cavern below. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Once you get going, you’ll forget all about your fears. I do this all day, every day, and you aren’t the first person to be terrified to go down. But I can tell you, once they did it, they all wanted to go again.”

“Really?” I asked as he hooked me up to the carabiner.

“Really. You’ll love it, Doris.”

“We’ll be right beside you over here,” Sylvie said from the other side of Marge. “I picked this particular zipline tour because it has four lines, meaning we all go together. We’re with you, Doris.”

“You got this, Doris!” Marge gave me a thumbs up from beside me where she was already hooked up, lying flat on her stomach with her guide ready to launch her off. “We’ll be right beside you.”

Alice looked less enthused in the harness beside her, wearing the orange helmet she hadn’t stopped complaining about.

“We’ve got this, Doris. Let’s fly like birds.” Sylvie mimicked Marge’s thumbs up.

I looked at them again, all ready and waiting, and then I dug into the resolve I would need to push off the platform.

You survived swimming with Great Whites, Doris. You can do this. God will protect you, and if He doesn't, it just means my time is up, and He's calling me home.

With that reminder about my fate even if I plunged to my death, I gave Sylvie a sharp nod. "Okay. Let's go."

The harness pushed into my stomach as I lay waiting, then one of the four men helping Miguel put his hands on my straps and stood behind me.

"Ready?" Miguel asked us.

"Ready!" Marge shouted, and I gave a sharp nod.

"3, 2, 1," Sylvie counted. "Let's go!"

With a blood-curdling scream, I got pushed off the platform and swooped into the open air surrounding me. The world fell away as the whirring noise of the zipline started, and I sailed along the line, my heart rate pounding as fast as the speeds we caught while we descended between the trees. Fear and exhilaration twisted and twirled inside of me.

"Whooooo!" Sylvie screamed. "We're flying, Doris! We're flying!"

I'm flying.

As the fear started to subside, that simple fact finally sunk in.

I was flying—like a bird. And Sylvie was right.

I loved it.

"I'm flying!" I screamed back, opening my arms as the wind whipped my face. "I'm flying!"

"Whoooo! You're flying!" Marge shouted. "This is amazing!"

And it was. With the fear completely obliterated by the excitement, I could finally appreciate the beautiful scenery around me. The trees. The flowers below. The blue sky stretched out in front of me. I lifted my eyes to it, stretching my arms out as I imagined flying up and away into it, and at that moment, I truly felt like I was.

“This is crazy!” Alice screamed, but laughter peppered her words.

I glanced to my left and smiled at my widows, all flying beside me, matching grins stretching their faces.

In a million years, I never imagined I’d be soaring through the jungle canopy. We flew between the tall trees and glided over the foliage below, each squealing and laughing as we continued descending.

“We get to do this four more times!” Sylvie shouted.

Four more times. I doubted that would be enough. I felt so free up here in the air that I wanted to stay floating forever.

“Hey! A monkey!” Marge shouted, and my gaze followed her finger.

Monkeys started swinging across the divide we careened down, their long arms stretching as they swung over the lines, suspended for what seemed like an eternity, then landing safely on the other side.

Sylvie’s face lit up. “So cool! Miguel said they liked racing the zipliners.”

One by one, they started swinging faster, now swinging along our sides and keeping pace with our descent. A monkey on my right swung fastest, passing up the several struggling to catch him.

“Look at that one go!” Sylvie shouted. “He’s gonna beat us!”

“Zip girls, zip! Let’s give that monkey a run for its money!” Marge pressed her arms to her side in an effort to speed up.

While they zipped faster to race it for fun, I tried to zip faster to get away from it, visions of it flinging poop at me detracting me from the beautiful views all around. The monkey got up just ahead of us, then swung his body, launching across the ziplines toward the other side.

But much to my horror, he mistimed his swing. I watched helplessly as I sped straight at him, then screamed when he

collided with my head.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” My screams echoed into the jungle as the monkey grabbed my helmet, clinging tight to my face and covering my eyes. “Help! Help! Someone help!”

It shrieked and screamed along with me, gripping tighter with its little hands that I remembered likely had feces on them. My whole body shuddered as I tried to suck my head back into my neck like a turtle to get away from it, but the little creature just gripped me tighter, its shrieks getting the other monkeys in the trees to join him. Soon the screams of monkeys seemed to come from everywhere around us ... though none were as loud as the one screaming into my ear.

“Help! Help! It’s on me! I’m under attack!” I screamed as best I could with its furry belly muffling my words.

“Holy shit!” Marge shouted. “There’s a monkey on Doris’s head!”

“What?” I heard Alice ask before she screamed. “Oh, no! Doris!”

“Get it off! Get it off!” I screeched, my arms flailing wildly as I blindly flew, the monkey like a blindfold blocking out my entire view.

“Stay calm, Doris! He’s not trying to hurt you! Just stay calm, and he won’t bite!”

Bite? Oh, good Lord. I was only worried about it touching me with its poopy hands, but now it’s going to bite me, and I’m going to die of some newfound jungle disease.

I tossed up a barrage of prayers as I flew down the zipline, the monkey fixed to my face like Velcro.

“Get off of me!” I hollered again, and this time I felt it move. The monkey screeched and screamed, scrambling on my helmet and finally jumping onto my back. I felt its tiny hands running all over me before it stopped, and I was too scared to turn back and look, worried it’d bite my face.

“What’s happening? Where is it?” I screamed.

“It’s crouching on your back! Just stay calm!” Sylvie called. “It’s trying to find a way off. Hold tight, Doris! Just hold tight!”

“This is awesome!” Marge howled with laughter.

“It’s not funny!” I shouted back.

That didn’t stop her rolling laughter.

“Hold on, Doris! We’re almost to the end! I can see the platform!” Alice shouted.

I looked up and saw the end of the line just up ahead. It felt like an eternity as I flew toward it, the monkey still riding me like a horse. But just as we neared the edge and saw the men waiting to catch us, I felt it move on my back, and finally, it launched off me, then the weight disappeared.

“Is it gone? Is it gone?” I screeched.

“It’s gone! All clear! He jumped back into the trees!” Marge called back.

I breathed a sigh and threw up a thank you prayer as the brakes kicked in and slowed me down. A man stood at the end of each zip line, grabbing and pulling us to safety when we arrived.

“Are you okay?” The man handling my lines asked. “Was that a monkey on you?”

“Yes!” I scrambled to get up, fighting my restraints. “I got attacked!”

“You didn’t get attacked,” Sylvie chuckled as she slowed to a stop. “It just mistimed its jump. You didn’t get bit or scratched, did you?”

I kicked off my harness and jumped up, feeling all over my face and body for wounds that would open me up to a myriad of monkey diseases that terrified me. When I felt nothing, I blew out a sigh. “Thank the Lord, but I think I’m okay. Is there ... is there any poop on me?”

I tried to spin around to look at my back but couldn’t see.

The man who had caught me shook his head, his smile starting to form, though he fought it. “I don’t see any poop on you.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“I can’t believe that happened!” Alice laughed as she got up. “You literally had a monkey on your head!”

“Best. Thing. Ever!” Marge stood, placed her hands on her knees and howled with laughter.

“It’s not funny!” I swatted the air at her. “I could have been hurt!”

“The only thing that’s gonna be hurt are Axel’s feelings.” Marge snorted.

I tipped my head. “What?”

“Are you gonna tell him that you let a monkey get fresh with you? I swear that thing was humping your head.”

My eyes bulged as my mouth dropped. “Marge!”

Alice snorted the most unladylike sound, then closed her eyes and let out a laugh louder than I’d ever heard come out of her. “Oh, my God! You did! You got humped by a monkey!”

“He was not *humping* me!” I stomped my foot. “He was just holding my head.”

Marge tossed an arm around Alice, the two of them continuing to roll with laughter. “I think he liked you. I think he saw you flying toward him, jumped on, and was humping you.”

“He was not!” I stomped my foot harder. “You’re disgusting!”

“Girls. Stop teasing Doris. It wasn’t humping her,” Sylvie started seriously, but laughter soon choked out of her, and her shoulders shook as she tried to hold it in. Finally, it spilled out in waves, her eyes closing as she folded forward. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Doris! But oh my God! You had a monkey on your head!”

The three of them laughed so hard that finally, the horror of my situation started sloughing off me, and their contagious laughter took hold. First, a small snort, then a slight chuckle, and soon I was rolling as hard as they were. We laughed so loudly standing up there in the treetops that I swore everyone in Mexico must have heard our howls.

“You’re okay, though? No injuries?” My guide asked, but we were too caught up in our laughter to answer right away.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” I finally managed, then let out a long sigh trying to catch my breath.

“It’s happened once or twice before.” Sylvie’s guide said. “I’ve never seen it myself, but I’ve heard stories of the monkeys hitching a ride. I’m not gonna lie. I never really believed them, but after seeing that monkey flying down on your back today, I believe it.”

He laughed with us, then when we finally all ran out of air, they asked if we wanted to keep going. I’d nearly forgotten we were only partway down. There were still four more lines until we reached the bottom.

“Well, it’s not like another monkey is going to jump on her.” Sylvie tugged at her harness. “That’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance. So, I’m all in if you ladies are in.”

Alice looked down at the far drop below the treetop platform we were on, then slapped a bug that landed on her arm. “I don’t see any faster way out of this Godforsaken jungle. I’m in.”

“You know I’m in!” Marge pumped a fist.

I squeezed my lips together while trying to shake off the fear the monkey had caused me. “Okay. I’ll do it. Sylvie is right. There’s no way that’s happening again.”

“Then let’s do this!” Sylvie clapped and hurried forward to the other edge of the platform, where the next line began.

One by one, we got strapped in, and then we were off again, us four widows sailing through the treetops with grins so wide I thought our faces might tear.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Whoot!” I shouted as we flew over the waterfall below to the final platform that would end our amazing adventure.

“Welcome back!” The new man catching me said as I slid to a stop in front of him. “Did you have a nice time?”

My teeth were so dry from smiling that I had to wet them with my tongue before I answered. “It was incredible! So much better than I could have imagined!”

“I loved it!” Sylvie slid up and stopped.

“I wanna go again!” Marge proclaimed when her guide caught her.

Alice landed just after her, and looked over, her funny orange helmet the only thing I’d ever seen that diminished her beauty even a touch. “Finally. It’s over. I’m ready for cocktail hour.”

“Oh, you loved it. Admit it.” Marge stood and stretched.

Alice rose as well, then shrugged. “It was ... okay.”

Sylvie tipped her head. “I heard you laughing the whole way down.”

A slight smile tipped Alice’s lips. “Okay. Fine. It was fun.”

Sylvie drew her elbow back to her side with a closed fist. “Yes! I nailed it! I knew we would have an amazing time here!”

“Absolutely crushed it.” Marge patted her shoulder. “We are doing this every year, no matter if someone wishes it or not.”

“No arguments from me,” Sylvie agreed, then she looked at me. “Doris? Did we accomplish your wish? Did you feel like you flew like a bird?”

Closing my eyes, I relived my feelings soaring over the world below. “Yes. Oh, yes. It was wondrous. Thank you, Sylvie. It was the perfect wish.”

“Follow me, ladies,” our guide said, gesturing for us to join him on the rope bridge suspended between our platform and another across the way. Though I was scared to walk on the narrow, swinging bridge, I’d already conquered enough fears on this trip not to argue and just go with it. With one deep breath to steady my nerves, I stepped on. It swung a little with my weight, but I kept moving, and we walked single file to the next platform, which had stairs leading us back down to the ground. When we arrived, Miguel was waiting for us.

“You ladies look like you had a great time!” He grinned, then pointed to a UTV with our bags that we’d left behind with him.

“We had a great time!” Sylvie hurried over and grabbed our bags, giving everything a quick once-over before handing them back to us. “It’s all here.”

Marge tapped her bag. “I’ll just keep our passports in here until we get back.”

“Maybe we should just keep them all in there for the rest of the trip,” Sylvie said. “You keep going on and on about how that thing is theft-proof. It’s probably safer than toting them in our purses where they could be stolen.”

Sylvie passed me my pink purse, and I peeked inside. Everything looked untouched.

“Works for me. I’ll guard ‘em with my life.” Marge gave a short salute and checked the strap of her cross-body bag.

“How do we get back?” Alice asked, scanning the jungle around us.

“There’s a bus that will take you the last half mile back to the parking lot.” Miguel gestured to the beat-up bus chugging out smoke behind us.

Alice pulled a face. “Damn it! I thought I was avoiding a bus by doing those zippy things. There’s still a bus ride?”

“You won’t catch cooties from public transportation.” Sylvie laughed and rolled her eyes.

“If you haven’t died from some rogue STD yet, I’m sure your immune system can fight off whatever viruses are living in that ancient upholstery.”

Alice lifted her middle finger, and Marge blew back a kiss.

Just as they were about to start arguing, we heard squeals of delight behind us. We turned around to see the splash of some people jumping off the edge of the small cliff beside the waterfall. They popped up in the churning water, laughing and splashing.

“Oh! Can we do that? Can we jump in?” Sylvie asked Miguel.

“Of course. There’ll be another bus in thirty minutes. Feel free to jump and swim, and you can catch the next bus.”

“I’m going in. Who’s with me?” Sylvie looked between us.

Marge raised her hand. “I’ll never say no to adventure. That’s the whole damn reason we’re here. I don’t have a suit, though.”

Sylvie’s face dropped. “Me neither. Dammit.”

“Most people just go in their clothes.” Miguel shrugged.

Sylvie tipped her head and looked at us, inching up her eyebrows. “I’m game if you ladies are.”

“Still in!” Marge grinned.

Alice huffed, then tossed up her hands. “If it delays getting on a bus, I’ll do it. Marge already ruined my outfit with the mud from her UTV race.”

I glanced at her simple shirt, still shocked that it probably cost more than my entire closet.

They looked at me, and that excitement that bubbled up inside me whenever they came up with some wild idea boiled right over the top. “Okay! I’ll do it!”

Sylvie clapped her hands, jumping up and down. “Let’s go!”

We grabbed our bags and hurried toward the edge of the water, listening to the bus chug away down the mountain. When we got there, I blew out a deep breath.

“It’s so beautiful.”

“Look! The water sprays are making rainbows!” Sylvie pointed, and I smiled at the small rainbows glowing over the crystal-clear water below.

“Okay, ladies! Let’s do this thing!” Marge moved closer to the edge.

“There had better not be any crocodiles down there.” Alice inched up beside her and glanced down.

Marge jutted her chin to the couple swimming out of the water. “If there were, they’d have eaten the other people already. We’ll be fine.”

“Good point.” Alice shrugged. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“Okay! Here we go!” Sylvie stepped up and got in line.

I moved in beside them, grinning as we all looked between each other.

“Wait!” Marge said, turning to face me, eyes sparkling. “Sylvie’s wish! I say, since your wish is done, we draw the last wish before we jump. Let’s kickstart this next phase of our adventure and leap off into it.”

Sylvie’s eyes sparkled. “Oh! Okay! Hold on!”

She hurried off to her backpack just a dozen feet away, then pulled out the knitting basket and carried it over to me.

When she lifted the lid, excitement crackled inside me, wondering what new adventure awaited us.

Alice and Marge gathered round as I lifted off the lid, reaching my hand in and pulling out the last little piece of paper.

Sylvie.

She practically vibrated in her skin with excitement as I unfolded it, my face lighting up as I read the words.

“What does it say?” Marge pushed in beside me, craning her neck over my shoulder.

I held it up. “It says, ‘Go whitewater rafting.’ How fun!”

“Oh, yeah!” Marge leaped up. “I’ve always wanted to try that!”

Alice arched an eyebrow. “Rafting? Floating down a river? I can handle that.” Then she frowned. “Wait. Do I have to wear a stupid helmet again?”

“Only if you don’t want to hit your head and end up unconscious at the bottom of the river,” Marge teased.

Sylvie chuckled. “We’re not going on the crazy rapids, so that’s not going to happen. But yes, we’ll likely have to wear helmets. Sorry, Alice. It’s just something that I always thought looked like fun.”

“I can pull off a helmet again, I suppose.” She touched her flattened hair.

“I think it’s a wonderful wish. The perfect one to end our trip before we get you home to get married next week. A lazy day on the river for us ladies after a wild adventure.”

“I’m so glad you ladies like it. I can’t wait.” Sylvie grinned, then reached out and took my hand. “Now, let’s finish Doris’s wish and fly one last time. Ready?”

“Ready.” I took Alice’s hand, and she grabbed Marge’s. Together we walked to the rocky ledge, each glancing at each other with grins before Marge started counting.

“Wilder Widows on three. One, two, three ...”

We launched into the air, our voices mingling into one when we screamed, “Wilder Widows!” as we leaped off the cliff hand in hand.

SYLVIE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I am so excited about this,” I said to the three widows walking behind me toward the rafting kiosk in the parking lot. “When I wrote the wish initially, I was thinking like river rafting in Wisconsin or something, but doing it in Mexico through the jungle is even better!”

“Well, while we’re already here, why not?” Marge moved up behind me.

“It gave us two extra days at the resort with the swim-up bar, so no complaints from me,” Alice added.

They were right. When we’d discussed my wish and where to do it, instead of flying back to the states and finding a place to go, we’d researched and found a rafting expedition right here in Mexico. I’d booked our tickets, and we’d spent the last two days floating around the pool and marinating in margaritas. Though I’d enjoyed the relaxing days with my best friends, I was ready to get out on this next leg of our adventure.

Our last leg.

Only three days left of our whirlwind widow’s trip.

And in five days, I’d be married.

The excitement of seeing Tom again nearly overwhelmed me, but I kept reminding myself that I needed to keep my mind here with my widows instead of at home with him. In five days, we’d have our wedding, and I’d get to enjoy Tom day in and day out again. My widows, however, would each head back to their new lives, and it would likely be months until I’d see them again. That thought filled me with deep, profound sadness, but I pushed it aside to focus on the joy we’d have together these next few days.

Especially today with my wish coming true.

“Hola!” The man behind the kiosk said. “Cómo puedo ayudarte?”

“Hi.” I smiled, waving as I approached the small wooden shack. “I’m Sylvie, and I have a reservation for four.”

He repeated my name, and then his face lit up as he nodded. “Si, si. Sylvie.”

He turned and started asking questions in Spanish, but I shook my head and answered with the phrase I’d uttered so often in Mexico. I felt guilty, like an entitled American, every time I said it. At least that’s what Marge said since we’d made no attempt to learn the local language ... unlike her. “No hablo Espanol. Habla usted Inglés?”

He held up his fingers, making a sign for small. “Un poquito.”

“Outta the way, outta the way. I’ll handle this.” Marge pushed past, giving me the side eye like she always did when I expected everyone in Mexico to speak English. “I speak the best Spanish. I’ll talk to him.”

“I think we’ve established your Spanish sucks, Marge.” Alice crossed her arms, peering out from her oversized black sunglasses as she lowered her chin.

“I’ve been studying the past few nights. Brushing up, you know? I’ve got this. Don’t worry.”

“I’m worried,” Alice deadpanned.

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll do fine,” Doris said. “Go ahead, dear. Find out what he wants.”

Marge started spewing in Spanish, and the small, older man smiled and nodded along. When he pulled out a flyer with five pictures of rapids on them, he pointed to them while he spoke.

“Cuatro,” Marge answered, pointing at the fourth photo. “We’ll do cuatro.”

“What did he ask?”

“He’s asking what rapid we want to do. I picked the fourth one.”

“Is four hard?” Doris asked, worry seeping into her voice. “I don’t want to go on a scary one.”

Marge scoffed. “Nah. They won’t take us on a bad one. These tourist places are just like lazy rivers. I just picked one that looked like it may have a few little rapids we can go through. You know, gotta have a little excitement out there.”

“Just a little, though,” Doris warned her. “I don’t want to get hurt.”

“None of us do,” I said to her, then looked at Marge. “So, nothing crazy. Just a nice, fun ride with a few bumpy spots. Is that what you picked?”

Marge said something to the man, and he nodded along, smiling.

“Yeah. We’re good.” She gave us a thumbs up.

“You’re sure?” Sylvie arched an eyebrow.

“We’ll be fine. Julio here is gonna show us a great time.”

Julio closed the kiosk door, locked it tight, and then waved at us to follow him to the white van.

“A white serial killer van? Really? Isn’t ‘not getting into a white van with a strange man’ like Survival 101? Great. This is the part where we get kidnapped,” Alice whispered to me, and I laughed.

“We’re not getting kidnapped,” Marge whispered back. “I can take this guy. No question about it. He’s what, a hundred and twenty pounds? Cripes, that’s nothing. I can squish him with my left boob, I bet.”

Alice recoiled. “Now there’s a visual I’ll never unsee.”

Marge ignored her. “Julio seems cool. I don’t think this is some underground kidnapping ring.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” I whispered back.

Before we got in, Marge double-checked she had our IDs and passports in her secure little satchel. Knowing we’d be getting wet in the rapids, we all left our purses and phones at the hotel so they wouldn’t get damaged, bringing only one

phone, all the passports, and a few credit cards in Marge's satchel.

Once we were set, we got inside. The van bumped down the road for several miles before veering off down a dirt trail. Alice and I exchanged a look, careful not to let Doris see and get her panicking, but Marge stiffened her jaw and narrowed her eyes, cracking her knuckles while she let us know she'd take this guy.

Luckily, when the van stopped, we were at a river and not some compound where they'd hold us hostage until Alice paid our ransom. Julio hopped out and grabbed the life jackets and helmets, then brought us over to where a giant orange raft was secured and padlocked to a tree. After unlocking it, he dragged it down near the winding river cutting through the beautiful jungle surrounding us.

He gave us a little safety demonstration even though we didn't understand a lot of it. Marge relayed his words to us, but I was fairly certain she was just making them up as she went along, likely understanding his fast-talking about as much as the rest of us. When he finished, he gave us a big grin and thumbs up, then pushed the raft into the water.

One by one, we piled in, each taking an oar that he handed us. After we were all in our places perched on the sides of the raft, Julio pushed it out and then jumped in. He settled into his spot on the back and dug his paddle in, using it like a rudder to steer us out into the center of the river.

"He said to paddle," Marge relayed his words, and this time I decided she was actually correct.

We started paddling along the lazy river. The slow speeds gave us plenty of time to enjoy the incredible scenery surrounding us. It was so much better than I'd expected, and I paddled along for over an hour, mesmerized by the lush green foliage covering both sides of our path.

"Oh, wow!" Marge said from her seat across from me as we turned a bend. "Look!"

I gasped when I saw the beautiful waterfalls cascading down the sides of the rocks just up ahead. Rainbows covered the air where the spray splashed up, and it felt like we were paddling right into some magical land out of a storybook.

“Isn’t that something,” Alice said softly. “Wow.”

“Magnificent,” Doris breathed. “Absolutely magnificent.”

We all paddled silently through the beautiful oasis with the water cascading down all around us. The sun sparkled on the water but disappeared when we slipped into a large cave that took us away from the magical little spot.

“Okay. This is amazing.” I marveled at the weathered rock surrounding us.

“Better not be bats.” Marge scowled. “I hate bats.”

“Something Marge is afraid of? That’s a first,” Alice said, peering up at the stalactites jutting out of the ceiling.

“I didn’t say afraid,” Marge corrected. “Just that I hate them. The way they dart and fly at you.” With a shudder, she shook her head. “Don’t like ‘em.”

“Are there bats in here?” Doris stopped paddling and ducked low. “I got one stuck in my hair once. It was horrible. I’m still traumatized.”

“What is it about your head attracting wild animals?” Marge asked, and I struggled not to burst into laughter.

“You’ve got a helmet on,” I answered, though I also looked up for signs of them. “You’ll be fine.”

Alice pushed her paddle against the water. “Helmet or not, I’m not into bats. Paddle faster, ladies.”

We all pushed our paddles into the water, heading toward the light glowing on the other side. When we popped out of the cave, we all blinked against the contrasting sunlight now blinding us.

Grateful we’d made it out without another animal stuck to Doris’s head, we pushed on along the river.

“Hey, it’s speeding up. Anyone else notice that?” I said, noticing how much quicker we moved with almost no effort.

“Oh, yeah! We must be getting to the rapids part of the trip!” Marge practically bounced in her seat.

“I’m a little scared, to be honest,” Doris admitted.

“We’ll be fine,” I answered. “Julio will steer, and we’ll just paddle along. It will be bouncy, and we’ll get splashed, but we shouldn’t face any dangerous rapids. Those are for the experts. This is the beginner’s tour.”

Doris let out a sigh. “Oh, good. That makes me feel better. I’m a beginner.”

“We’re all beginners,” Alice said.

“Look!” Marge pointed, and as we came around the bend, I saw the churning white water and small waves ahead. “Get ready, girls! It’s rapids time!”

Julio started speaking in the back, though none of us could understand him. And if Marge did, she wasn’t relaying information since she was so fixated on the rapids ahead.

“Keep paddling, ladies!” she called out after Julio said something. “He says to keep paddling!”

We followed orders, continuing to paddle as we entered the start of the fray.

“Whoo!” Doris squealed as the raft started twisting and bumping along.

“Don’t fall in!” I called to the girls. “Just keep your feet tucked under the raft. Strong cores!” I’d watched some how-to videos on YouTube the night before, so I at least had some idea of the techniques needed to navigate the rapids.

We all screamed with excitement as we pushed through the choppy water, each laughing and shouting with joy as we bounced and dipped, water spraying in our faces every time the bow of the boat dipped down. After several minutes of navigating our way through the mild rapids, we rounded another bend.

Julio shouted something from the back, and I looked over to Marge, who furrowed her brow.

“What did he say?” I asked.

Marge tipped her head. “I think he said hold on tight. But maybe he said nice work or something like that.”

Alice huffed. “Those are two completely different statements, Marge. Damn you and your horrific Spanish. Which is it? Nice work, or hold on tight?”

Marge shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe hold on tight just in case.”

As we finished rounding the bend, our speeds continued increasing, and when we made it all the way around, my jaw unhinged.

“Holy shit. What is that?” I said when I saw the wild rapids ahead. Waves broke and crashed around rocks jutting out of the river that swept us straight at it.

“What. The. Hell?” Alice whispered. “We’re not going into that. Are we going into that?”

“That doesn’t look like it’s for beginners!” Doris argued, panic lifting the octaves of her voice.

“Uh. I think he definitely said, ‘Hold on tight.’” Marge grimaced.

“That is definitely not for beginners. Marge!” I spun in my seat. “Tell Julio we can’t do that! Tell him we need to get off this river!”

Marge started speaking Spanish, but Julio just nodded and smiled, saying something while he pointed ahead.

“Halto! We musto stopo!” Marge held her hand up like a stop sign. “Stopo! Halto!”

Julio just dug his paddle in like a rudder and kept the raft rushing toward the fast-approaching rapids.

Marge spun back, and I saw something strange on her face when I looked at her ... something I’d never seen there before.

Fear.

“Um, it doesn’t seem like we can stop.” She pointed to the sharp rocks on both sides. “The only way out is through.”

“Holy shit. Ho. Ly. Shit.” I blinked at her, then turned back toward the wild rapids about to swallow us whole.

“Don’t panic, soldiers!” Marge suddenly snapped into action. “Just keep paddling! Julio will steer! We paddle! Keep your feet hooked tight! Use your paddles to push off any rocks! And whatever you do ... *don’t fall in!*”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Alice grumbled right before we hit the first of the fray. “If I die, I’m haunting you again.”

“We’ve got this, soldiers! Now PADDLE!”

We screamed as our raft plummeted off the first drop. The powerful spray of water nearly knocked me off my perch, but I kept paddling and pushing against it. Our raft started sideways, heading straight for a sharp cluster of rocks.

“Left side! Paddle harder! Paddle! Paddle!” Marge commanded.

Doris and I were on the left, so we dug our paddles in, pushing against the violent water trying to drive us straight into the rocks. Julio shouted something loudly, and I glanced over my shoulder to look at him behind me, but to hell if I could figure out a word he said.

“What did he say?” I shouted to Marge, sitting just opposite of me.

“I’m not even going to pretend I know what the hell he’s saying! Just paddle or we’re toast!”

My stomach dropped, and it wasn’t just from our violent launch over the next ledge.

“Whoa!” I screamed as we landed with a thud. It dislodged me, and I fell backward, colliding with Julio as I nearly tumbled off the back of the raft.

“Sorry!” I called to him as I pulled myself back upright, but when I turned to face him, I saw nothing but empty space. Wide-eyed, I spun around and saw Julio’s orange helmet bobbing above the water.

“Julio!” I cried. “Man overboard!”

“What?” The three girls echoed, then Doris let out an ear-piercing scream.

“Oh, cripes! Julio!” Marge bellowed.

“What do we do?” Panic sent my heart racing, and the blood whooshed through my veins faster than our raft raced down the river.

“We gotta clear these rocks ahead, and then we’ll try to grab him!” Marge shouted over the loud water. “He’s floating behind us, and the rapids will send him directly to us. We just have to be ready to grab him.”

Terrified I’d killed Julio, I tried to focus on the task at hand to keep the other passengers—my best friends—alive.

We pushed and paddled, screaming and grunting as we guided our raft through the rapids trying to swallow us whole, but without Julio, our rudder, it only took a few long moments before our raft spun sideways.

Our screams mingled into one as we careened at a cluster of rocks I knew we’d never be able to avoid.

“Brace for impact!” Marge shouted, and we all ducked down, grabbing each other’s hands moments before the raft collided.

In a flurry of motion, we flew through the air as the raft flipped. Water rushed into my face and my mouth as it pulled me under. My grip on the widows’ hands started to slip as the water yanked us beneath it, but my fingers refused to let go, so I squeezed tighter, holding onto them for dear life as we tumbled and twisted in the churning waves. Finally, when I was out of air, and certain I would drown, the water released its unyielding grip, and we popped up to the surface one by one.

Coughing to clear our lungs, we gasped for breath, bobbing in the softening rapids that continued to push us downstream.

“Is anyone hurt?” Marge asked as our speed decreased.

“I think I’m okay,” I answered, though I truly had no idea if I had injuries and was just in shock.

“I think I’m okay too,” Alice answered.

“I’m not hurt. Thank the Lord,” Doris said.

“Anyone got eyes on Julio?” Marge started spinning her head around.

Julio!

Crap! I’d nearly forgotten our poor guide was floating somewhere in the river.

“Julio!” we shouted, but there was no answer.

“Look! There!” Doris shouted, pointing her finger toward his body drifting quickly toward us.

“Get ready to grab him!” Marge commanded, and we all stretched out our free arms and got ready.

He moved with such speed I almost missed him, but I snatched ahold of the small dry bag he had tethered to him and held him tight as he blew by. His life preserver kept him floating on his back, and my stomach dropped when I didn’t see any response on his face.

“I’ve got him! Help me get him to shore!”

The ladies all grabbed him, and together we pushed him to the river’s edge. Marge scrambled out, grabbing his legs and pulling him out of the water. The three of us crawled out beside her, panting. His unconscious body lay in an awkward heap at our feet.

Doris shrieked. “Is he dead?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Marge, the nurse, went to work quickly doing CPR.

We held our collective breath as we watched her work, and I glanced up for a moment to see our raft drifting away far down the river and out of sight.

“Can you save him? Oh, my God. I feel awful!” I covered my face. “It’s my fault. I lost my balance and knocked him out of the raft!”

“Come on, Julio. Breathe!” Alice cupped her hands together, closing her eyes tight.

“Our Father who art in Heaven,” Doris started, making the sign of the cross as she prayed over Julio.

Finally, he coughed, sputtering up water as he choked it out.

“Oh, thank God!” I pressed my hands to my helmet. “He’s alive!”

But shortly after coughing, he seemed to lose consciousness again.

“What happened? Why isn’t he awake?” I asked, still riddled senseless with the guilt he was in this situation because of me. “Is he ... dead?”

“He’s not dead. He’s breathing now,” Marge touched a small streak of blood coming from beneath his helmet. It was then I saw the dent in it. “But I think he lost consciousness because he has a TBI.”

“TBI?” Alice asked.

“Traumatic brain injury. I think he hit his head.”

“Is it serious?” Doris asked.

“Dunno. Could be. Also could just have gotten knocked silly, and he’ll wake up later with a big bump and a headache. Help me brace his neck in case he has a spinal injury, then we’ll take his helmet off, and I’ll give him a thorough exam.

We did as she asked, helping her carefully strip Julio from his life jacket after she fashioned a makeshift neck brace with her own.

“Gotta be careful just in case. Let’s just get him stable, and then I’ll see if I have cell service out here, and we’ll call for help.” Marge reached for her satchel but patted her chest instead. Her eyes bulged as she looked down. “My satchel. Where is it?”

“What?” I spun to look at her and then noticed it was missing. “Oh, my God. Is it lost?”

We all started scanning the area, but no one saw a thing.

Marge pressed her hand to the top of her head. “Well, shit. It must have ripped off in the rapids.”

“What about his bag? Anything in there?” I pointed to his dry bag.

Alice yanked it open, searched the contents, then shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Shit,” I breathed. “Why the hell doesn’t he have a phone on him?”

“Probably did on the raft,” Marge said. “There was that storage box in it I saw him putting stuff into. But the raft is gone.”

“So ... we don’t have any way to call for help?” Doris’s lip quivered. “What do we do?”

Marge dropped her head for a moment, and her shoulders heaved with a sigh. Then she lifted it, and that resolve was back on her face again. “Now we hunker down and wait for someone to notice we’re gone and send a rescue team.”

“How long is that going to take?” Alice arched an eyebrow.

“Dunno. Could be hours. Could be ... days.” She passed a serious glance between us. “To ensure our survival, we need to plan on days.”

A long gulp slid down my throat.

Days?

We were going to possibly be stuck in the jungle for days?

I looked around at the rugged world surrounding us.
That is, if we make it that long.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hup to it, soldiers! We need this fire roaring to get enough smoke to catch attention and warm up Julio here,” Marge called from the pile of wood we’d been gathering that she’d fashioned into a small firepit. Per Marge, just off the shore was the perfect place to hunker down. Surrounded by trees with large overhanging leaves for shelter, close to the river to flag down any potential passing rafters, and easy enough to access with a helicopter when they found us.

If they found us.

It had been two hours since we’d washed ashore. Marge was still in full survival mode, barking orders and helping us do what needed to be done to ensure we made it out alive. We’d pulled palm leaves and made a temporary shelter, and now we were gathering dry wood for the fire she was starting with just two sticks rubbed together.

“A spark!” she shouted, and a moment later, a tiny plume of smoke billowed up from her little tinder pile. “Quick! More dry leaves!”

Doris hurried over and handed her some more crunchy, dried-up leaves, which Marge added to the small flicker of fire. When they contacted it, they burst into flames that started crawling up the wood she had in a teepee above them.

“Oh, yeah! I’ve still got it!” Marge grinned from her prone position by the fire.

Doris clapped. “Wow! You did it, Marge! We have fire!”

Alice appeared from the trees just outside our camp. “A fire? Really? You did it? Holy shit. We may actually survive.”

“I told you ladies, if we ever got lost, I knew what I was doing. I’ve got you, girls. We’re gonna get out of this alive.”

Her knowledge and words gave me hope we’d survive this debacle, but I glanced at the still unconscious Julio and worried he wouldn’t. Guilt slithered up my spine and settled. He was in this state because of me.

“And him? Is he getting out of here alive?” I asked Marge.

She glanced over. “He’s got a nasty bump on his head but no signs of hemorrhaging or brain bleeds. I think he’s just knocked out. He’ll likely come around soon. Try not to worry about Julio. I’m taking care of him. You worry about gathering dry wood. We’ve got enough water for the night with the jug we found in Julio’s dry bag, and I’ll work on sourcing fresh water after we get the fire going. Now off you go. We need a lot of wood to toss on this fire in a hurry if we see the search helicopters. We need big smoke.”

“On it.” I snapped back into action and hurried off to help Alice find wood.

Three hours later, our fire roared high, and the four of us sat around it under the slowly setting sun.

“How’s he doing?” I asked about Julio, who had woken up for a short while and soothed my guilt just a bit.

Marge paused from sharpening a large branch into a spear using the sharp rock she’d found. “He’ll be okay. Just has a bad headache and needs rest. He’ll feel better tomorrow, I’m certain.”

“That is if we make it until tomorrow.” Alice glanced at the darkening surroundings and scooted closer to the fire.

Marge gestured to our little camp. “We’ve got shelter, water, and fire. We’ll be fine for the night.”

Doris looked over her shoulder. “And the animals? Aren’t there dangerous animals out here?”

Marge grinned, holding up her stick that resembled a spear more and more with each swipe of her rock. “You’ve got me. I’ll keep you ladies safe. Bring it on, wildlife.” She speared the air with her stick.

Alice widened her eyes and blinked quickly. “Holy hell. You’ve gone full Rambo, Marge. Do you want me to get you some mud to smear under your eyes for the full effect?”

Marge pursed her lips together, spit on her fingers, and dipped them in the dirt. Then, while staring at a horrified

Alice, she smeared the mud beneath her eyes, giving her a menacing appearance that would make Rambo run for his life.

I chuckled, and it helped slough off the tension tightening my shoulders.

Marge ignored Alice's frozen stare and went back to sharpening her spear. "I mean, you may be a cougar, but you aren't gonna hold your salt against a tiger, leopard, or jaguar. Joke now, but when it comes for you, it'll be me you're hiding behind. And speaking of leopards, do you know the difference between a leopard and a cougar?"

She waited, and finally, Doris said, "One has spots?"

Marge swirled the tip of her spear in the dirt and grinned. "A leopard can carry something twice its weight up a tree. A cougar can drag someone half her age into bed."

I burst out laughing, and after giving her a glare, Alice joined her too. Doris chuckled a bit, but then her laughter petered off.

"Are there really big cats out here? For real?" Doris wrapped her arms around her knees.

Marge shrugged. "I mean, a cougar for sure." She pointed at Alice and winked. "But there's definitely a chance of others. Who knows what's out there? Could be a thousand things lurking trying to kill us, even cannibals."

I tipped my head and scolded her with a stare. "Marge, you're scaring Doris."

"And me." Alice scooted forward toward the fire again.

"Ah, we'll be fine. Just remember to stay close to the fire, piss in pairs, and don't go near the water's edge so a croc doesn't grab you. Do that, and you'll be fine. They've got to have noticed we aren't back yet. I bet the search will start come morning."

"Do we seriously have to sleep out here?" Alice asked, concern threaded in her words.

"Doubt they'll start searching tonight." Marge shrugged, then went back to sharpening her makeshift spear. "Too dark.

They'll come in the morning. Chances are they'll ping my phone or Julio's satellite phone on the raft, then when they find it floating upriver, they'll work backward and find us."

"And Julio doesn't have any other phone?"

"From what I understood when I asked him, he only had a sat phone in the raft storage."

"But we don't have the raft." I sighed.

"Nope. We don't have the raft."

"So, we're stuck." I sighed. "Sorry, ladies. This is all my fault. I just wanted to do some fun rafting."

"Yeah." Alice narrowed her eyes but turned them to Marge instead of me. "I thought you said you picked a river that wasn't batshit crazy." She pointed toward the river gurgling beside us. "That river? *That* was batshit crazy! That was like pro-level rapids!"

Marge shrunk a little. "Well, I didn't know that. I thought it looked nice in the picture."

"And didn't you tell him we were beginners? I'm so shocked he took us on such a dangerous trip."

Marge slunk a little lower. "I think he did. And I may have misspoke when I answered since I don't actually know the word for beginner. I thought I conveyed the message, though."

"Obviously not!" Alice tossed her hands in the air. "I told you that your terrible Spanish would get us in trouble. If I even so much as hear an 'hola' out of you the rest of the trip, I'll show you how much damage a cougar can do." She flashed her pretty painted nails, then rolled them into a fist.

Marge smirked and pointed her spear at her. "Bring it on, big cat."

As their stern expressions started to soften, suddenly, Marge's face tightened, and her body froze.

"Nobody. Move," she whispered out the side of her mouth.

Our eyes all widened as we froze into place.

“What’s going on?” Doris whispered, her voice trembling.

“Marge, if this is some joke, I swear—” Alice started, but Marge shot her a look so intense it stopped her midsentence.

“I. Said. Don’t. Move.”

Marge gripped her spear, aiming it toward Alice.

Goosebumps rose along my skin, and a shiver of fear slithered down my spine while I sat immobile, completely unaware of what danger lurked nearby and hoping like hell Marge was teasing and would burst into laughter any moment ... Laughter that I would silence by tackling her to the ground and strangling her for scaring me so badly. But instead of laughter, suddenly, Marge shot forward with her spear, a primal, guttural shout ripping out of her as she jammed her spear into the ground.

Or so I thought until I jumped to my feet and saw the snake beside Alice that her spear had penetrated straight between the eyes.

“Ahhhhh!” Alice shrieked, launching up and rushing behind me.

Doris and I joined her screams, the three of us clumping together in a hug as we jumped up and down shrieking.

Marge leaned down and grabbed the large reptile who was longer than she was tall.

Doris swooned, and Alice caught her as she tumbled back.

“Is that... a... a venomous snake?” I managed out.

Marge hoisted it high with a smile and said, “That’s dinner!”

Now I was the one nearly swooning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We sat around the crackling fire, the large snake roasting on a spit Marge had constructed. My stomach grumbled. I didn't want to admit it out loud, but the smells were actually appealing, especially since we hadn't eaten all day.

"Are you really going to eat that?" Doris asked from her seat on a log beside me.

"You betcha," Marge answered. "We ate plenty of snakes in 'Nam. They're good. Kinda taste like pork."

"But you said it was venomous!" Doris kept on. "Won't you get poisoned?"

"Nah. This is a pit viper. You can tell by the head, though I'm not sure which variation lives down here in Mexico. But they're all edible once you cook 'em. It's just getting bit that you gotta worry about." She flipped the spit. "And this guy is deader than a doornail. He ain't biting nobody now."

"I still can't believe you killed a snake with a stick." Alice shook her head.

"You mean saved your life with a stick?" Marge arched an eyebrow and smirked. "That bad boy would have made a snack out of our little cougar here if you'd moved so much as an inch and startled it. Those fangs would have sunk right into your boney flesh, and then there's nothing we could have done to save you. Some of these venomous snakes make your skin slough right off."

I swallowed with a gulp. "And will there be more coming we need to worry about?"

"I'll stay up tonight while you ladies sleep. I'll make sure no one gets a prickly little visitor."

"We can't ask you to stay up while we sleep. We should work in shifts," I answered.

"If there's one thing you learn in the Army, it's how to go days without sleep and still function well. I'll be fine."

“I agree with Sylvie. I think we should do shifts. I doubt I’ll be able to sleep tonight anyway. I’m traumatized.” Alice shuddered.

“I’ve got something that will help you all sleep.” Marge grinned and reached into the dry bag, pulling out a small, brown case. “I found this when I was searching for a phone.”

She opened the case, pulled out a white joint, and grinned wide.

“What is that?” Doris asked.

“Oh, hell yeah! Way to go, Julio!” Alice nodded enthusiastically. “That’s the next best thing to the vodka no one packed. Light that baby up!”

“Oh, my God.” I chuckled, remembering my youth and sitting in clouds of smoke, hysterically laughing with my best friends. “I haven’t done that since college.”

“I haven’t done it since ‘Nam.”

“What is it?” Doris tipped her head.

“A joint. Marijuana.” Marge waved it back and forth at us.

“Oh, my!” Doris wafted her hands in front of her face. “No, thank you. I’ve never done that.”

“Oh, come on, Doris. It will be fun.” Alice snatched the joint from Marge, who grumbled her displeasure. Alice wasted no time in grabbing a flaming stick and using the tip like a lighter. She puffed it between her lips, and after a moment, she coughed out a billow of smoke.

“My turn.” Marge grabbed it back, taking her own puffs before handing it to me.

I stared at it for a moment before shrugging, “Oh, what the hell. We’re trapped in a jungle surrounded by things trying to kill us. At least this will take the edge off.”

I took a big pull, closing my mouth and widening my eyes as I fought to keep it down. Finally, I lost the battle, and I hacked and coughed until my eyes watered. “Oh, man,” I

choked out. “I haven’t done that in a while. Here, Doris. Do you want to try?”

She looked at the joint like it was the devil himself. “Oh, no. I can’t.”

“It’s just a plant, Doris.” Marge cleared her throat, coughing one last time. “A plant put here on this earth by God himself. Why would he put it here if he didn’t want you to enjoy it? It’s no different than having a glass of wine.”

She twisted her lips, then shook her head. “No. I don’t think I can.”

“No peer pressure.” I started to hand the joint back to Marge. “But let us know if you change your mind.”

Just before the joint got back into Marge’s hungry fingers, Doris squeaked out. “Okay! I want to try it!”

“You do?” we all echoed as I pulled the joint back.

“Like you said, it’s a plant. It’s natural. And I am making it a point to try new things and face my fears, so yes. I want to try it. Just a little.”

I passed her the joint, and we instructed her on what to do. She took a small puff, her blue eyes flashing wide as it hit her lungs. A moment later, she hacked and coughed, sputtering to catch her breath.

“Oh, that was terrible!”

“Yeah, it’s better in brownies,” I said, chuckling. “And you’re a hell of a baker. Maybe when you get back, we’ll have you whip us up some pot brownies.”

She giggled, and so did I. Then I realized my hit was already taking effect. “Oh my. It’s starting to kick in.” I smiled, already feeling the tension slip away.

“Yep. I’m feeling it,” Alice agreed, leaning back on her hands with a sigh. “This is what I’m talking about.”

Marge snuffed out the joint and put it back in the little brown container. “Probably stick with a hit each for now just to take the edge off and see how it goes. Don’t want anyone

getting too high and wandering off to get eaten by a jaguar. We gotta get us all back in one piece for the wedding.”

The wedding.

My wedding. It felt so far away as I sat beside the fire, lost in the jungle.

“I can’t believe I’m getting married in five days. Well, that is if we make it out of here.”

“We’re getting you out of here and to that wedding if I have to hike us out of here ourselves. You’ve waited decades to be with Tom. We’re getting you down that aisle.”

“Thanks, ladies,” I said, but the sentiment wasn’t there.

“What’s going on, Sylvie? You don’t seem as excited about your wedding as you should be.”

I let out a lengthy sigh. “I know. And it’s driving me crazy. I have waited more than half of my life to be with Tom. I knew the moment I laid eyes on him that he was it ... my other half. The only man for me. And I still feel that way now. I love him with every ounce of my being.”

“So, what’s wrong then?”

I shrugged. “I have no freaking idea. There’s just something deep in the pit of my stomach that doesn’t feel right, and I’ve tried like hell to identify it. I can’t. Everything with Tom is perfect. There’s absolutely no reason not to be panicking right now that I may miss my own wedding, but ... I’m not. If I missed it, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

Just admitting that lightened the load on my shoulders.

“Wow. I’m so sorry, Sylvie.” Marge frowned. “That’s really sad you aren’t as excited about your wedding as you should be. And you really have no idea why?”

“Nope.” I clucked my cheek. “I have been over every nook and cranny of that man, and he’s perfect. Absolutely perfect. The only thing I’ve been thinking is it’s the guilt about moving on so fast from Bruce. Like I’m punishing myself for running back to the man I coveted all those years I was with him.”

Marge blew out a puff of air in disdain. “Well, if that’s the case, then you need to just forgive yourself right now and move on. There’s no sense in denying yourself the man you truly love over some silly penance you think you owe. You don’t. You love Tom. Tom loves you. End of story.”

“If you love him, and he loves you, then it’s as simple as that.” Doris smacked her hands together, then paused to stare at them like they were some wondrous find. “Wow. Fingers. Aren’t they a little strange?”

We all glanced at our hands for a moment, marveling at the phalanges we never paid much attention to.

“Yeah. Fingers are weird.” Marge wiggled hers in front of her face.

We all did the same, then finally, I shook my head and snapped out of it. “I wish it were that simple, but there’s something holding me back. I just hope I can figure it out before the wedding.”

“We’re here to talk if you need us,” Alice said. “We want you to get your happily ever after.”

“And I want you to get yours too,” I said, turning my attention to her. “And we really thought you had found it with Alejandro. Are you ready to talk about what happened?”

Alice’s face darkened with sadness, but she didn’t answer.

“You ever going to tell us what happened, Alice? I’m worried about you.” Doris reached over and patted her leg.

“Me too,” I agreed. “Whenever you’re ready to share, we’re here for you. And if Alejandro did something to you, you know we’ll hunt him down and punish him.”

Alice let out a long sigh. “Fine. I’ll tell you. But first, I need another hit of that joint.”

Marge scrambled to get it out, handing it to her quickly. Alice lit it up again, took a big puff then passed it back around. We all took another hit, but Marge passed.

“I’m on watch tonight. Gotta keep my wits about me.”

She put the joint back in the case, then we all turned to Alice again.

“Alright. Spill,” Marge demanded. “What did he do?”

Alice closed her eyes, holding her breath for a moment before finally speaking. “He didn’t do anything. He was perfect. *Too* perfect, in fact.”

“How was he too perfect?” I scrunched my brow. “Don’t you demand perfection in everything? I would think that would make him, well, perfect for you.”

Alice stared into the flickering flames for a while, then finally spoke. “I have something to admit to you ladies that only my doctor and a few people at the DMV know.”

We all leaned forward expectantly.

With a deep sigh, she whispered. “I’m older than you all. I’m ... seventy-six.”

“You’re what?” My mouth unhinged.

Marge scratched her head. “Did you just say you’re seventy-six, or is that the pot talking? You’ve never told us your age, however I always thought you were in your early sixties but trying to pretend you were in your forties.”

Alice kept her eyes down. “You heard me right. I’m seventy-six.”

“Wow!” Doris clasped her hands on her head. “I can’t believe you’re older than me! But you look so much younger. And the way you dance! How is that possible? How can you be seventy-six and still kick your legs up that high?”

“That’s the problem.” Alice looked up. “I can’t anymore. Well, I can, but not without great pains. Everything hurts. All the time. In fact, even though I’m so grateful I was able to live out my dream as a showgirl, I don’t want to do it anymore. My body can’t handle the nightly shows.”

“Oh, Alice! I had no idea,” Marge reached over. “I see your shows all the time. Why didn’t you tell me how much pain you’re in?”

“Because I don’t want to admit what being in pain means. It means ... I’m old. Spent. Washed up. It means my best years are now behind me. It means that I’m too old to be with a young, handsome man like Alejandro. I can’t keep up the façade for more than a night. It’s one thing to catch the attention of a young, handsome man, but that’s with all the bells and whistles that take hours to put on. The truth is, in the morning light, without the makeup, fancy hair, and everything plucked and pulled, as he’ll see, and you’ll see in the morning after spending a night with me in the jungle, is that beneath it all, I’m a monster. None of this is real.” She waved a hand over her face. “And that truly sunk in when I woke up with Alejandro the other day. He went to bed with a goddess and awoke to a monster. It’s a lie. Everything about me is a lie, and there’s no way I can keep up these pretenses forever and hide the truth from Alejandro.”

“So, don’t hide from him,” I said plainly. “Let him see the real you, Alice. I know you don’t think so, but being intimate with someone and letting them behind the curtain is the real testament of a relationship. Of trust. Of love.”

She shook her head so hard I thought it might fall off. “No. Oh, no. I’m never letting Alejandro find out about what happens behind the scenes. He’d be horrified. I don’t ever want him looking at me the way I looked at Harry Hayes.”

“Harry Hayes was wearing a diaper and about a hundred and sixty years old,” I laughed.

Alice tightened her lips. “Someday, that will be me, and Alejandro, who is twenty years younger than me, would look at me the way I looked at Harry.”

“He would never look at you that way.”

“No. He won’t. Because I won’t let him.”

I was shocked to hear her certainty. “So, you just ended it with him before you even gave him a chance to make his own decision? Did you at least say goodbye, or did you just leave him?”

Alice's normally stoic face flushed pink as she dropped her gaze back down to her feet. "I just left him."

"Without a word?" My voice lifted.

Alice nodded, still fixated on the ground.

Marge scowled. "Wow. That's cold. Here we were, ready to go punch Alejandro for being an asshole to you, but it turns out you were the asshole to him."

"I had no choice!" she defended, looking up and passing a warning gaze over us all before her face softened. "I had no choice. I was too embarrassed to ever face him again. I ..."

She closed her eyes and took a breath. "I can't believe I'm admitting this. I blame the pot."

Doris tipped her head. "What happened, dear? You can tell us?"

"I ... I wet the bed." She flung her arms in the air. "There. I said it. Okay? I wet the bed. I'm a monster. I'm a monster with an overactive bladder that sometimes leaks a little urine at night, and that night, I was sleeping naked without an overnight pad, and I woke up and saw that I had wet the bed. I snuck out and never saw him again. See? Now you understand. I had to. I couldn't face him. I'm a disgusting, horrific, incontinent, decrepit old monster."

We all looked at her and then at each other.

"Alice, sweetie." Doris pursed her lips. "I have accidents all the time. Ever since I had kids, I leak anytime I laugh too hard or sneeze. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

I lifted my hand. "Same. In fact, most ladies I know our age, especially those with kids, have some leaking issues. You ladies make me laugh so hard I always have to keep spare underwear in my purse when we're together."

Marge tossed her head back in laughter. "I pee every time I dance too hard. That night we were dancing at the resort bar, I must have pissed myself half a dozen times! I was like, 'Dancing, dancing ... peed a little bit. Dancing, dancing ... peed a little more!'" she sing-songed. "Alice, almost every

woman who has had a child gets incontinence issues. It's normal!"

"Not for me, it isn't!" She scoffed, looking away. "It's different for me, okay?"

"How so, hon?" Doris asked.

Alice let out a defeated sigh. "It's different for women like me who have spent their whole lives sexualized and celebrated for their looks. Because for me, my beauty and my elegance isn't just *part* of who I am. It *is* who I am. You ladies all have these whole other wonderful parts of you that don't rely on just your looks. Me? Nothing." She tossed her arms up.

"You're selling yourself short. You have so much to offer, Alice." Doris tipped her head and frowned. "I hate that you feel that way."

"I feel that way because it's the truth. My whole life, I've never had anything else to offer other than my looks. It's all I've been valued for, and now ... it's leaving me."

"It's not leaving you. You're still beautiful, Alice. You always will be."

She shook her head. "It's leaving me. I can't keep up. Women who look like me aren't allowed to age, but we're ridiculed for fighting it. If I age gracefully, they whisper, 'Oh wow. She used to be so beautiful. She really let herself go.' And if I keep pulling and tightening everything with plastic surgery, they ridicule you for that, saying you don't look natural. And then we go too far and end up looking like that crazy cat lady with the jacked-up face. I don't want to look like an overpulled, over-injected cat lady, but I don't want to fall apart either."

"Oh, man. I've seen that cat lady," Marge said. "You better not go that far. Being a cougar is one thing. But looking like you're turning into one?" Marge shuddered. "Yeah. I'm not hanging out with you anymore if you get so much plastic surgery, you look like a crazy cat monster."

Alice tossed up her arms. "But that's the thing! When is it too much? When does the fight to maintain my beauty end up

turning me into a different kind of monster? I can't win! There's no winning! All that awaits me now is ridicule no matter which way I turn."

"No one is ridiculing you, Alice. I mean, I do all the time, but I'm just teasing," Marge said, her voice softening. "But in reality, I think you're beautiful. And I always will."

Doris and I nodded in agreement.

"I just don't want to go back to not being envied anymore. Before I grew into my lanky legs and became a beauty, I was tormented constantly. But then I blossomed, and suddenly, my beauty got me everything. I've never walked into a room where I didn't feel like I could lift my chin proudly and stand there admired as the most beautiful. Any man lucky enough to have me on his arm stood a little taller because I had chosen *him*."

She lifted her chin with the pride I was used to seeing ... the pride that had been missing since we'd stepped off that ship. "I was a trophy wife, born to decorate whatever room I walked into and relish in the looks and stares that followed me everywhere I went. But now?" Her shoulders fell along with the pride she'd tapped into for a moment. "Now, for the first time since I was that lanky-legged farm kid who smelled like cow shit and got teased on the bus, I don't feel like the most beautiful woman in the room anymore. My looks, even with all the surgery, expensive creams, celebrity hairstylists, couture wardrobes ... they are failing me. My dancer's body is failing me. And I ... I don't know who I am without them."

A shimmer of a tear started in her eyes, and my heart squeezed in my chest. She was right. Though I'd never felt unattractive, I still knew I had much more to offer the world than just my looks. I wasn't thrilled with the toll aging took on me, but it was part of life. But for Alice, it was the end of the world. It had never occurred to me how much harder the aging process was on someone who'd spent their life revered for their beauty. And all that envy seemed to have made her feel that was all she was ... a beautiful dancer and a trophy wife.

And she couldn't be more wrong.

“You are not just a trophy wife, Alice,” I stated firmly.

“No. I’m not.” She shook her head. “Not anymore. And a beautiful trophy wife is what Alejandro deserves. He deserves a Jessica Rabbit to shine on his arm. One who isn’t plucking chin hairs, limping from bunions, and leaking pee. No. I’m not a trophy wife anymore. I’m a consolation prize.”

“Hey!” Marge grunted. “That’s my friend you’re talking about. You’d better stop talking shit about her.”

“I’m just speaking the truth, Marge. It’s over. It’s over.” She let those words drift off on a sigh.

“It’s not over.” I slammed my fist into the dirt beside me and then winced from the pain. “Ow. Anyway, it’s not over. Yes, you have always found your identity in being beautiful, and you still are ridiculously stunning, but you have to know how much more you are. You’re kind and caring.”

She snorted.

“You are. Even though you don’t let the world see it often, we all see it.”

“It’s true.” Doris smiled. “You are a wonderful friend.”

“And you’re funny as hell.” Marge pointed at her. “Not many people can keep up with my wisecracks, but you can always send them sailing back at me.”

“You’re smart and driven,” I said. “You found a way to create an empire as a showgirl in *your seventies*. I mean, that’s incredible. The amount of hard work and determination it took to get you there? There are only a handful of other women on this entire planet who could have accomplished what you did.”

A slight smile tipped her lips, but she shook her head. “But even that is over now too. I didn’t want to tell you, ladies, but now that I’m stoned and apparently spilling the beans, I didn’t fall off the stage on the ship because of a wave. It was a shooting pain in my foot. The one the doctors can’t fix anymore. It’s happening more and more, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. My days of daily dancing are over. I’m going to have to retire, and no world tour for me.”

“Are you sure? There’s nothing they can do?”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing else. But if I’m being honest? I’m kinda glad. It was one thing to be a showgirl in my twenties, but it’s another thing entirely to be a showgirl in my seventies. It. Is. Exhausting. The late nights. The long hours. The constant pain from all the dancing and the uncomfortable shoes. I mean, why in the hell can’t they make comfortable dancing shoes?” She blew out a breath. “It’s just too much. I’m thrilled I did it. I’m thrilled I proved to myself and everyone else that I’m more than just a trophy wife, and I’m a woman who can shine all on her own and make her own damn money, but now that I’ve proven that to myself and everyone who ever doubted me? I just want to be done. Go back to dancing periodically for fun.”

Doris poked a stick at the fire. “Then you should do that. Quit your show, get yourself some comfortable shoes for once, and go find Alejandro because you love him.” She looked up from the fire at Alice. “You do love him. Don’t you?”

Alice sat for a long time while we waited in silence. Finally, she answered quietly. “Yes. I do love him.”

“Then it’s settled. We’re getting you the hell out of this jungle and going back to the ship to tell him!” Marge said decidedly.

“I love him, but ...” Alice went on. “I love him enough not to saddle him with my problems. He thinks I’m a healthy, much younger, sexy Vegas showgirl, and in reality, that’s not who I am at all. Not anymore. I love him enough to let him go. Saving him from having to endure a life with an old, decrepit ball and chain.”

“You’re trying to save yourself from rejection. And you know what, it’s bullshit,” I said, shocking myself with the force of my words. I pointed my finger at her, then got distracted by how it looked in the firelight and started spinning it around in circles.

Alice recoiled. “Excuse me?”

Her sharp response pulled me back from my distraction, and I pointed at her again. “I’m sorry, but I’m calling bullshit on the whole ‘I’m doing this for him.’ You’re not. You’re doing this because you’re too scared to let your guard down with someone to see this imperfect side of you. Well, let me tell you, no one is perfect. We all have flaws and things we’re self-conscious about. Everyone. But we let people in to see them anyway. That’s what love is. Trusting someone enough to love you at your worst. Even with chin hairs, and incontinence, and creaky joints, and wrinkles.”

She shook her head. “He deserves better.”

“He deserves to make his own decision. He deserves a chance to love you, warts and all.”

“I don’t have warts. Thank God.”

“I just mean, you stole his choice. You stole his input. You just up and decided for him what’s best, and you know what? That sucks, Alice. Maybe he would love you even more knowing what you’ve accomplished at seventy-six. Maybe he’ll think your chin hair is cute.”

“Hairy Potter is awesome,” Marge added with a grin. “We love Hairy Potter.”

“He won’t think it’s *cute*.”

“Maybe he will?” I shrugged. “Tom knows I have chin hair. He doesn’t care.”

“Axel and I shared a one-bedroom cabin. There are no secrets I get to keep from him,” Doris added with bulging eyes. “He knows all. And you know what? He still loves me.”

Alice twisted her lips as she thought, then shook her head. “No. He won’t. He’ll think I’m gross and leave me for one of the other million beautiful women who parade around on his cruise ships every day. And you know what? Even if he does still love me when he finds out the real me, what’s the point? I’m seventy-six. I’ve got one foot in the grave. We’ll barely have any time to enjoy each other before I turn into a decrepit old corpse.”

“Seventy-six is not that old anymore!” I said. “I mean, when we were kids, yeah ... it was old. But now? Now it’s different. With medical treatments and health care changing, people are hitting a hundred all the time. That used to be a newsworthy story when we were kids. Now it’s not even a blip to hear someone joined the century club. Hell, they’ve just readjusted the life span chart, and guess what. You’re far from being too old to find new love.”

“Well, he wouldn’t want me anyway. Not like this. He still deserves a young, beautiful woman.”

“But don’t you at least owe him the chance to weigh in? He may surprise you, Alice.”

“We still love you right now, and I don’t want to throw salt on your open wound, but let me tell you.” Marge paused and pointed a finger at her. “Right now. You’re no beauty queen. In fact, you look like dog shit.”

“What?” Alice’s hands flew to her face. “What are you talking about?”

“Um, we got dragged underwater through a rapid. Your makeup is like ninety percent off, and the other ten percent is just deposited in strange places on your face. Like you have some mascara streaked on your nose. Or maybe that’s dirt. And your hair?” Marge snorted. “I mean... you’re putting Alfalfa to shame with the way it dried, sticking up in every which direction.”

“What?” Alice covered her face and looked away. “Why didn’t you tell me? I need a mirror! Who has a mirror?”

“No one. And you haven’t looked in one all day and had no idea you are over here looking like a drowned rat. Just like the rest of us. And did we treat you any different? No. Because, unlike this notion you have in your head, everyone doesn’t just love you for your looks.”

“It’s different. You’re women. My friends.” She uncovered her face. “If Alejandro saw me like this, he wouldn’t love me anymore. I could handle being replaced as a trophy wife, upgraded for a younger model. It’s expected. But you don’t

marry for love when you're a trophy wife. You get the money and then a nice big settlement when they upgrade. That's the gig. But with Alejandro, I don't think I could bear to have him leave me for a younger woman. My heart ... it couldn't take it."

"Or maybe if he saw this real side of you, he'd love you even more," Doris said.

We all sat quietly and let those words sink into Alice. Finally, she looked up, more tears sparkling in her eyes. "And what if I do this? What if I show him the real me and he *doesn't* want to be with me? What if you're wrong?"

"Then you have us." I smiled. "And we will love you. Always."

Marge nodded along. "Chin hairs, bunions, pee pants and all. You've got us, Alice."

"Always." Doris smiled.

"Thank you, ladies." Alice pinched her lips tight as a stream of tears poured down her cheeks. "I love you all so much. And I know I chickened out with Alejandro. I did. You're right. I'm just so scared."

"That's because love *is* scary. It means you're putting your heart in the hands of another human being and asking them to take care of it. But love is so much more than sex and romance. It's intimacy. It's trust. It's letting them take care of you when you're sick and look like hell or taking care of them when they aren't at their best either. It's beautiful to be in a place so secure that you can sit in the bathroom and hold someone's hand while they are constipated and crying out."

Alice's face pulled back in a cringe. "Okay, yeah. That's *never* gonna happen for me."

Marge mimicked Alice's face. "Yeah. Me neither. There are still some lines that don't need crossing, no matter how strong the love. That is one of them."

I chuckled. "Well, I wouldn't look forward to it either, but I *would* if I had to. I just mean it's not all sparkles and glitter all the time. Give it a shot, Alice. You stole his chance to have

a say in the matter. That wasn't fair. And if you're worried you're gonna get so old you start pissing and shitting your pants, just take comfort in the fact you won't be embarrassed long. When you're that bad, you'll be senile, and you won't even remember it happened."

She tipped her head and chuckled. "Valid. But I don't care how senile I am. I don't *ever* want him wiping my butt."

"Well, the good news is you're loaded. You can pay people for that. When things go south, just hire a nurse to handle all the dirty work. Then you can keep some semblance of mystery."

Alice pressed a finger to her chin. "Hmm. You're right. I am rich. I can hire people for the gross stuff."

"Exactly!" Doris said. "So, now you see? You have to give him a chance. You owe it to him and yourself to try to trust in your love."

"But aren't I too late? I literally jumped off a cruise ship to get away from him. I don't even know where he is now. The ship is back in the States, and he has the next three months off. I didn't get his off-ship phone number, so I have no way to find him. I really messed up." Another tear started down her cheek. "I love him, and I threw it all away."

"We'll find him," Marge said decidedly. "We found Tom for Sylvie, and we'll find Alejandro for you. You have my word. I won't rest until you're back in his arms. We're gonna get the hell out of this jungle, get Sylvie to her wedding, and then we'll go find your man."

A small smile tipped her lips. "Thank you, Marge. I am so scared, and I have no idea what I will say to him when I see him, but you're all right. I have to try."

Determined to help my friend reunite with her true love like I'd reunited with mine, I started brainstorming how we could find him fast. "You said he's off for the next few months, right?"

"Right. He has a place in Florida he usually goes to or a place in Spain. I'm not sure which one he's heading to. We

were going to travel together, so he'd planned on coming back with me."

"Well, I'm sure my daughter in the police department can help us hunt him down. Don't you worry. We're gonna find him, and you're gonna hobble on those bunions straight back to his arms, show him all your flaws and see if he still loves you. And if he doesn't, I'll invite him over for lunch."

"Huh?" Alice asked. "What the hell does that mean?"

Marge grinned, opening up her fingers and slowly closing them into a fist. "I'll invite him to lunch so I can serve him a big ol' knuckle sandwich."

Alice smiled back at her, then laughed. "Thanks, Marge. I know I can count on you." She passed a look between us. "All of you."

"Anytime. We've all got your back."

"Yes, we do!" Doris jumped up but lost her balance and toppled back down. "Oh, boy. I think I am flying."

"You mean high." I laughed.

"Yes. That. I feel funny."

"But I bet you aren't scared of jaguars anymore, are you?" Marge asked.

Doris thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No. I'm not. I'm not scared of anything right now, I don't think." She started to giggle quietly, then her giggles turned to laughs, and finally, hysterics. Doris clutched her stomach laughing so hard tears poured down her face.

"What's so funny?" Alice asked.

"I don't know!" Doris spat out, her laughter deepening. "I can't stop laughing! Why can't I stop laughing?"

Her laughter started to coax out mine, and little by little, I laughed harder until I joined her on the ground, tears streaming as I laughed so hard, I could barely choke down air.

"Lightweights," I heard Alice say, her own chuckle joining ours.

Marge tapped the side of her head. “See how smart I am? The pot did its job. Everyone feels better. And now we’re gonna eat this snake, you three will get some shuteye, and soon we’ll be rescued so we can get this one to her wedding and find this one’s true love. We got a lot to do, widows, so let’s get through this night and get on with our new journey.”

“Here, here!” I shouted as I finally got my giggles under control, and the widows joined me in the sentiment.

My wedding. Now, if only I could figure out what was stopping me from feeling as excited as I knew I should.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Fan the flames! Harder! Harder!” Marge commanded as we wafted at our fire to signal the helicopter passing overhead.

She’d been right. As soon as daybreak hit, we heard helicopters circling in the distance. It had taken about an hour for them to get close enough for a chance to see our smoke signal, and now that they were hovering nearby, we waved and fanned, screaming our heads off, hoping they’d spot us.

Finally, the search helicopter flew right above, hovering long enough that we knew we’d been spotted. A man descended a rope with a first-aid kit, and when he landed, we tackled him with a giant group hug.

“Oh, thank God you found us!” I said, hugging him tightly.

“Is anyone hurt?”

We pointed to Julio, who had regained consciousness in the night and was doing well, but Marge worried he may have a broken arm.

“He could use an airlift out of here,” Marge said, then started rattling off all the medical jargon she’d used to treat him.

“Wow. Nicely done,” the man said, his English crystal clear even with his accent. “We’ll get him out of here first then. I’ll send another helicopter for you ladies. It should be here in about twenty minutes. You okay holding out that long?”

“Yeah. We’re okay,” I said.

“Just thank the Lord you found us!” Doris squeezed him again. “I was so scared!”

“I bet. Your raft was found banged up down the river. We knew you must have wrecked up somewhere along one of the worst rapid sections, so at least we knew where to start. Man, brave ladies taking on a Class Four rapid.”

“Class four? What does that mean?” I asked, tipping my head.

“You know. A Class Four rapid.” He waved a hand at the river gurgling beside us. “They are rated one through five, with five being extremely dangerous. Four is for serious experts, and one is for beginners. This is a Class Four.” He furrowed his brow. “Are you not experts?”

“No.” Doris, Alice, and I echoed, then all turned to stare at Marge. “No. We are *not* experts. We are *beginners*. And Marge was supposed to pick a nice, relaxing river.”

She sucked the air through her teeth. “I just thought I was picking the fourth river. The pretty-looking one. I didn’t know four meant *level* four. Whoops.”

The rescuer looked at her and shook his head with a smile. “Well, lesson learned. And maybe get someone who speaks Spanish next time to help you book so you don’t end up in dangerous territory.”

“Yeah, Marge. *Someone who speaks Spanish.*” Alice planted her hands on her hips. “Someone who is most definitely not *you!*”

“I really thought I had it this time.” Marge shrugged, then shrunk a little lower. “Sorry.”

“You ladies just hang tight and don’t move. Help will be here shortly.”

He used his mic to call up to his pilot, and a few moments later, a basket descended. Marge helped him hook up Julio, then he waved as he ascended with our guide. Shortly after, the thumping of the blades quieted, and I sat down with my widows awaiting our rescue. When they came, we got lifted up one by one, and then I watched out the window at the wild jungle below, shocked we’d managed to survive a night in it.

After being brought back to our resort by the rescue crew, we all went back to our rooms and collapsed. I called Tom to tell him what happened, so happy to hear his voice again before I passed out and slept for most of the day. When I awoke, I messaged the girls and then called Marge’s room

since her phone had been lost in the rapids. We all agreed to meet at the restaurant to make our plans to get home in time for my wedding.

I slid into a bar stool and flagged the bartender down, ordering an oversized margarita while I waited for the widows to arrive.

“Vodka martini. Straight up. Two olives. Extra dry,” Alice said to the bartender as she slid into a seat next to me.

“How are you feeling?”

“Happy to be back in civilization.”

“Same.” I licked the salt off the rim, then took a sip and finished with an, “Ahhhh.”

“How we doing, ladies?” Marge asked, popping onto the stool on my other side. Doris sat beside her.

“Tired but happy to be alive,” I said. “And finally ready to get home. I get married in three days. We should head out tomorrow, so I have a day to unwind before all the wedding stress starts.”

“There won’t be any stress,” Alice said. “I hired the best damn wedding planner in the state, remember? She’s handling everything. All you need to do is show up and get married.”

“That was such a thoughtful wedding gift.” I reached over and touched her hand. “Michelle is wonderful. She’s going to be a lifesaver, especially with how hot we will be coming in.”

“I’m excited to see Axel.” Doris smiled. “He’s going to fly in and meet me right at the wedding. I’m going to hug him so hard, if he wasn’t a brick of solid muscle, I’d hurt him.”

“Roxie is meeting me there too. I talked to her an hour ago. Better than me flying to Vegas than off to the wedding.”

“So, then we can all just fly home together? That will make it easy to book tickets. I’ll call my agent and have him get us on a flight in the morning.”

Alice picked up her phone, but Marge cleared her throat.

“Uh. About that,” Marge started, and the crackle in her voice made me lift an eyebrow.

“About what?”

“Uh. You know how I made us carry our passports with us everywhere so they didn’t get stolen from the hotel safe?”

“Yes.” One of Alice’s eyebrows inched up. “Because you saw that special about tourists getting robbed, so we trusted you, gave them to you, then you lost them in the river jungle, so you were calling the Embassy to get us new ones ASAP?”

Marge swiped my margarita and took a big swig.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

She slammed it back down. “So, the embassy says it can take three to five days for replacements. At least.”

“What?” We all echoed.

My heart stuttered to a stop. “What the hell do you mean three to five days? I get *married* in three days! Are you telling me I will be stuck in Mexico and miss my wedding?”

“No.” Marge lifted her hands. “I’m telling you that we can’t legally fly home for at least three to five days. But because I feel so bad that I lost all our passports, I talked to the guy at the front desk, and he has a friend who knows a friend who can get us a coyote to take us over the border.”

“Illegally?” I blinked my wide eyes at her. “Are you telling me you want us to sneak across the US/Mexico border like illegal aliens?”

“Technically, yes, *but* we aren’t illegal aliens.” Marge jutted her thumb at us. “We’re Americans. We’re just going home ... a different way.”

“What is a coyote?” Doris asked. “Like a *real* coyote? Those are scary!”

“It’s a criminal, Marge,” Alice answered, her narrowed eyes locked with Marge’s. “A coyote is someone who helps sneak people across the border illegally. And Marge wants us to trust this criminal to get us back to the US.”

“Will we get arrested if we get caught?”

Marge snorted. “What are they gonna do? Send us home? Great! Back to the USA!”

“Or into a Mexican jail!” I said, shaking my head. “No. No way. We’re waiting for our passports, and if I miss the wedding, we’ll just have to reschedule.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Alice lifted her hand. “We are *not* missing the wedding. You are getting married at the vineyard in three days. It’s got to happen.”

I furrowed my brow. “I mean, I *want* to get married in three days, but I’m not risking all of us ending up in a Mexican prison for it.”

“We’re not going to prison. Worst case scenario, they toss us back over here, and we have to wait for our passports,” Marge said. “We’re not criminals. We’re American citizens. And no one is stopping me from going home.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. Tom will understand. I’m not putting any of you in jeopardy for me. Lord knows my wish already put us in peril.”

“The wedding has to be in three days.” Alice pinched the base of her nose.

Confused by her insistence, I furrowed my brow. “Why? What’s going on, Alice?”

“It’s just ... I have a wedding surprise for you, and I don’t think I can reschedule it. It was *very* difficult to pull off.”

My eyes lit up. “A surprise? What kind of surprise?”

“The *surprise* kind of surprise. But we have to get to that vineyard and your wedding in three days.”

It wasn’t that I wasn’t excited to get home and marry Tom. I was. So very much. But that nagging little feeling in my gut that something was wrong still picked away at me. Something missing. And deep down, I almost felt grateful that we would have to postpone. It would give me more time to put my finger on what was missing ... what was holding me back from running down the aisle as fast as my feet could take me to my

happily ever after. But then I saw the look on Alice's face, and I thought about getting back into Tom's arms, and I knew we would do whatever it took to make it happen.

"Okay. Fine. As long as you're *sure* we won't go to jail if we get caught. Worst case scenario, we just end up back at the resort. Right?"

"Right." Marge nodded. "They'll just tell us to turn around and get the hell out of there. Even though they *should* let us through because we're Americans, but unless we can prove it, there's a chance we don't get across. But if we do, then we're home free. We'll get to the wedding, they'll send our passports to our mailing address, and boom. Problem solved. It's my fault we're in this situation, so I'm gonna get us out of it."

"Are we really doing this?" Doris asked, her voice lifting. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Hector at the front desk is good people," Marge said. "I've been chatting it up with him since we got here. He wouldn't send us with someone unsafe. All we're doing is jumping in a car with this guy he knows, and we're making a break for the border. But here's the deal, we gotta cross at night. So tomorrow night, we ride out."

"I can't believe we're seriously considering this." I palmed my face.

"It's either this, or we miss your wedding." Marge clucked her cheek. "I'm game for giving it a good old-fashioned college try if you ladies are."

"What the hell. I'm in," Alice said. "I don't want Sylvie to miss out on my surprise. I guess it's worth making a run for the border."

"As long as you're sure we won't go to jail. I'm not cut from the right material for jail." Doris shook her head then turned to Marge with wary eyes.

"We won't go to jail. You have my word."

They all looked at me.

Visions of kissing Tom at the altar of the vineyard flooded me with a warmth that heated me up right to the core of my soul. My love. My heart. My Tom. And soon, my husband. Though I still had some uncertainty hidden in the back of my mind, I knew deep down that he was the one for me, and whatever it was giving me pause would disappear the moment I felt his lips on mine.

“Okay. I’m in. Set it up.”

“You ladies trust me. I’ve got this.” Marge pushed up from her stool.

“Mmmhmmm,” Alice said, arching a brow. “I’ve heard that before. And I believe we ended up stranded in the jungle the last time you said those words.”

“I’m gonna fix this. My mess, my problem to solve. Ladies, get ready. We’re going home tomorrow night!”

She hurried off, leaving the three of us sitting in silence at the bar.

Finally, Alice took a long swing of her martini, set it down, and said, “We’re going to Mexican prison, aren’t we?”

“Yep. Definitely,” I answered, then downed the rest of my drink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The van hit a bump, causing me to groan when I landed on the hard floor where the widows and I were hunkered down. “How in the holy hell did we think this was a good idea?”

Marge moaned in pain and rubbed her rear end. “We’re almost there. After this, just one last jaunt across the Rio Grande, and we’re home free. You’ll be back to Tom, me to Roxie, Doris to Axel, and Alice to ...”

“A bar. A nice, clean, comfortable bar that isn’t the back of this stinking cesspool of an old van. How in the hell did I pay this guy ten thousand dollars for our passage, and he doesn’t even have a cushion on the floor for us?”

Marge stiffened up. “I’m gonna pay you back for that. This was my mess, and I’ll fix it. It may take a few years, but I’m good for the dough.”

With an eye roll, Alice scoffed. “I don’t care about the money, Marge. It’s nothing to me. I *care* about getting home. Just promise to get me home, no matter how much damn money it costs me.”

Marge dropped her head in a sharp nod. “I promise. I’m getting you home. I’m getting us all home.”

We hit another bump, all of us catching air and coming back down on the floor with groans.

“What in the hell is going on up there?” Alice complained. “Is he driving us over every pothole in Mexico?”

“Well, we’re not exactly on a road,” Marge said. “These vans cut across the desert to the secret coyote crossing spots on the river.”

“And we’re not in any danger, right?” Doris asked.

“They do this for a living. We’ll be home free soon.”

“I sure hope so. I’m scared, and it smells like urine back here.” Doris scrunched her nose.

I swallowed down a gag. “Please don’t remind me of what we’re likely sitting in.”

The van slid to a stop, and a few moments later, the back door swung open. Javier, our coyote, waved for us to get out.

“This way,” he whispered in English, and we were grateful he spoke it since we had needed to communicate a lot with him all day while he shuttled us around.

“Oh, thank God. Let me out of here.” Alice leaped up and hopped out.

The rest of us followed, all inhaling a deep breath of air that didn’t wreek of the remnants of the bodily fluids we’d likely been sitting in.

“This way, this way,” he whispered, waving at us to follow him.

He crouched down, and we did the same, following him toward the tall bushes ahead.

“Oh, man. Crouching is not easy at my age.” Marge pressed her hands against her lower back as she tried to squat lower.

“After that van ride, I’m gonna be completely crippled for my wedding. I can already feel my back going out. You’re gonna need to carry me down the aisle while I convulse with back spasms.”

“You know, it’s funny. I haven’t danced in a week, and it’s the first time in a year my entire body isn’t aching. If that isn’t a sign I should retire from showbiz, I don’t know what is.”

Marge chuckled. “Yeah. If your job hurts you worse than riding in that van, it’s time to say buh-bye.”

“Shhhhh!” Javier waved at us to keep it down, so we shut our mouths and crept along behind him.

Finally, we arrived at the bushes, and he waved for us to come inside.

One by one, we knelt beside him, staying low and peering out over the moonlit river separating us from our homeland.

Separating me from Tom.

“Now we wait,” Javier whispered.

“What are we waiting for?” Marge whispered back.

He pointed across the river to the west, and I saw the flickering of flashlights skimming across the water.

“We wait until patrol moves past. Then we go in raft and cross quickly.”

“A raft. Again?” Doris asked, concerned. “Is it going to be like last time?”

“Great.” Alice groaned. “Haven’t we done enough rafting on this trip?”

“No rapids here.” I chuckled. “The water looks very safe. Just a quick trip across. Easy peasy.”

Alice looked at me, eyebrows lifting. “Easy peasy? With our luck? They’ll be some rogue tsunami that sweeps us away, and we’ll all drown.”

I muffled my laugh with my hand. “That would be our luck.”

“They coming. Quiet now,” Javier said, scootching lower into the bushes. We all flattened down with him, going completely silent while we watched the flashlights grow closer. Soon they were just across from us, and I peered out from the cracks in the bushes, watching Border Patrol scanning for illegal crossings as they strolled by.

Illegal crossings like we were about to do.

It took almost ten minutes of lying there in those bushes with every joint and muscle in my body screaming that I wasn’t twenty-one anymore before they moved far enough down the river that Javier gave us a nod. We were ready.

We limped out of the bushes silently. Javier grabbed a small rubber raft from behind a bush just down the way and quietly pushed it into the water. A quick wave of his hand gestured for us to get in, so we tip-toed along the water’s edge and then climbed in, each moving slowly and silently. My

heart raced when he pushed us into the water. Inch by inch, we slid across the calm ripples, closing in on our freedom just on the other side.

I'm coming, Tom.

Just as we started to skid onto shore, a blinding light flooded the darkness. I lifted my hand to shield my eyes, blinking fast against the ocular assault.

“Freeze!” A deep voice boomed.

A splash of water sprayed behind us, and I looked to find Javier gone.

“Shit! We're busted! Paddle! Paddle!” Marge called out, but the distinctive click of a gun caused her to stop moving and lift her hands above her head. “First Lieutenant Margarita Moretti of the United States Army! Don't shoot!”

“We're Americans! We're Americans! Don't shoot!” Doris screeched.

My heart threatened to explode out of my chest as I sat with my hands in the air, squinting against the light. The dark silhouette of a man crossed in front of the light, and soon he appeared beside our boat.

“Out of the boat. Now!” he commanded.

The girls and I scrambled to the sides and climbed out, lifting our hands again.

“We're American citizens.” Marge pushed to the front of us to speak to the tall, young officer. “And we demand you let us return to our homes.”

“Is that so?” He smirked. “Like I've never heard that before.”

“It's true!” Doris cried. “We *are* American citizens. Please, sir. We're just trying to get home.”

“Then why didn't you cross at the border like every other legal American?” He arched an eyebrow.

“Because we lost our passports,” I said. “There was a rafting accident, and they got washed away.”

“Then you get new ones from the Embassy.”

“We tried. But it will take a week, and we *have* to get back. She’s getting married in two days!” Marge pointed at me. “So, you see, sir, we need you to let us go so we can get her to her wedding.”

“Sorry, ladies. I have no proof that any of this is true.”

“Listen to my voice. This is an American accent,” Marge said slowly, enunciating each word.

“Lots of people who aren’t from the United States have a perfect accent. I’ve been working border patrol for five years. This isn’t my first rodeo, ladies.”

Marge furrowed her brow. “I’m an American Army soldier. I bled for this country, and I demand you let me back in!”

“Sorry. I can’t just take your word for it. Once you can prove who you are, then we’ll let you in. Until then, you’re gonna need to come with me to the detention camp while we sort this out.”

“Detention camp?” Doris swallowed. “Is that like prison?”

“I knew it. I fucking knew it. We’re going to Mexican jail.” Alice sighed.

He slid his gun back into the holster. “You’re not going to jail, but yes, you will be detained.”

“For how long?” Doris whimpered.

“For however long it takes to sort this out. Now, follow me.” He turned and started walking.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” I sighed as I started moving behind him. “We never should have tried this.”

“Officer?” Alice asked, her voice lifting into the sultry tones we knew so well. “Isn’t there ... *something* we could do to work this out?”

“You’ll work it out through the system.”

“Perhaps, a little extra spending money? Say ... a thousand dollars?”

He stopped and turned, leveling her with a stern stare.

“Five? Five thousand dollars?”

“Are you trying to bribe a government agent, mam?”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “Me? No. No. Of course not. I just thought that perhaps you’d like a little walkaround money ... and then the four of us just, you know ... walk away.”

“That’s a bribe, ma’am.”

“Is it?” She batted her lashes. “Or is it just a ... a mutually beneficial little gift?”

His jaw ticked and tightened. “Keep moving.”

“Damn it,” she whispered under her breath.

Marge slid up beside me and talked through the side of her mouth, “You’re gonna need to run for it.”

“What?” I whispered back. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just run for it. You’ve got to get to your wedding. I’ll sacrifice myself and slow him down. I can handle prison time. Just head into the darkness and hide. Once they stop searching for you, call Tom, and he’ll get you home safe. He’s a military man. Special forces. He’ll know the best way to extract you.”

Closing my eyes for a beat while I tried to process her nonsensical suggestion, I finally answered, “Marge, we’re busted. It’s over. I’m gonna miss my wedding. It’s fine. We’ll reschedule. I’m not going to run.”

“I made you a promise I was getting you to your wedding on time. I never break my promises. You’re getting out of here. You got your cell phone on you?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. You’re gonna run, soldier. That’s an order.”

“Marge, I’m not—”

“When I say run, just start running.”

Suddenly Marge shot forward and jumped on the back of the officer.

“Hey!” he shouted, spinning around to grab her, but she just swung with him, clinging to him like the monkey had clung to Doris’s head.

“Run, Sylvie! Run!” she screamed.

I froze in place, looking between Marge riding around on the swearing, shouting officer and the freedom of darkness just the other way ... the freedom of darkness that held God knows what and went God knows where. Then I looked back to my widows, staring at me wide-eyed and shocked.

No. I couldn’t leave them. I wouldn’t leave them.

“Run, Sylvie!” Marge screamed again.

But instead of running, I just lifted my hands up. “I’m not running. Stop fighting, Marge. It’s okay.”

“Get off me!” the officer shouted, giving one good shoulder twist that finally dislodged her. Marge hit the ground with a grunt.

“You blew it!” Marge kicked the dirt. “I had him! You could have made it!”

With a soft shake of my head, I responded with the truth, as hard as it was to say. “Marge. It’s over. We’re busted. I’m missing my wedding. It’s time we just accept it.”

The officer pointed his gun at Marge, and finally, she lifted her hands and rose. “I could have held him.”

He glared at her, leveling his gun to her head. “And now I’m holding you. Put your hands behind your back.”

Marge didn’t fight this time and instead turned her back toward him and crossed her wrists.

He slipped his gun back in the holster and then slapped the cuffs on her. “Anyone else gonna give me trouble?” His angry gaze passed over the rest of us standing defeated.

“No, officer,” we echoed in defeat.

“Good. Now, I *was* planning on taking you to the station to try to work this out without having to detain you, but now, thanks to the assault from your little friend here, you’re heading straight to the detainment facility.”

“And now we’re *really* going to prison. Nice work, Marge.” Alice sighed.

“You can’t hold us long. We’re Americans! We’ve got rights!” Marge grunted as he pushed her up the embankment.

“Yeah, yeah. If you were Americans, then you wouldn’t have run. They’ll figure out what to do with you.”

The last of the fight drifted out of me as I marched behind Marge, glancing back to see Alice and Doris filing along after me. Even though I could have made it to freedom, I would never leave them behind. No matter what lay in front of us, at least we would face it together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“USA! USA! USA!” Marge chanted from behind the bars as the guards patrolled our detention block. “I’m an American citizen! You can’t keep me out of my country! A country I was fighting for in ‘Nam before you were even a little spermy swimming for an egg. That’s right. I put in my time. I fought the war. And now you’re gonna stop me from going home? Hell no! I *bleed* red, white, and blue! USA! USA! USA!”

“Marge. Stop.” I rolled my eyes, putting my arm around Doris as she sobbed beside me on the rickety cot in the concrete cell we’d been in for almost a full twenty-four hours.

“We’re gonna die in here,” Doris wailed.

“We’re not gonna die in here.” I rubbed her shoulder. “They are just sorting out we are who we say we are.”

When we’d been separated and interviewed, I found out that because we’d gotten off the cruise ship and had no official entrance into Mexico, it only made us look even more suspect of being illegals trying to smuggle ourselves into America. My interviewee had asked me to walk her through everywhere I’d been and stayed in Mexico so they could trace our steps and try to prove our identity. She’d stared at me like I had three heads when I’d told her our saga. About the Cougar Cruise, Alice’s panic attack that pushed us off the ship and into Mexico. The shark diving. The zip lining. The rafting trip gone array where we’d lost our passports. Then our attempt to break for the border so I could get to my wedding.

When I’d finished our story, she’d just shaken her head and said, “Either that’s the most detailed and greatest lie ever told, or you ladies are crazy.”

“We’re crazy,” I’d stated with certainty. “We are definitely crazy.”

As I sat in the cell listening to Marge go into her third rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner, butchering every note like an ax-wielding serial killer, I dropped my head into my hands. “How did we end up here?”

“Marge. Marge is how we ended up here,” Alice said from the white bucket she had flipped upside down and used as a chair.

Alice had tried bribing every officer with money and sexual favors, only to be dismissed as quickly as they’d dismissed Marge’s attempts to show them she was the most American American who’d ever lived.

“By the dawn’s early light!” Marge kept on singing.

“Oh, can it, Marge!” Alice covered her ears. “I’m going to lose my mind!”

Marge quit singing, then squared off with the guard across the way. “Did you hear that? Tell me that wasn’t an American singing. That’s right, you can’t. Because it was, in fact, an American singing a love song for her country.” When he didn’t respond and just stared straight ahead, she pushed on the bars once, then let out a sigh. “Well, it’s not working anyway. They don’t believe that I’m the,” she paused and raised her voice shouting, “best damn American in the history of all of America!”

“Just sit down.” I patted the cot.

“I gotta piss first. Alice, I need the bucket.”

“No. No, no, no.” Alice shook her head, grabbing the bottom of the bucket and holding it tight beneath her. “No one is pissing in the room with me.”

“That is literally supposed to be the toilet.” Marge pointed at the bucket. “That’s its purpose. Not to be flipped upside and used like a chair. Now move. My bladder is bursting.”

“They have to let us out to the bathroom soon.” She crossed her legs, refusing to budge. “My bladder feels like it’s going to burst too, but I’m *not* pissing in this thing, nor will I be present in this cell while any of you piss in it. No one is pissing in a bucket. We hold it. Like ladies.”

It had been several hours since we’d last been let out for bathroom breaks, and we’d been told there were so many detainees sharing the modest facilities at the moment that it could be many hours more until we’d get another chance.

They'd given us the bucket to use between breaks, but Alice had guarded it like a pit bull frothing over a juicy steak.

"I'm gonna piss myself." Marge crossed her legs. "Move, Alice!"

"No!" Alice gripped the bottom of the bucket tighter. "You need to hold it!"

"Alright. That's it. Move!" Marge marched over, grabbed Alice by the shoulders, and hoisted her up.

"No! No!" Alice tried to hold onto the bucket, but as she lifted it with her, it slipped and bounced along the concrete floor.

"Hah!" Marge released her grip and grabbed the bucket, hurrying off into the corner like a squirrel with an acorn.

"How is this my life right now? How? How!?" Alice pressed her hands into her disheveled hair and marched over to the cot, plopping down beside me.

Marge unzipped her pants, sat on the bucket, and let out a long "ahhhh" as she started to urinate.

"Oh, God." Alice closed her eyes and covered her ears. "This isn't happening. Marge is not pissing in a bucket ten feet away from me."

The sound of the urine stream made my own bladder clench, and the urge to go began to overwhelm me. "Shit. Now I don't think I can hold it. Oh, man. That's worse than a faucet running."

Alice crossed her legs, and I knew she felt the same pressure as me.

I grimaced. "I'm sorry, Alice. I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm gonna have to piss in the bucket too. I can't hold it anymore."

While biting her lip, her leg shook as she bounced on the cot beside me. "Sir! Excuse me, sir!" She jumped up and ran to the bars.

He didn't respond.

She tried to act sultry, but after a full day bouncing through the desert in the back of a van and a full night in the detention cells, Alice's alluring looks had melted with her makeup. Her mascara streaked down her face. Her foundation had wiped off in places, leaving her looking like a mime instead of a dancing star. And her hair, always smooth and polished, was snarled into a rat's nest with pieces of foliage from the bushes we'd used for cover. There was nothing sexy or sultry about the woman batting her clumped eyelashes at him.

"Sir!" she demanded.

He looked at her. "What?"

"I *have* to go to the bathroom. It's an emergency."

He pointed to the bucket Marge just vacated. "There's your bathroom."

"I'm *not* going in a bucket!"

"There are about a hundred people in line in front of you waiting to use the real bathroom. Sorry. That's just how it is. You either hold it until it's your turn, or you piss in the bucket."

"I'm a millionaire! A *multi*-millionaire! The *star* of my own show!" She stomped her foot. "I'm a *lady*, dammit! Ladies don't piss in buckets!"

"You do now." He lifted his chin, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"Ahhhh!" Alice screamed, grabbing her hair and spinning around to face us. When she let it go, it stuck up in all directions, making her look even more crazed. "I'm going to kill you, Marge! 'Worst case scenario, we go back to our resort.' That's what you said. *This* is not our resort! And now? Now I have to piss myself or piss in a bucket. I'm going to strangle you!"

She started toward Marge, eyes wild and wide. I jumped up and stepped between them. "Okay, okay. No one is strangling anyone. I'll tell you what. We have that tinfoil blanket. How about I hold it up for you and give you some privacy on the bucket, and then you hold it up for me and give

me some privacy on the bucket. That way we're not just peeing out in the open."

She twisted her lips.

I grabbed her hand. "I've got to go. Badly. What do you say?"

She let out a sigh. "Fine. But after today, we *never* speak of this again. Understood?"

"Absolutely," I agreed.

Marge and Doris nodded as well.

With a sigh, she pressed her fingers to her forehead. "Oh, my God. Fine. Get the tinfoil."

"Good. Okay. I'll get the blanket." I hurried over to the cot and got the thin, foil blanket we'd been given. I marched over to the bucket, held up the blanket like a curtain, and gestured for Alice to go. She grumbled the whole time, but finally, I heard her steady stream and a lengthy relieved sigh. After she finished, it was my turn, and I was so ready to go I didn't even know if I could get my pants off in time. But I made it, and as horrified as I was to pee in a bucket, it was the best damn pee I'd ever had in my life.

After pulling up my pants and stepping out, we did the same for Doris, who sobbed the whole time. When she finished, we all slumped together into a pile of defeated ladies sitting on the cot.

"There. We've all gotten the worst over with. Any minute now, we're gonna get told we're free to go." I stroked Doris's back. "They interviewed us all. They are checking with the DMVs and the resorts to prove we were where we said we were and stayed under the names we said we did. The ones that will match our faces and IDs when they pull them up on the computers. It can't be much longer."

"They said it could take days," Doris said, lip trembling. "The person who interviewed me said they are so backed up it could be *days* in here!"

“We each got a phone call. I called Tom. Marge called her daughter. Tom said he would pull every favor he had in the military to get us released quickly. Marge’s daughter is a well-respected cop with the LAPD, and she’s doing the same. We have to trust that they are out there doing everything they can to get us home.”

Doris sniffled. “I sure hope so. I miss Axel. He wasn’t home when I called, so I just left a message. He must be worried sick.”

“We’ll get you to him soon.” I slung an arm around her and squeezed. “I promise.”

The sound of high heels clicking on concrete pulled our attention, and when they stopped, we spun to see a beautiful woman in a nice pantsuit standing in front of our cell with her arms crossed tight.

“Hi, Mom,” she said with a smile. “How’s it going?”

“Martha!” Marge shouted and raced to the bars. “I can’t believe you came!”

She chuckled, shaking her head as she took Marge’s hands in hers through the bars. “And miss seeing you locked up in a US Customs and Border Patrol detainment center? Not on your life.”

Marge started to laugh, and though Martha looking nothing like her and was far more refined looking than you’d ever expect of a daughter of Marge, when she started laughing with her mother, it sounded like surround sound.

“I cannot wait to hear this story,” Martha said as her laughter petered off.

“And I can’t wait to tell you everything. But first. Get us the hell out of here! Can we go?”

Martha nodded. “Yeah. Sylvie’s fiancé, Tom, called in a bunch of favors to expedite the process, and they agreed to sign you all over to my custody. I hopped on a redeye last night, flew to El Paso, and here I am to bust you out.”

Alice and Doris whooped with excitement, folding together into a tight hug. Doris's happy sobs echoed through the cell.

"That's my girl." Marge grinned proudly. "I knew you'd fix this."

"You know I'll always have your back, Mom."

Marge's smile brightened.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I said, rushing to the bars to hug her. When I couldn't reach, I just hugged the air. "It's so nice to meet you, and I wish it were under better circumstances."

"You must be Sylvie?"

I nodded.

"Your fiancé loves you very much. He was ready to tear this place down to get you out."

My heart warmed knowing that Tom would have done anything to bring me home. It only reaffirmed how much I *did* want to marry him, and to hell with whatever it was that had been keeping me from racing down that aisle to the happily ever after awaiting me in his arms.

"And now I'm told we have a wedding to get to?" Martha looked at me.

"Can we still make it?" My heart rattled against my ribcage. "Is there time?"

"We have twelve hours to get you to the vineyard. Tom booked the flights, I'll get you to the airport, and as long as there are no delays, you should be there with an hour or two to spare."

"Oh, my Lord!" Doris made the sign of the cross. "Thank you, Lord! We're going home, and we're gonna make it to the wedding!"

"Don't jinx us," Alice said "We still have to fly. With our luck, we'll get shot out of the sky, crash in the ocean and end up marooned on a desert island for eternity."

“Nah.” Martha smiled. “We’d find you.”

Marge reached out and squeezed her hand. “I know you would, sweetheart.”

They shared a moment, then Martha blew out a breath and took a big step back, pulling out her phone. “Now, before we go, I promised Tom I’d send him a picture, so get together and smile for the cameras, ladies!”

I started to laugh, then slung my arm around Doris, who chuckled and tossed her arm around Marge.

Alice shook her disheveled head wildly. “No. Hell no. I’m not getting my picture taken in here looking like God knows what. I haven’t seen a mirror in forty-eight hours.”

“No picture, no release.” Martha smiled.

Alice narrowed her eyes. “You are your mother’s daughter, aren’t you?”

A smile that looked as sinister as Marge’s often did split her face. “Hell yeah, I am. Now say cheese, ladies!”

We all smiled while Alice frowned, and Martha laughed after she took the shot. “Okay, guard. You can let them out now.”

When the lock clicked and the door swung open, we all took turns giving her a hug. Marge held her the longest, then let her go and said, “Okay. No time for sappy shit right now. We’ve got a wedding to get to!”

A wedding. *My* wedding. And it was happening in less than twelve hours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Quick, quick! Zip up her dress!” Alice barked to Michelle, the wedding planner I’d just met in person for the first time an hour ago when we came screaming into the vineyard where my wedding would take place ... in thirty minutes. After we’d rushed to our rooms and taken quick showers to wash off the horrors of our detainment center stay, we had next to no time to get ready for the biggest day of my life.

The small red-headed woman jumped at the order and hurried behind me, carefully zipping up my simple cream and ivory wedding dress.

“Everything is all set,” she said as she finished. “All you have to do now is walk down the aisle to a man who loves you very, very much.”

I smiled at the thought of seeing Tom at the end of the aisle ... the man I’d wished it’d been the first time I’d gotten married.

“You look beautiful, Mom,” Rachel said, covering her mouth as I spun to face her.

“Thank you, sweetheart. You look beautiful too.”

We shared a hug, and when I let her go, I gazed into eyes that looked so much like Tom’s. I was shocked Bruce had never noticed her eyes belonged to neither of us.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this? I know it’s been so confusing finding out Tom’s your real father and having us get married so soon after Bruce’s death. If this is too much, I won’t go through with it. I’ll give you all the time you need to process it.”

“Mom.” She took my hands. “When you told me that Bruce wasn’t my real father, I’ll admit, I was furious. My whole life, I lived a lie. But then you told me the why. How scared you were. How trapped you felt. And that you’d given up the love of a man you *still* love all these years later just to stay married to the man you thought could give me a good life.

You've sacrificed *so* much for me already. Now it's your turn to be the priority. I'm fine, Mom. I'm all grown up, and I love Tom. In fact, from the moment I met him, I felt a connection to him I never felt with Bruce. He's my father. You're my mother. I love you both, and I can't wait to walk you down the aisle."

Tears brimmed my eyes as I pulled her in for another hug. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mom."

"Awww," Doris said from her perch on the bed behind me. "Isn't family just the most important thing in the world?"

"It is." I let go of Rachel and turned to my widows, who all waited to stand up in my wedding. "And you ladies are family too."

"You know it," Marge said. "We're family for life now. Wilder Widows forever."

"Wilder Widows forever," I said back, then swished the skirt of my dress. "But this widow is going to be a wife soon."

"In twenty-two minutes," Alice said as she stepped into the group. "So, no sappy talking right now because we aren't going to smear that makeup. We don't have time to fix it."

"Yes, ma'am." I put a hand to my head and saluted her with a smile.

Alice chuckled. "Sorry. You waited so long to be with him. I just want to make sure your day is perfect. We all do."

"You're all here. It's already perfect." I smiled.

My phone rang. "Oh, that may be the caterer. They had a question about the desserts. Can you grab it?"

"Hello?" Rachel said, and a moment later, she stuck out my phone. "It's the realtor, Mom."

My eyes flashed wide. "The realtor? Now? Uh, take a message."

"She said it's important." Rachel held the phone out closer to me.

I hadn't even officially listed my house yet, so I wasn't sure what could be so pressing, but I took the phone and said, "Hello."

"Sylvie? Hi. It's Stacie. I know we talked about selling, and we were planning on listing soon, but someone stopped by and was looking for *exactly* what you have. I told him a little about it, showed him some of the photos, and ... he's put in an offer. A big one. He doesn't even need to go in it. Pending inspection, which it should pass with no problems, he wants it."

"Already?" I choked out the word. "What? But it's not even for sale yet."

"He wants it. Badly. If you're willing to sell, he's ready to buy. I know it's fast, but he'd like a sixty-day closing."

Sixty days.

If I said yes, in sixty days, my home on Wilder Lane would no longer be mine. I'd officially be saying goodbye to the part of my life with Bruce there ... to the part of my life where I'd met my most cherished friends.

I looked up at them, each watching me with concern.

"What's going on?" Marge asked.

"Stacie, I'm going to have to call you back. I'm just about to walk down the aisle."

"Oh! I'm so sorry! By all means. Just let me know by tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah. I will. Thanks," I said, then ended the call.

"What is it, Mom?" Rachel saw the shock on my face and came up to my side. "Is everything okay?"

"The house. Someone wants to buy it."

Her eyes went big. "Wow. That was fast."

"Yeah. It was. Too fast."

"You're really selling?" Doris asked, her sad eyes meeting mine.

“I ... I don't know. I thought I was. But now ...” A feeling of deep dread and sadness pierced my gut when I thought about walking out of the house for the last time. “I don't know.”

I looked at my widows, thinking about all our memories in that house and on that street and realizing that when I sold the house, even though we would always be forever friends, I'd be shutting the door on that chapter of my life. Shutting the door on the option of going home to live by them, seeing them every day like we used to.

Suddenly, like a wrecking ball to the gut, I identified that missing piece that had been holding me back from the joy I should be feeling about my wedding.

By choosing Tom, I lost them.

I'd move into his house, sell mine, and close the door on having my cherished friends just down the street forever. Sure, we'd get together a few times a year for our wishes and visits, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't ... enough.

I wanted both.

My widows *and* Tom.

I wanted it all.

Like a little lightbulb went off above my head and illuminated my entire world, I lifted my finger. “Oh, my God. I know what's wrong. I finally figured out why I'm struggling with getting married.” I lowered my phone and set it on the table.

“Wait. You're thinking of calling off the wedding?” Rachel's voice shot up an octave. “What?”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, of course not. I love your father, and I've been waiting most of my life to be his wife. But our whole trip, there's been a slight sadness when I think of the wedding instead of the pure joy I should feel over getting to marry Tom. He's my true love. My soulmate. I should be elated. But every time I thought about marrying him, a little sadness crept in. I couldn't put my finger on what was wrong until now. Hearing my house sold and knowing

that means officially ending my option of going back to Wilder Lane with the widows really brought it into perspective.”

I hurried over to the bed and sat down between Marge and Doris. I gestured for Alice to come over, and she sat beside us.

“What are you saying, Sylvie?” she asked.

“I’m saying.” I closed my eyes and took a breath before I said the words my heart wanted to scream. “I’m saying I want to move back. I want all of us to move back. I hate living so far away from you girls, and I felt like marrying Tom meant an end to us. I don’t want that. I want all of you all the time. I know we’ve all moved on with our lives and gone to new places, but I miss it. I miss us. And I’m wondering what you ladies think? Would any of you be interested in moving home?”

“Yes,” Marge said quickly. “Hell, yes. I hate Las Vegas. I truly hate it. I want to move home so badly it hurts. I miss everything about our life on Wilder Lane. But especially, I miss all of you. I’m not sure how Roxie will feel about this, but I don’t think I can hide it from her anymore.”

“Well, as you know, I’m done with Vegas,” Alice said. “My dancing days are over, and honestly, I’m over that town. It’s full of girls with high, tight asses and firm skin that doesn’t even need wrinkle cream. I’m sick of being surrounded by them. They are only making me feel older. I miss my home on Wilder Lane. I had an amazing run in Vegas this last year. I accomplished my dream and proved to everyone I could make it on my own. But I’m done now, and I want to go back.”

My heart lifted hearing their words. We all turned to Doris.

Big tears welled in her eyes. “I miss it too. So much. I love life on the ranch in the summer, but in the winter, it wasn’t so great. And I miss you girls so much it hurts. I feel like I’m either missing you when I’m with Axel or missing him when I’m with you. I just hate it.”

We all fell into a group hug, holding each other so tight it hurt.

“I need to talk to Tom,” I said as I broke my embrace. “I need to tell him before he marries me that if he does, we have to move to my house. Back to Wilder Lane. If he’s marrying me, he’s marrying all of you.”

Marge nodded in agreement. “Yeah. It’s time for me to tell Roxie how I really feel about Las Vegas. I’m terrified she will choose it over me, but I can’t live there anymore. I love her. So much, but it’s killing me a little every day. I guess you ladies are right. I need to trust in our love more and trust that maybe she’ll pick me, and we can move back to Wilder Lane. Together.” Her eyes lit up in a way I’d never seen them sparkle. “Wouldn’t that be something? Me and Roxie living on Wilder Lane? Man. I can barely process how incredible that would be.”

Doris frowned. “I have no idea what to say to Axel. The ranch is his life. I don’t think he’d ever leave it, and he’s my husband, so if he says we stay on the ranch, then we stay on the ranch. But I’ll be so sad knowing all you girls are home, and I’m not.” Her lip pushed out into a big pout.

“All you can do is talk to him,” Marge said. “If he says no, we’ll figure out how to get you visiting all the time. But we all need to talk to our partners and tell them how we feel. Then we just hope like hell they agree to try life on Wilder Lane.”

“It’s a great street.” I smiled. “The best neighbors around.”

They all smiled back at me.

“Ten-minute warning,” Michelle called from the door when she popped her head back in.

“Could you do me a favor?” I asked her.

“Of course. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Go get Tom. He can’t see me, so have him wait on the other side of the door. I need to talk to him.”

“Right now?” Her blue eyes bulged. “But the wedding is about to happen. Can it wait?”

I shook my head. “No. It can’t. I need to tell him something before the wedding.”

“O ... Okay,” she said, then stood in the doorway.

“Now means now!” Alice snapped. “This is important business she needs to discuss! Hurry to it, Michelle!”

She jumped in place, then spun and slammed the door behind her.

Marge pressed her hands to her thighs and stood. “I’m going next door to talk to Roxie. She’s waiting for me to go down. Now that I’ve decided to do this, I need to know if she’s with me or not. It’ll kill me waiting any longer. I’ll meet you girls in the lobby before the wedding. I promise.” Marge gave us a quick wave goodbye, then hurried to the door to head back to her room.

“I should talk to Axel too. It will be a lot for him to process, so I’ll tell him now, so he has time to think about it. I’ll meet you downstairs as well. I really do miss you girls all the time. I hope I can come home.”

“Good luck, Doris.” I kissed her cheek then she hurried off.

Alice rose and cocked a hip. “I’m a proud, single woman. I don’t need anyone’s permission to move home. I just asked myself, and I’m happy to say I’m thrilled with the idea. Me, myself, and I will be down at the bar celebrating my impending move home to give you and Tom some privacy. I’ll see you in the lobby.”

I laughed and kissed her cheek, then she walked out, leaving Rachel and me alone.

Rachel looked at me and blew out a sigh. “Well, you always taught me to go after what I wanted with no holds barred. I’m proud of you for doing just that. You want him, and you want them. And you can’t get what you don’t ask for.”

“I did always say that, didn’t I?” I smiled.

“Yes. You did. And you spent so much of your life giving things up for me. I want you to have it all. You deserve it. Now, I’ll go entertain the guests while you talk to Dad. I’ll see you down there.” She gave me a kiss and headed out the door.

My heart swelled, knowing I'd made the right choice in raising her the way I had. She'd turned out just perfect.

As I paced back and forth in the room waiting for Tom, I jumped when three raps on the door broke the silence.

"Sylvie?" his deep voice echoed through the door. "Are you in there?"

"Yes." I hurried over, pressing my hands to the door, feeling so desperate to touch him after a month apart that I almost broke it down. "I'm here."

"Thank God you made it back safe. They told me you were here, but I don't think I'll believe it until I've got you safely in my arms again."

"Soon," I said to him, leaning against the door, closing my eyes, and pretending it was him, I pressed again. "I'll be back in them soon. And I can't wait."

"Good, because I'm a little worried you've got me here to talk to you about something before the wedding. You're not running out on me again, are you?"

"No!" I answered quickly. "Never. I love you, Tom. Always have, and always will."

"Good, because I don't want to have to kidnap you and hold you hostage to keep you in my life. But dammit, woman. I will. I let you go once, and to hell, if I'm doing it again."

I sighed and pressed my cheek to the cool wood. "I'm yours now and always, Tom."

His voice softened. "And I'm yours."

I inhaled a happy breath, then remembered why I'd called him here. "I do need to tell you something before the wedding because I want to make sure you're marrying me with all the facts."

"You'd better not be pregnant with someone else's baby," he joked, making me laugh.

"Shut up, Tom." I chuckled.

I heard his laugh then he cleared his throat. “What is it, baby?”

“You know how I moved in with you after we reconnected, and I was putting my house up for sale?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t sell it. And I don’t want to live with you in Valley Hills. I want us to move back to Wilder Lane so I can live by my widows again. They all want to move home too. We miss each other too much. When I’m with you, I miss them. And when I’m with them, I miss you. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a constant state of missing someone. I want you all. And the only way to do that is to move back to Wilder Lane. With you.”

“Is that it?” he asked, and I furrowed my brow.

“What do you mean ‘Is that it?’”

“Moving to your house on Wilder Lane is the big ask of me?”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t know how you’d feel about leaving your home, and I don’t want to marry you and *then* drop that bomb on you.”

His voice softened. “Baby, I’ll follow you anywhere. *You’re* my home now. Not the house I live in.”

My heart lifted so high I felt it leave my body. “You’d move to Wilder Lane with me? Just like that?”

“Of course, I would, woman. I love you. If you want to move to Mexico, I’ll make margaritas. You want to move to France? I’ll get a beret. Want to move to the moon? I’ll buy a fucking space suit. Anywhere, Sylvie. I will follow you anywhere. And if Wilder Lane is where you’ll be happy, then that’s where we’ll go.”

Tears streamed down my face as I pressed my hands to the door. I tried to answer, but a lump in my throat put a cork in any words.

“Sylvie? You there, baby?”

After a heavy breath, with a smile, I nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m here. And thank you, Tom. I love you so much. You have no idea how happy you’ve made me.”

“Good. Because you make me happy every minute of every day. I’m only repaying the kindness. And I intend to spend the rest of my life finding ways to make you happy, too. Now, if that’s all there is to this discussion, then hurry up and get your ass down the aisle. I’ve been waiting forty years to call you my wife.”

“Yes. Okay. I’m coming. I’ll be there in a few.”

“Good. Don’t get lost in the jungle or detained by border patrol on your way.”

I burst out laughing, nodding my head though he couldn’t see it. “I won’t.”

“I love you,” he said, then I heard his footsteps receding.

I walked over to the mirror, looking at my makeup that had started to smear with my tears. Knowing Alice would kill me, I touched it up as best I could. After one last look over myself in my wedding dress, I headed out the door.

Holding my dress so I didn’t trip, I made my way down the stairs to the lobby. The three widows stood at the bottom, expectant eyes watching me as I approached.

“Wow,” Marge breathed. “What a knockout.”

“Absolutely beautiful.” Doris wiped her eyes.

“Tom is gonna have a heart attack. Better get the paddles ready.” Alice grinned.

I arrived at the bottom of the stairs and fell into the embrace of the three women I held most dear.

Marge broke the hug first. “Well, did you do it?”

I smiled. “I did. He’s in.”

“Whoohoo!” She pumped her fist in the air. “I knew he’d do it for you. That’s the power of love.”

“And you? Did you talk to Roxie? What did she say?”

She frowned, dropping her gaze to the ground.

“Oh no.” I covered my mouth.

But a moment later, she whipped up her head with a grin. “She said, ‘hell yes!’ Turns out she’s sick of Vegas too. After a life of working in casinos and getting her ass grabbed, she’s ready to retire. We’re moving back to Wilder Lane!”

I gasped, then leaned forward and yanked her in for a hug. “I’m so happy for you!”

“Me too. Damn, I sure found a good woman. I can’t believe she’s following me home.”

“I can.” I let go of her and looked into her face. “You’re a catch, Marge.”

She blushed, looking at the ground and then back at me.

Doris grinned beside us, and I knew from the way she practically bubbled out of her skin that she had good news.

“Well? What did Axel say?”

“He said yes!” She squealed, jumping up and down and clapping her hands. “At least most of the year,” she added. “We still have a lot to work out, but he assured me we can spend a big chunk of the year on Wilder Lane. We’ll live on the ranch during the summer and do the tours. I’ll cook, and he’ll tend to the tourists just like before. But when tourist season ends, he’s ready to get the heck off the ranch too. Leave it to the youngsters to run. We’ll live on Wilder Lane together, where we can relax and enjoy each other.” She smiled wider. “And you. I can enjoy all of you.”

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed, my heart so full it felt ready to burst. “And we know Alice is in, so this is it. We’re all moving back to Wilder Lane. Together.”

“Where we belong.” Marge took my hand.

I grabbed Doris’s, and she took Alice’s. The four of us stood together, forming a circle of friendship so strong, I knew nothing, not time or distance or life, could ever break it.

Marge squeezed my hand tight. “I’m so ready to go home with you all. I’ve had my share of Elvis’s and glitter and ladies of the night.” She looked at Doris. “And no, Doris, before you ask, I’m not talking about vampires.”

Doris chuckled, and we all joined.

Alice lifted her chin high. “Well, now that that’s settled, let’s get your ass married so we can pack up and move the hell home.”

“Deal.” I smiled, and the four of us hurried off together, hand in hand, to find my true love at the end of the aisle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“You may now kiss the bride,” the officiant said, then she stepped off to the side.

Tom slinked an arm around my waist, causing me to gasp as he bent me back into a knee-quaking kiss. The guests erupted in applause as he kissed me so long and deep that I finally ran out of air. But I didn’t care.

I had Tom to breathe life back into me.

And he had.

“Attaboy!” Marge yelled from her place beside me where my three widows and my daughter stood.

I laughed against Tom’s mouth, kissing him once more before we turned to the guests, and I lifted our hands together. They applauded again as we walked between them as husband and wife, grinning from ear to ear.

We hurried around the corner, stopping to be alone for a moment and share in more of those earth-shattering kisses before we joined our guests under the huge white tent at the edge of the vineyard. We lifted our glasses for champagne toasts and had a delicious meal with the widows and their spouses sharing the main table with us. It was the first time our partners had met, and I was elated at how well they all seemed to get on. They’d have to now that we’d all be neighbors soon, their loves too inseparable to be apart again.

After dinner, Alice snuck up the stage, standing in front of an elegant white curtain billowing behind her. With several rapid clinks on her champagne glass, she caught the attention of all the guests in the room.

“Thank you for giving me your attention,” she started, “and I promise I’ll be brief. I just wanted to hop up here and call the bride and groom to the dancefloor.”

Tom took my hand and lifted me from my seat, guiding me to the center of the black and white tiled dance floor. He slid

his arm around my shoulder and held me tight against him as we waited for Alice to speak.

“When Sylvie first told us about the night she met Tom all those years ago, she spoke of a connection so strong, so intense, that she knew she loved him from the minute she laid eyes on him.”

The guests awwwed, and Tom looked down at me and smiled.

“I am not a big believer in love and fairytales, I’ll admit, but when I saw Tom and Sylvie reconnect after all those years apart, there was no mistaking the unquenchable love still burning between them. It was palpable, as I’m sure you can all attest to, as you see them standing here today as husband and wife. It’s a love so strong it makes a non-believer like me question if it’s truly possible to have a soulmate ... a person you’re destined to be with. Someone you recognize instantly as your other half. There’s no denying that for these two, it was true love at a glance. She knew. He knew. Their love bound them together in an instant.”

Tears started in my eyes.

“When Sylvie talked about that first night they met, and the nostalgia twinkled in her eyes, she said the moment she knew she would marry him was when he held out his hand and said, ‘Dance with me.’ She took his hand, and the sparks flew so brightly, she joked they could have had their own fireworks show.”

I laughed, looking at Tom and mouthing, “It’s true.”

He smiled and mouthed back. “It is.”

“And every time we hear the song on the radio that Tom asked Sylvie to dance to, her whole face lights up with warm memories visible to even us who weren’t there. And tonight, I ask that for their first dance, they take a spin to that song again. The one that they danced to the first night they met.”

As she finished the sentence, a soft piano started playing, and I smiled, knowing the melody all too well.

“It’s *Tiny Dancer*.” I closed my eyes and let the song transport me back to the night we’d met. To how I felt in his arms, dancing with him, laughing as we sang the chorus while he spun me around.

“Dance with me,” Tom whispered, just like he had that night.

When I looked up, I saw those same eyes that had captivated me all those years ago. We were older, and time had changed the planes of our faces, but they were the same eyes that still captivated me now. I held out my hand, and he took it, smiling as he pulled me against him and slid his arm against the small of my back. Just as we started taking our first steps, the lyrics to the song started, and the curtain on the stage dropped.

I gasped, my hands flying to my mouth as I saw Elton John playing his piano as he sang our special song.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Sir Elton John,” Alice said as she started clapping and moved off to the side.

The guests at our wedding gasped along with me.

“No!” I screamed, flashing my gaze to Alice, who grinned, kissed both hands, and blew us a kiss before stepping off stage.

“Is that ... Elton John? The real Elton John?” Tom asked, staring dumbfounded at the stage. “Or like some kind of lookalike?”

I shook my head, still stunned to see the man himself playing the song that had started our love. “Alice doesn’t do anything but authentic.”

“So that’s... that’s really Sir Elton John.”

I stared at the stage, my eyes barely believing it myself, but knowing Alice, I answered with certainty, “Yes. Yes, it is. Alice’s gift. The one she made us sneak across the border so as not to miss. This is it. She got us Elton John to sing his song ... our song.”

“Well, holy shit.” Tom remained frozen.

“Well, we only get one chance in our life to dance to Elton John singing our song, so don’t just stand there.” I smiled and held out my hand the same way he had. “Dance with me.”

He glanced down at my hand, and when he locked eyes with mine, he snapped out of the shock Alice’s gift had caused him.

“Of course ... wife.” He grinned, pulled me against him, and then we danced the same moves we’d done all those years ago.

When the song ended, the guests erupted into screams and applause. Tom dipped me and kissed me, then we faced the stage and applauded as well.

“Congratulations to the happy couple,” Elton said, his sparkling glasses covering his eyes as he looked in our direction. “And since my friend, Alice, here, told me about your wedding and the adventures you Wilder Widows go on, I’d like to sing one more song tonight. This one goes out to those Wilder Widows I’ve heard so much about.”

Alice looked at me and shrugged, then came onto the dance floor. Doris and Marge hurried from the other side, joining me in the center as Tom kissed my hand and backed away.

“This one is called *Friendship*,” he said with a smile, then turned back to his piano and started playing away.

“I love this song,” I said as I took their hands in mine. “And I love this gift, Alice. How in the world did you get him to play my wedding?”

“It’s a long story, but we’ve met several times in Vegas, and he thinks the stories I’ve told about the Wilder Widows are just a hoot. I knew exactly what I wanted to get you for your wedding present, and I’m so glad you liked it.”

“Love it! I’ll never forget it! This was totally worth getting caught on the border, locked in a cage, and pissing in a bucket to get back in time for this.”

“We don’t talk about that.” She arched an eyebrow, then cleared her throat. “But everything we did was worth it to

make it back before he went on his world tour in two days, and we missed our chance.”

“So worth it!” I laughed as we started dancing to the music together.

“Definitely worth it! I can’t believe I’m listening to Elton John right now!” Doris squealed.

“Highlight of my life. Roxie almost passed out over there.” Marge chuckled.

Elton started singing the lyrics about friendship, and we all closed our arms around each other and swayed as we listened to his powerful voice. Flashes of memories from the adventures our friendship had sent us on went through my mind like movie clips as we swayed together on the dance floor. How different my life would have been had they not come knocking on my door that day. Though part of me wished that I’d been with Tom all the years we’d been apart, the other part of me knew that my path in life had to be with Bruce. It had to take me to Wilder Lane, where I’d become a widow and find the greatest gift of my life.

My best friends.

When the song finished, Elton wished us well and then snuck out the back to a limo waiting to take him away.

“My feet are killing me,” I said as I walked toward the sitting area with the vintage couches surrounding a fire in the corner of the tent.

“You’re telling me.” Alice collapsed in a heap beside me. “I feel like I’ve strapped razor blades to my feet.”

“You should really try these.” Marge sat down and kicked up her orthopedic shoes. “We’re the same size.”

Alice pulled a face and shook her head. “No. No way.”

“They are so comfortable. Seriously. Just try them on.”

“No!” she protested, but we all started teasing her, calling her a chicken and pansy.

“Fine!” She tossed her arms up and then kicked off her strappy stilettos.

Marge pulled off her shoes and handed them to Alice. With a soured face, Alice slid them on.

“Well?” I asked as she stood up, shifting her weight between the honkin’ shoes.

Her lips drew back as her eyebrows lifted. “Wow. It really is like walking on a cloud.”

Marge slapped her thigh. “See! I told you! I’ve been telling you and telling you!”

Alice did a little spin, finishing by hopping up and down. “Wow! I could probably keep dancing longer if I wore shoes like these!” She twisted her body, glancing down at the ugly footwear. “Not that I will, though. I mean, hello, they are hideous.”

“Ah, who cares?” Marge asked. “So they aren’t glittery dancing shoes. They’re comfortable!”

“I need both,” Alice answered. “I’m not wearing ugly shoes, but I’m done torturing myself in these.” She nodded toward her discarded stilettos.

“Someone somewhere has to make fancy orthopedic shoes,” I said.

“They don’t.” Alice shook her head. “Trust me. I’ve looked everywhere. The ‘fancy’ orthopedic shoes are still beyond awful.”

As she kept moving around in her shoes, I pursed my lips and tipped my head. “Then why don’t we?”

“Why don’t we what, dear?” Doris asked.

“Design and sell beautiful but comfortable shoes for people our age. Dancing shoes, nice work heels, party shoes. Beautiful and comfortable shoes. Why not? I spent a lifetime in marketing. I know how to launch new products and advertise. No one has better fashion sense than Alice. She can help design them and dance in them to make sure they’re comfortable.”

“Oh!” Marge sat up. “I can be the spokesperson! I’ve been told I’m really natural talking on camera. And you know I’ve got a face for TV.” She waggled her eyebrows.

Alice pulled a face. “Maybe your job can be to work security. Lord knows we’ve seen you slaughter a snake with nothing but a stick.”

Marge nodded. “Yeah! Security. I’ll make sure no one steals the shoes.”

More ideas started flashing in my mind, the way they used to when I’d get a new account. “We’ll use Alice and her famous *Gammy* persona as the spokesperson! People love her, and she’ll sell a ton of shoes!”

“Are we really talking about doing this?” Alice asked, excitement flickering in her eyes.

“Why not? We’re all retired, but honestly, I wasn’t ready to, but Bruce got sick. I would love to start a company that will give us all a new passion in life, something we can do together. Something that will help other women. We can do this. I truly believe we can.”

“It sounds lovely, but I don’t have any experience doing anything like that.” Doris frowned.

“You can be the baker to keep us sustained. We’ll need lots of muffins while we’re designing shoes.”

“Yeah. I’ll need sustenance to stay strong, so I can kick any perps’ asses if they try to break in and steal our shoes.”

I chuckled, my mind exploding with visions of our new business and working together. “Well, ladies? What do you say? Are we starting a shoe company together?”

I waited, watching while they looked at each other, smiles spreading across their faces.

“I’m in,” Alice answered.

“Me too,” Marge said.

“Why the heck not!” Doris smiled.

“This is incredible!” I opened my arms and pulled them all in for a hug, wondering how it was possible my life could be so wonderful. “This is going to be so much fun!”

“Do you ladies need anything?” Michelle came up and asked.

“We’re okay, but thank you for checking, Michelle. You put together the most wonderful wedding. Thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome. Congratulations to you and Tom,” she said, then started away.

“Wait, Michelle?” I said, and she stopped. “Actually, there is one last thing you can do for us. There is a knitting basket in my room. Could you bring it down along with some paper and pen?”

“Absolutely,” she responded, then walked off.

“Oh, boy! Time to write down our next wishes?” Marge bounced in her seat. “I know mine. I already know mine. Gah! I can’t wait!”

Alice lifted her hands and closed her eyes. “Please, for the love of God, Marge, *no* animals trying to kill us. I’m begging you. You’ve almost killed Doris. Twice!”

“Nope. No dangerous animals. Not this time.” She shook her head but then grinned widely. “I’m so excited, though.”

“I know mine, too.” I smiled. “Do you two?”

Alice smirked. “Oh, I know mine.”

“Oh, boy. That sounds sinister.”

She responded with a wink.

“I know mine, too!” Doris clapped.

We sipped our champagne and waited for Michelle to return, each scrambling to grab our paper and write our wishes, dropping them in the knitting basket one by one then closing the lid.

I tapped the top of our beloved little basket. “One year. We pull them in one year.”

“And just think, we won’t have to fly to each other to do it. We’ll be living back on Wilder Lane. Together.” Doris grinned. “I mean, unless it’s calving season. Then we’ll have to postpone. El Diablo is having his first baby with the most beautiful black cow, and I’m going to be there to welcome the little one to the world. Grandma Doris is gonna spoil it rotten!”

“Of course, Doris. We know you have to be on the ranch part of the year, and we don’t want you missing out on anything like that, so we’ll make sure we do this when we’re all back home.”

“Oh, good.” She grinned. “I don’t want to miss anything. But I do love spending summers on the ranch. Maybe you girls could come stay sometimes.”

I nodded. “Definitely. I would love that. Tom loves riding too.”

“Me and Roxie will be there for sure.”

“Great. You know I don’t do horses and cow shit. I guess I’ll be on Wilder Lane all by myself.” Alice huffed.

Marge looked up, and a smile started on her face. “Or maybe you won’t.”

“What?” Alice asked, her gaze lifting over my shoulder, long lashes flipping her eyes open wide as she saw something.

“What? What is it?” I turned around, gasping when I saw Alejandro standing on the edge of the dance floor, eyes searching.

“It can’t be,” Alice breathed, her hands flying to her face before she flipped over the back of the couch, landing with a thud. The top of her head and eyes appeared over the top. “It’s him. It’s Alejandro! How ... how is he here?”

Marge leaned forward onto her elbows. “Don’t be mad, but I had my daughter get his contact information. I called him up,

told him you made a mistake and asked him if he'd be willing to see you again and talk things through.”

“You what?” Alice’s big eyes blinked from behind her cushioned fortress.

“You were gonna chicken out. I know you were. You love him. You admitted it with pot as your truth serum, and I made you a vow to help you get back to him. I always keep my word, so I’m just giving you a little nudge in the right direction.”

“And what did he say when you called him?” Those big blue eyes blinked faster, darting between Marge and the handsome man still scanning the room for her.

“He said he was heartbroken when he learned you left, and he was getting on the first flight to see you again. He wants to talk to you, Alice.”

“So, I didn’t blow it?”

“Not yet. But you will if you don’t get your ass out from behind that couch and go talk to the man. He flew halfway across the country today for you. Now get up, quit being a pansy ass and go talk to him.”

“I . . . I can’t believe you did that for me.”

“Of course I did. We made you a promise we’d find him. We did. And now he’s here.”

“This is incredible, Alice,” I said, still stunned that Alejandro was here at my wedding. “Go on. Go talk to him. Remember how you felt in that jungle. You were ready to try.”

Fear and sadness clouded her vibrant blue eyes. “What if he rejects me?”

“He won’t.” Doris smiled. “He loves you. And love conquers all.”

“But what if he does?”

Marge lifted up her hand and then rolled it into a fist. “Knuckle sandwich for lunch, remember?”

Alice inched up a little, then ducked again. “I’m scared.”

“All the best things in life are right outside your comfort zone,” I said, something I often reminded myself of when I got scared about a new venture. “Now get your ass up and take a chance on love.”

Alice tightened her grip on the back of the couch. “What ... what do I say? I don’t know what to say!”

“The truth.” I reached forward and touched her arm. “Just tell him the truth. Tell him everything. How you feel. Why you left. What you want. Everything.”

“The truth,” she breathed as she rose slowly.

Alejandro saw her instantly, a huge smile spreading across his face as he started toward her.

Alice remained behind the couch, clutching it tightly as he approached.

“Hello, Alice,” he said, stopping just short of her.

“Hello, Alejandro.”

We widows sat beneath them on the couches, our heads swiveling back and forth while we waited for them to speak. Finally, Alice started.

“I’m so sorry I ran off, Alejandro. I just ... I got scared. Love, emotions, and all that ooey gooey stuff, it’s just ... new to me. And new is scary. I’m so sorry that I left without a word.”

His amber eyes creased with his smile. “I know, Cariño. I know you better than you think. I knew immediately why you ran, and I also knew that I would find you again. You are my love, and no matter how far you run, I will always be there to catch you.”

I clutched my chest and sighed along with Doris and Marge.

Alice shot us a look to shut up, then stepped around the couch, moving toward him slowly. “Can you forgive me?”

Alejandro stepped toward her until they were only inches apart. “There is nothing to forgive. I’m sorry that I went too

fast and scared you. We can slow down if that's what you need."

"It's not," she answered quickly. "It's not that at all. I ... I love you, Alejandro. I do. Totally and completely, and I'm done being scared by that."

He reached forward and brushed a piece of hair from her face. The way she melted at his touch reminded me of how I felt when Tom touched me. There was no denying the love crackling between them like twin flames.

"Dance with me, Cariño." He opened his hand and offered it to her.

She stared down at it, then looked at us. Marge gave her a nod.

"First, before I say yes, I want you to know who you're asking to dance."

He furrowed his brow.

Alice inhaled a deep breath and then started. "I know you think I am this young, sexy, famous showgirl who is elegant and refined. Well, I'm not. The woman you think you love may not be the woman I truly am. And I owe it to you to be honest, so you can decide. I'm ... Oh, God." She closed her eyes tight. "I'm seventy-six. I'm an old lady. I have bunions. I have chin hair. I have an overactive bladder and sometimes wet the bed. I have to retire from dancing because everything hurts all the time. I have a team of plastic surgeons and estheticians to fight the aging process and keep things tight, but ..." she paused, lowering her head as she let out a sigh. "I'm exhausted. I can't keep going. The toning. The tightening. The injections. The surgeries. The constant obsession over how I look, what I eat, and how much I exercise. I can't keep it up. It's too much. My war against aging is coming to an end, and I need to start letting it happen. The time is coming soon when I'm going to wrinkle. I'm going to sag. I'm going to lose my beauty, and I don't want you to be saddled with a decrepit old corpse that tricked you into loving her. So there. That's the truth. All of it. And if you want to run away, I don't blame you."

She stood with her eyes closed and then slowly opened them. We all sat in silence, our breaths held tight.

“Well, that was one way to do it,” Marge whispered, and I bumped her with an elbow.

Alice stood in front of Alejandro, her shoulders lifting and falling with heavy breaths. A slow smile started on his face as he slipped a hand behind her head and pulled her lips against his in a kiss so powerful I felt it all the way down to the tips of my toes.

When he finally released his grip on her, he kept his forehead pressed to hers. “We are all getting old, Alice. And I’m not perfect either. I have a list of things I could rattle off that are wrong with me, but then we’d be here all night. We all have insecurities ... things we’re scared will make people stop loving us. I will love you, flaws and all, and I hope that you, too, can love me with all my flaws.

“I do. I will,” she said breathlessly. “And are you sure you can still love me knowing who I am? Who I *really* am?”

His bright white smile flashed in the candlelight flickering all around us. “Yes, I am sure. I know with all my heart that I will love you ... and your chin hair, overactive bladder, and all the other things that aging will put in our path. I don’t love what’s out here,” he said as he slid his hand along her face, then moved it to her chest, pressing it against it. “I love what’s in here. And I will love you regardless of what happens on the outside. And when you’re senile and forget who you are, I will remind you. I will remind you that I love you and that you love me. That I am yours, and you are mine. I will love you now, and I will love you always.”

She closed her eyes and sighed, pressing her head against his.

Alejandro kissed her forehead, then stepped back, a charming smile lifting his lips as he stuck out his hand. “Now, I ask you one more time. Dance with me, Cariño?”

A stream of tears started down Alice’s face as she reached forward and took his hand. “Yes. I will dance with you.

Forever.”

He pulled her against him and spun her out onto the dance floor, holding her tight against him as he swayed with her to the music.

“That was the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen.” I wiped the tears from my eyes. “I can barely stand it.”

“It’s a miracle.” Doris sobbed, pressing her hands together in prayer. “A true miracle. Alice has found love.”

“I knew our girl had it in her.” Marge grinned. “Glad she quit being a pansy ass. Now someone better get that girl a taken tag.”

We watched them dancing, Alice spinning around on the dance floor looking as light as a feather. I then tipped my head and chuckled. “Do you think she would die of embarrassment if she realized she was still wearing your orthopedic shoes?”

Marge and Doris looked down at Alice’s feet and then burst into laughter.

With a snort, Marge answered, “Oh, yes. She may be willing to show Alejandro her flaws, but the moment she figures out she’s dancing in those shoes in public, she’s gonna be screaming over here to hide behind the couch again.”

We burst into laughter, clinging to each other as we laughed until we cried watching Alice dance away with her love in her orthopedic shoes.

“May I have this dance?” Axel asked with this thick drawl.

I looked up to see Doris’s handsome cowboy standing with his hand outstretched.

“Of course,” she replied with a girlish smile, taking his hand and following him to the dancefloor.

“I’m going to get Roxie. I promised her another dance.” Marge slapped her thighs and stood. I watched her cross the dance floor and sling an arm around Roxie’s waist, pulling her giggling girl out to the dance floor and spinning her around. I couldn’t strip the smile from my face as I watched them all dancing around together, laughing as they spun by.

“You gonna let me take my wife for another spin, or now that we’ve danced to Elton John live, are we too good for DJs?”

I looked up to see Tom standing above me.

Tom. My Tom. My one true love. The one my widows had returned to me. The one I now called husband thanks to them.

I smiled and gave him my hand. “I’m gonna dance with you every night for the rest of our lives.”

The dimples in his cheeks deepened with his smile. He pulled me up, lifted me in the air, spun me around, and finally set me down on the dance floor between the swaying bodies of my dearest friends. Rachel danced nearby on the arm of a handsome man I’d never seen before, giving me a wink as she twirled past.

I looked around at the most beloved people in my life, all together on the dance floor. And soon, the widows and I would be together again on Wilder Lane. Always.

EPILOGUE

One year later...

“Throw another shrimp on the barbie!” Marge joked to Tom in her completely butchered Australian accent.

He smiled at her from behind the plumes of smoke rolling off the BBQ grill where he pushed around all the meats and vegetables we picked up at the morning market.

“I’m out of shrimp, but how about a brat?” he asked as she walked by carrying the pitcher of margaritas.

She nodded her head. “Brat it is. Extra onions.”

“Oh, Roxie is gonna love that,” Alice said as Marge arrived at our little spot next to Alice’s pool.

Marge set down the pitcher on the table and waved her hand. “Ah, she doesn’t care. We’re way past that whole having to brush our teeth before the business time stage of the relationship.”

Alice lowered her sunglasses and looked at Marge. “She cares, Marge. *Everyone* cares about onion breath. That’s not intimacy. That’s just good manners.”

“Oh, cripes. Don’t tell me you’re still hiding shit from Alejandro.”

Alice looked over to Alejandro where he, Roxie, and Axel were tossing beanbags into a cornhole box.

She smiled. “No. We’re very much past all the facades of new love. But some lines should never be crossed. Onion breath, peeing with the door open, sharing toothbrushes, and clipping your toenails in bed.” She shuddered. “Those things are off limits, no matter how long you’ve been together.”

I shrugged. “Tom and I pee with the door open.”

Doris gasped. “You do?”

“Oh, yeah. All the time. Doesn’t bother me.”

Alice sighed. “Too far, my friend. You go too far.”

Marge smirked. “Well, I’d think after we all pissed together in Mexico, you wouldn’t be so uptight about—”

Alice lifted a hand like a stop sign. “We don’t talk about that. Ever.”

Her warning glare caused us all to chuckle.

Ignoring the stare-off between Alice and Marge, I said, “That’s the beautiful thing about couples. You can each decide what works for you. For Tom and me? Open door peeing.”

“Roxie and I too.” Marge shrugged, then flopped back into the chaise lounge. “Intimacy is awesome.”

“You know,” Alice said, sliding her sunglasses back up and leaning back. “It is. I can’t tell you how much less stressful life is now that I don’t have to hide every little imperfection from Alejandro. Not to mention how relaxed I am not dancing every night anymore. It was amazing while it lasted, but this?” She waved an arm around the extravagant pool area in her backyard. “This is more my style at seventy-six.”

“Seventy-seven,” Marge corrected. “You had a birthday last month.”

“Seventy-six was a good year to me. I think I’m just gonna stay there.”

I laughed and poured a margarita refill into my glass. “It was a good year. A really good year.”

I laid back and thought about everything that had transpired since Tom and I tied the knot exactly one year ago.

We’d all moved home to Wilder Lane and picked up just like we’d never missed a beat. But instead of just sitting around knitting, we’d used our free time to start our company and create our new shoe line. It had been a lot more work than we’d prepared for, but we’d loved every minute of the new challenges starting a shoe company threw at us. It had taken eight months to have enough shoe designs and styles we’d felt comfortable starting to market them, so we’d decided to try and start small.

Tried being the operative word.

After Alice had gone on social media high-kicking in sexy orthopedic dance shoes, several high-profile bloggers, vloggers, and influencers caught wind of our mission to give women comfort and fashion. With so much media attention, our company blew up. In less than a week, we received more orders than we'd be able to make in a year with our modest company, so we'd had to scramble to find a production company to meet the demand. Luckily, Alice had connections with some fashion designers, and last month, we finalized our contract to produce millions of shoes each year.

As a marketer, it had been a dream come true to see our little baby idea blossom into a powerful hitter in the shoe world. It turned out we weren't the only women who didn't want to give up their style after their bodies started slowing down. Thousands of women sang our praises as they walked, marched, and danced their way off in our flashy, sexy orthopedic shoes, and tens of thousands more had preordered for their turn to strut in comfort when our shoes got mass-produced.

"Look. Madeline just sent me a picture of Clover." Doris held up her phone, showing us the picture of the little black calf she fawned over every day. "He looks like El Diablo, doesn't he?"

She poked the screen and gave it a kiss.

"Do you miss the ranch?"

"I miss El Diablo and Clover. That's for sure." She poked the photo on her phone again. "But no. Axel and I had a wonderful summer there, but we were both exhausted and ready for another winter on Wilder Lane."

"I'm so glad he loved it here," I said. "I was worried he might miss the ranch too much, and you'd have to move back."

Doris chuckled. "Axel says he's happy anywhere as long as I keep the blueberry muffins coming."

Alice arched an eyebrow. "Is that what we're calling hooties these days?"

“Alice!” Doris swatted her, then flushed a shade of red deeper than Alice’s painted toenails.

Alice just chuckled, and Marge whispered, “Good one.”

“So, *anyway*,” Doris went on. “No. He was really happy here. We’ll always do summers on the ranch; we both love it there. And having you ladies visit really helped me not feel so left out.”

“We love visiting the ranch.” I popped a grape in my mouth and bit down. “Tom would live there year-round if I let him.”

“My wife, too,” Marge agreed. “Not me, but I liked visiting and riding Cochise again, that grumpy son of a gun.”

“Roxie is still happy here?” I asked, glancing over at Roxie as she laughed when she missed a shot. The two of them had held a small ceremony in the backyard three months ago, and Marge couldn’t stop saying ‘my wife’ whenever she got the chance. She was so over the moon happy that she’d found her one true love, but she always kept Percy’s dog tags dangling around her neck, a reminder of the best friend she’d spent a lifetime with and would always miss.

“So happy.” Marge smiled. “Who knew she was ready to leave the glitz and glamor of Las Vegas behind? Now, she’s a stay-at-home wife, and I love getting to spoil her rotten with all the dough we’re making selling shoes.”

“I’ve been feeling terribly guilty about it,” Doris admitted. “I keep putting extra in the basket when they pass it around at church. And we’ve donated a lot to other churches and causes in need.”

“That’s so nice, Doris.” I smiled. “We’re planning on supporting some great charities, too, but I do hope you treat yourself to a little something. You have been working so hard baking away and keeping us fed.”

“Oh, I did.” She leaned forward and whispered. “I bought Axel a pair of very expensive cowboy boots, and I splurged on a La Cornue oven. It cost almost as much as my house when we first bought it fifty years ago. But let me tell you, ladies, it

was worth every penny. My muffins have never tasted so good.”

“That’s what she said,” Marge teased. Alice burst into laughter and slapped her with a high five.

“I don’t even know what that means, but I know it was dirty. You two are disgusting.” Doris turned away, pointing her nose in the air.

I laughed too and was still laughing when Alejandro strolled over, leaning down and placing a soft kiss on Alice’s lips.

“Do you need anything, Cariño?”

“Another one of those.” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him down for another toe-curling kiss. The sparkling wedding ring on her left hand glimmered in the sunlight. He’d proposed just two months after Tom and I had been married, and they’d had a beautiful ceremony at a tiny little restaurant in the Bahamas where they’d had their first date. It was intimate and simple. So different than what the old Alice would have wanted for her wedding. But with Alejandro, she allowed a different side of her to come out. He softened her edges like a gentle piece of sandpaper sliding across a jagged piece of wood. The two of them worked beautifully together, and I’d never seen her happier.

When she finally let go, he kissed her once more on the lips, then the nose, and finally the forehead. “Tom said to tell you the food is ready. I’ll bring you a plate.”

“I’ll just take a salad.”

He shook his head. “You don’t eat just salad at a BBQ. I’ll bring you some real food.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he lifted his finger and pressed it over her lips. “And I don’t want to hear one word about you getting fat or cellulite or anything else. You are beautiful, and you can eat a burger without dying.”

He didn’t give her time to argue back, instead turning away and heading back to Tom at the BBQ.

“That seaman of yours sure knows how to handle you,” Marge said, then chuckled at her own little joke. “Seaman. Alice has a seaman.”

Alice inched up an eyebrow. “He’s not *handling* me. He’s just making sure I stop living with so much pressure on myself to be perfect. And you know what? It’s amazing.”

“Good,” I spit out. “Life is way too short to pass up a good cheeseburger.”

“When we were on that last cruise around Greece, you should have seen how much shit I ate. I swear I worried the ship would sink if I ate anymore.”

“When’s the next cruise?” Doris asked.

“In six weeks. We’ll be sailing around Italy for almost three weeks. As always, you ladies and your spouses are invited.”

One of the perks of her marrying a cruise ship captain was that we all got access to any cruise that didn’t sell out. Tom and I had joined the other couples on three cruises already, and we’d seen so much of the world I’d never have gotten to explore otherwise. Alice joined him on the ship often and usually put on at least a few dancing shows while she was there. It let her dance in front of an audience and feel like a star again without the pressure and stress of her own big production.

“I’ll see if Tom wants to go. I’ve been dying to see Italy!”

“My homeland! Count me in!” Marge raised her hand. “And I know my wife will want to see Italy.”

“I can’t imagine Axel won’t want to go. He loved the last few cruises we went on. He didn’t get off the ranch most of his life, so he’s all about seeing as much of the world as he can now that he’s partially retired.”

“Great. I’ll let Alejandro know to book the rooms. We’re going to have a wonderful time.”

“And speaking of wonderful times.” I wagged my eyebrows and pulled a pool towel off the basket I’d had hidden

beneath it.

“Oh! The basket! Are we doing it? Right now?” Marge sat up straight, eyes sparkling.

“It’s one year today. I say we pick our wishes now and see where our next adventures are taking us.”

Doris squirmed in her seat, grinning widely, and Alice pulled off her sunglasses, narrowing her eyes like she meant business.

“But first.” I grinned widely as I grabbed the bottle of whiskey I’d hidden beneath the towel as well. “Tradition. It wouldn’t be right without whiskey.”

Alice’s eyes lit up when I popped the cap off the whiskey. I took a long swing then grimaced as I swallowed it and passed it to Marge. One by one, we each took our sips, sputtering and laughing as the familiar liquid burned its way down. Doris passed back the bottle, her face still contorted from the unpleasant taste.

I grabbed it and put the cap back on. “There. Now that that is done, it’s time to find out what the Wilder Widows are getting up to next.”

I was about to pull the lid off the basket when I heard Tom come up behind me. “Whoa! Is this it? Wishes time? Can we see how this works?”

Axel walked around behind Doris and placed a hand on her shoulder. “If you ladies want to do this alone, we’ll understand, but I sure would love to see how ya’ll draw your wishes.”

Roxie climbed into Marge’s lap, resting her blonde head of hair on Marge’s shoulder. “Can we watch, honey?”

The widows and I all passed a glance. Part of me wanted to keep our tradition the way it was ... just the four of us. But the other part of me wanted to welcome our new loves into the world we’d created. The world that had led each of us to them.

“I’m okay with it if you all are,” I said with a shrug.

“Fine by me.” Marge agreed.

“Of course. We’re married. We share everything.” Doris smiled.

“You want to see how the magic happens?” Alice asked Alejandro.

“You know I do, Cariño.” He slid into the chair behind her, pulling her up against his chest.

“Okay. Here we go!” I squealed as Tom and Axel settled onto the chaise lounges beside Doris and me.

Tom slung an arm around my shoulder. “So, who goes first? How does this work?”

“Whoever did the last wish draws the next one,” Alice said. “Since Sylvie was last, that means she picks the next wish.”

“And none of you know what the other wishes are?” Axel asked.

“Nope.” We echoed.

“And you all have to do the wish together, right? Whatever it is?” Roxie asked.

“Yep.” We responded together again.

“Wow. That’s ballsy.” Alejandro laughed. “But I think all of us can be very grateful you ladies started this because, without this wishing basket, none of us would be here.”

“True story,” Tom agreed. “I’d probably have never seen her again if it weren’t for all of you.”

“I’ll always be grateful Alice’s wish brought you to me.” Roxie gave Marge a kiss.

“And I’ll keep Sylvie in my prayers every night, thanking her for delivering me my own little angel,” Axel said, then gave his blushing bride a kiss.

I looked around at the faces of the people I held so dear, thinking back on all the memories of when they’d come into my life. First the widows, then Roxie. Axel came next, then Tom, of course. And finally, Alejandro had been the final

missing piece to complete the puzzle of our happy little world ... a world created by the Wilder Widows.

“You ready?” Tom asked me. “It’s your pick, right?”

I lifted the lid off the basket. “I’m ready. Here we go.”

Everyone leaned forward, anticipation growing in their eyes as my heart raced, waiting to find out our next adventure. I reached in, felt the little piece of paper, and pulled it between my fingertips. When I got a good grip, I pulled it out and looked at the name on the outside.

Marge.

“Well?” Alice asked, leaning forward with Alejandro. “Who is it?”

I held it up and said, “Marge.”

“Yes!” She leaped up, pumping her fist in the air. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Doris pressed her hands together and closed her eyes. “No killer animals. No killer animals. No killer animals.”

“Here we go. Prepare to kiss your wife goodbye before Marge tries to kill me,” Alice said to Alejandro, and he gave her a quick kiss.

“Well, what is it?” Tom asked, giving me a nudge.

I inhaled a deep breath, relishing the familiar excitement that crackled through me every time we did this and knowing I’d feel it again as we continued our Wilder Widows tradition for years to come.

I opened the paper, and my mouth dropped open when I read the words.

“Marge!” I screamed.

“Oh, God. It’s fighting tigers, isn’t it?” Alice groaned.

Doris’s face dropped. “Oh no, Marge. What did you do? What does it say?”

I stared at Marge, mouth pursed tight, eyes wide while I watched as she leaped around, whooping and cheering.

Tom leaned over my shoulder and read it, then burst into laughter. “Nice one, Marge! Mad props!”

She pointed at him and smiled. “You get it!”

“I get it.” He gave her an air fist pump.

“What is it? Tell me! I’m dying!” Alice demanded.

I inhaled a breath and spun the piece of paper around to show them the horrifying words.

Go skydiving.

“Noooooooooooo!” Alice’s guttural scream ripped out of her lungs, and Doris joined her in an ear-piercing pitch inviting every bat in a ten-mile radius to join us.

“Yesssssssss!” Marge shouted back, then tipped her head back and let out a maniacal laugh every supervillain would be green with envy over.

After her scream finally petered out, Doris crossed her arms and pouted. “You said nothing that would be scary and almost kill us!”

“I said no *animals* are going to try to kill us. No animals in skydiving.”

Alice pointed her finger at her. “Unless you screw it up ... *again* ... and we drop somewhere in the jungle and get lost ... *again*. Then we *will* be fighting tigers.”

Tom lifted his hand. “Don’t worry, ladies. I’ve jumped countless times. I’ll give you all the tips before you head out on your next adventure together. And if you do get dropped in the jungle, I’ve got lots of experience in the jungle. I’ll come get you out.”

“Me too,” Axel said. “I mean, I don’t have the jungle experience he has, but I can handle wild animals no problem, and I’ll be right there with Tom searching the jungle to get my girl.”

“I’ve got lots of experience with cougars,” Roxie joked. “I’ll help.”

“I’ve got a bit of cougar experience myself.” Alejandro waggled his eyebrows and looked down at Alice. “Don’t worry, Cariño. If you land in the jungle, I’ll find you. I’ll always find you.”

“Thanks, love.” She gave him a kiss, then spun and impaled Marge with a glare. “I’m still gonna kill you, though.”

“A wish is a wish,” Marge said, coming back and picking up her margarita glass. “And my wish is that we’re going skydiving. Are you girls really gonna pansy out and make me go solo?”

I couldn’t believe I was saying it, but I let out a sigh and lifted my glass. “Okay. Fine. I’m in.”

Tom squeezed my shoulder. “That’s my girl.”

Axel gave Doris a nudge. “Show them how tough my little cowgirl is.”

Doris pinched her lips and then picked up her glass. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

We all looked to Alice. She sighed and grabbed her glass. “Fine. I’ll do it. But if my chute doesn’t open and I die, I’m haunting all of you.”

Marge whispered a silent thank you up into the air. “Then it’s set! We are going skydiving. This is gonna be one hell of a way to kick off our wishes, ladies. Here’s to our next adventure.”

We all lifted our glasses and held them out.

“Here’s to the Wilder Widows and our happily ever afters,” I said, looking at the faces of the people we all loved so much ... our happily ever afters.

“No,” Alice said. “Here’s to our *wilder* ever afters.”

My eyes lit up. “Yes. I like that.”

They grinned, and we clinked our glasses together. “To wilder ever after!”

THE BEGINNING

THANK YOU FOR READING

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