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A Pelican Pointe Novel
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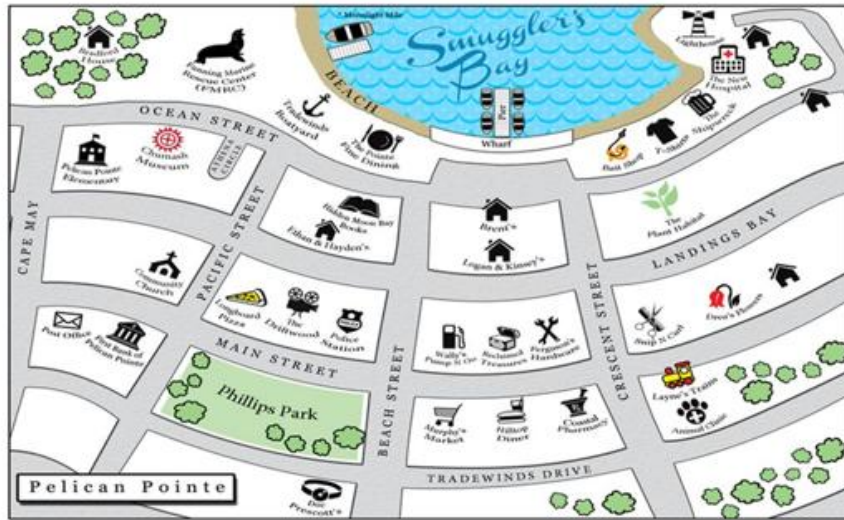
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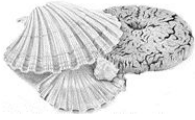
Echoes at Driftwood Cottage



by

VICKIE McKEEHAN

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Prologue

December 1999

Five days before Christmas

Somewhere off the coast of Central California

Marty Snelling decided his family needed a getaway. Since his wife died two years earlier right before Christmas, December had been a rough month for his kids. Seven-year-old William, affectionately called Willie, and four-year-old Hallie had spent two Christmases in a row missing their mother. Toys hadn't done much to alleviate their grief. Many of their presents had gone untouched. While Hallie enjoyed her stuffed animals and dolls well enough, Willie had lost interest in most of his favorite things. Marty promised this Christmas would be different. He thought a change of scenery might help get his kids out of the doldrums. He'd vowed to give them a memorable holiday full of fun and excitement, especially to help Willie, who'd taken his mother's death much harder than little Hallie had. After all, Hallie had been little more than a toddler when her mother succumbed to a rare form of leukemia within four months of diagnosis.

Determined to make this Christmas better, Marty had gone to his older brother, Royce, with an idea. Marty proposed a sailing trip, the perfect vacation to get them out of the house during Christmas break. What better way to spend the holidays and ring in a new year than a family outing on the water? They'd use Royce's forty-four-foot sailing sloop, dubbed the *Celestial Moon*, to take the kids on an adventure down the coast of California to see the sights.

The boat, built in 1972, had seen almost a quarter century of use when Marty's more prosperous sibling, Royce Snelling, bought it to satisfy his weekend itch to sail around Richardson Bay.

Royce had earned his wealth working for Apple in its early days, selling microcomputers to the masses. He'd made a small fortune alongside Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. All that money rolling in lasted until the downturn in the 1990s when power struggles upended Apple's long-range plans. When the company lost out to the cheaper PCs packed with Microsoft Windows, Royce had to rethink his finances and his marriage. No longer sitting at the top of the food chain, his wife left him for someone who could better support her lifestyle. After another short-lived marriage ended in divorce and Royce's employment became erratic, he lived full-time on the *Celestial Moon*. Instead of rubbing elbows with the rich and

famous like before, showing off with trips around the Bay, the boat had become his full-time home.

But toward the end of 1999, approaching a new millennium, the brothers' misfortunes seemed to be turning around. Microsoft in Seattle had offered Royce a job. With a fresh start on the horizon in January 2000, it seemed the perfect time for the two brothers to collaborate on a trip to mark the new beginning.

The Snelling boys began planning the trip in early October down to the last detail. And with Marty taking two weeks off from his construction job, he had high hopes that the vacation would get the kids out of daycare and bring his children some much-needed joy at Christmastime.

Despite living on the *Celestial Moon* for almost two years, catching work where he could find it, Royce believed in keeping the sailboat in tip-top shape. He'd babied his prized possession during the lean times, even if he had to pay for repairs by relying on his credit cards. With Marty's help, he'd overhauled the engine himself. The brothers added new fuel lines, added pumps from top to bottom, and even installed extra holding tanks for longer showers. Over the past two months, the Snelling brothers had replaced the halyards and sheets and bought new rigging.

By the morning of December 20th, they were ready to set sail. They began loading supplies onto the boat before dawn, with a thick greenish fog covering the harbor.

Marty carried a sleepy Hallie down to the second cabin. He laid her on the bunk while Willie, excited and eager, stayed above shadowing everything Uncle Royce did at the helm, waiting for him to start the engine and get underway.

"We're really sailing like pirates," Willie exclaimed, disbelief in his seven-year-old voice.

"Like old Jack Sparrow himself," Royce promised with a wink toward his nephew as Marty appeared ready and willing to help.

"Leaving port this time of day we'll see the sunrise if the fog lifts," Marty added cheerily.

"I want to see it all," Willie proclaimed. "I hope it's not cloudy the whole time. If it is, we won't see anything. I told everybody in my class how I'd spend two whole weeks sailing up and down the coast like One-Eyed Willie in that movie. My teacher said I should keep a journal and write a story about it. I'm gonna do that. I'm gonna show everybody how I don't need a mom."

Marty's heart broke hearing his son say those words. He rubbed the top of Willie's hair. "You'll have a grand adventure to tell them when you get back to class. The fog won't ruin the trip. I promise."

Willie frowned. "If only I could see through the dumb fog."

Noting the disappointment on his nephew's forehead, Royce decided the boy needed to get underway. He started the engine, took the wheel, and began to steer the boat out of the harbor. He tapped the navigation system. "No need to worry about anything. We have GPS to guide us straight out. The weather forecast promises this pea soup will likely blow by in a few hours. Then you'll see plenty of shoreline off the port side. That's to the left. You can create your own map along the way as each city comes into view."

“You did check the weather heading south?” Marty asked, trying to catch a glimpse of the skies through the thick fog off the bow. Worry ripped holes through his enthusiasm at the possibility of bad weather. “I didn’t consider bringing the kids through rough seas.”

Royce laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “It’s usually calm this time of year. The big Pacific storms don’t form until February. Besides, I’m a good sailor. You know that.”

“Even good sailors get caught off guard,” Marty muttered as Hallie wrapped her arms around her father’s legs in a death grip.

“I’m scared, Daddy,” Hallie said, rubbing her eyes. “I woke up, but nobody was there.”

Marty scooped the girl into his arms and patted her back as the boat rocked on top of the waves. “It’s okay, pumpkin. We’re just getting started. You’ll see. It’s going to be the Snelling adventure of a lifetime. Uncle Royce is an expert seaman. He won’t let anything bad happen to us.”

Hallie buried her face in her father’s neck as Marty looked at his brother with gratitude and apprehension. He knew Royce never took unnecessary risks, but the thought of taking his children out into the open ocean made him suddenly uneasy.

Noticing his brother’s angst, Royce slapped Marty on the back. “It’ll be okay. Take the kids out on deck. The fresh air works wonders to calm the nerves.”

The navigation system beeped as they neared a buoy. The noise had Hallie jumping, indicating that maybe they should leave Royce to focus on his tasks.

“It’s okay, sweetheart, everything’s fine,” Marty assured his daughter as he kissed the top of her head. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather be asleep in your bunk, nice and cozy under the blankets? I promise to get you once we’re past the harbor.”

Hallie shook her head. “No. I want to stay with you.”

As Royce navigated the boat further out to sea, Marty ushered the kids out of the cockpit and into the fresh open air on deck.

Marty noticed the fog had thinned out in places, opening up a chance to unveil the scope and size of the wide-open sea. On the starboard side was the vast expanse of ocean, enraged and churning as far as the eye could see.

Marty ignored the choppy water, pointing out the silhouette of some nearby boats, much to Willie’s delight. The boy leaned over the side, watching the water rush by, taking in every movement, the sights and sounds, as if he didn’t want to miss anything.

Trying to ease his own fears, Marty plopped Hallie on her feet so she could get used to the sway and rhythm of the boat. Holding her tiny hand in his, he felt a sense of peace wash through him, if only for a moment. In that short span, he decided he’d made the right decision. This would be their best Christmas they’d had in two years.

They left land behind, sailing further into the open sea. Miles from the coastline, Marty began to breathe a sigh of relief despite the doubts creeping in. Swallowing his own fear, he glanced at Willie with pride. His son showed no signs of apprehension or alarm.

But Marty, Marty had always been cautious, especially in the last two years since losing his wife. Her death had shown him how quickly life could change. He couldn't back out now. He only had to see the joy on Willie's face to realize that going back now would be a major disappointment. He'd promised the kids an adventure, and he wasn't about to panic. As the boat chugged through the water, the fog began to thin out, revealing a faint glow of orange to the east. Streaks of sunlight danced on the deck. Willie let out a whoop of delight at the sight. Father and son exchanged broad smiles as they watched the sunrise together.

Hallie teetered as the boat rocked. Unsteady on her feet, she lifted her arms so her father would pick her up again.

Marty obliged as the four-year-old gripped onto her father's neck.

"Will we see Christmas lights?" Hallie whispered.

"You bet we will. We might even go ashore once we reach Santa Cruz. How would that be? I hear they have a fantastic boardwalk where you can ride a magical sea dragon."

"A dragon?"

"That's a kiddie ride for girls," Willie chided from the railing. "I bet I'm tall enough to ride the roller coaster."

"We'll see about that," Marty told his son. "The point is, we'll spend Christmas Eve riding the rides, playing games at the arcade, and go to a candlelight concert in the park before Santa finds you and Willie on the boat."

"To fill our stockings," Hallie finished, clapping her hands at the idea.

By the time they were miles offshore, Marty's first bundle of nerves had begun to dissipate. But when the fog finally drifted away, Marty watched the sunshine disappear behind a slate of ominous storm clouds hanging low on the horizon. Like a slow-moving stone wall, the skies darkened. Thunder rumbled overhead. Flashes of lightning split through the blackish-purple squall surrounding the boat.

"Rain moving in fast from the west," Royce shouted from the cockpit as he adjusted their course. "Don't worry. It might get a little bumpy, but we'll outrun this storm."

"Wait a sec," Marty cautioned. "I read about this. Instead of increasing our speed to outrun the weather, shouldn't we drop the sails, anchor, and stay put, maybe ride it out stationary?"

"Dropping anchor isn't an option," Royce snapped. "We need to head for the nearest harbor. There's a small town less than two hours from here. That means gunning the engine and outrunning it."

But Mother Nature had other ideas.

A gust of wind howled across the bow, whipping the boat to its side like a feather. The rigging on the mast rattled, metal against the metal. A bolt of lightning hit the hull as the skies opened up. For several long seconds, the air sizzled with electricity.

Marty yelled out, "I'm taking the kids below deck."

Caught in a crosswind of churning ocean, he tried to keep his balance. He managed to grab Willie by the arm, steering him toward the steps in the downpour.

Before he could make it below deck, thunder boomed overhead. It was so loud it sounded like a blast going off inside the hull. The deafening detonation rocked the boat about the same time a forty-foot wave came out of nowhere, yanking it upward and tossing it into the air. Veils of ice-cold rain beat down as the waves tossed the sloop into another trough.

Between foam and fury, Marty battled the mountain of water and made it to the cabin in time to secure Hallie and Willie into one bunk. “Stay here,” he demanded. “I’ve got to help Uncle Royce keep us afloat.”

He took one last look at his frightened children and shoved past the door. Taking the steps two at a time, he stepped back onto the deck, his heart pounding. The wind lashed at his skin like a thousand tiny whips, and the rain made it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of him. The boat pitched and heaved on the monstrous waves, threatening to capsize with each passing moment.

He made his way to the cockpit and found his brother clinging to the rudder for dear life.

“We’re not going to make it, Marty,” Royce yelled over the din of the storm. “The engine is flooded, and we’re taking on water!”

Marty knew he had to act fast. He took a deep breath and headed to the engine room, the water sloshing up to his knees with each step. He worked quickly, doing his best to pump out the water and stem the flow. But it was no use. The storm was too fierce, and the damage too much.

Racing back to the helm, he saw Royce battling to keep the boat from sinking.

Marty grabbed the nearest rope, tied it around his waist, and secured the other end to the rudder. He tossed another cord to Royce, shouting, “Tie yourself down. We don’t want to get swept overboard. We have to ride this out.”

The storm raged on as the brothers fought the wheel together. At times, the boat lurched violently, tossing them into each other. Marty noticed his hands were numb. He’d held the rope so tightly that his hands were bleeding into the cording.

Half an hour passed, then another.

Over the howling winds slapping against the crashing waves, they heard a loud pop. It was a sound they both recognized all too well—the sound of the hull ripping apart.

Suddenly, they were both thrown into the murky waters.

Marty tried to swim toward the cabin but realized it was floating away. He fought to reach his kids. He thought he heard Hallie screaming for help, but he couldn’t determine from which direction it was coming. He soon lost sight of the cabin altogether. In the icy rain, he sank deeper as the waves carried him further out to sea. He couldn’t even see Royce anymore. As the current took him under, the air smelled like rotting seaweed mingled with the stench of diesel.

Panic took over. Marty’s last thought was to find Willie and Hallie before the sea swallowed him up forever.



Chapter One

Present Day

Pelican Pointe, California

It was growing dark when Rowan Eaton gunned the ten-foot moving truck into the driveway at 1821 Cape Geneva Drive and came to a stop. Bone-tired from sitting behind the wheel for almost seven straight hours without a stop, she had to pee—bad.

She reached across the bench seat to dig into her backpack, searching for the keys to her grandmother’s house, nestled between six others in the middle of the block.

With the last hint of light disappearing on the horizon, her fingers finally latched onto the keys. She made a mad dash toward the Arts and Crafts style bungalow, painted in a washed-out blue with white trim.

Rustic yet charming for a 1920s two-bedroom, it had held up well despite a few years of neglect. Rowan could take responsibility for the last twelve months of decline after Gran had passed away. But she was here now, ready to make Lynette Dewhurst proud.

Rowan ran up the steps, past tapered columns, to a covered porch. She instinctively brushed her fingers across the carved sign that read Driftwood Cottage, just as she’d done as a kid before going into her “I have to pee dance” in case any nosy neighbors were curious. One glance at the old wooden porch swing, and she fumbled the keys but managed to unlock the door in time.

Stepping into the living room, the musty smell of the old place enveloped her. Vacant now for the better part of a year, the cottage still reminded her of a dozen summers, playing in the backyard, spreading seeds in the garden, sipping lemonade on the back stoop, eating too much peach ice cream after supper until her belly hurt, making soup from scratch, or learning to sew homemade doll clothes for her Barbie.

Right now, her one-track mind barely had time to flip on the lights as she raced down the hallway to the bathroom before wetting her pants. Without bothering to shut the front door, like she'd done a thousand times as a kid, she skidded to a stop on the scarred maple hardwood floor by latching onto the doorframe to stop her progress.

"Made it," Rowan muttered as she sat on the rickety toilet that always seemed to run after flushing. When she'd finished, she went to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. She took a long, hard look at her image in the mirror and realized the last few weeks of insomnia had finally caught up to her. She looked exhausted. The dark circles under her hazel eyes were bigger than ever. Major decisions like this one had taken their toll. Her co-workers back in San Diego thought she'd lost her mind. For the past five months, they'd ragged her about giving up a six-figure salary as a graphics designer for one of the top advertising agencies in Southern California. They weren't shy about dishing the same advice about opening up her own agency in the boonies. It wasn't just risky but foolish. The consensus overall boarded on nuts. Long-time friends had used words like unrealistic, career-ending, and reckless to make their point.

So much for unconditional support, she'd let their opinions get to her. But that was over. She was here now, and she was determined to make it work. After all, she had a roof over her head. She'd left behind her noisy, urban loft for the slower pace of a more tranquil coastal community, a town where she had history.

She tried to tame her copper-colored hair, a sweaty, sticky mess that spiked in all directions. Before leaving San Diego a mere seven hours earlier, it had looked relatively normal,

draped to her shoulders in a long, layered bob. But not now. After such a long drive with the windows rolled down, she looked like Ron Weasley had stuck his finger in a light socket. She couldn't wait to take a shower and collapse into bed. Unloading boxes would have to wait until morning.

Rowan wandered back toward the front room, the familiar creak of the wooden floorboards squeaking beneath her feet. One by one, she pulled off the white sheets covering the furniture. She stood back as the dust scattered everywhere, including her throat and lungs. Hacking and coughing, she took in the sagging sofa cushions and armchair. Both were outdated in style and color. Should she hold onto her grandmother's things or donate them to the thrift shop? It was a question she'd avoided answering for over a year. She looked around at all the work that needed doing. Gran had replaced the wallpaper three decades earlier. What remained was an inferior paint job that cracked and flaked. Every room suffered from peeling paint. Instead of feeling joy at the prospect of a blank canvas and a makeover, she felt the weight of more decisions. Hands at her hips, she let out a long sigh. "A real artist would have a field day with this place," she told herself.

"Be patient," she whispered. "You just got here five minutes ago. Give yourself a break. It doesn't all need doing at once."

She walked to the entryway to shut the front door and turned in a circle. Maybe now she could fully appreciate those childhood memories. "Thank you, Gran. You knew this house was always my refuge. You always knew exactly the right thing to say to me."

"You're a little young to start talking to yourself," Scott Phillips announced, his voice booming in a deadpanned monotone.

Rowan jumped at the sound of a man's voice. Panic lodged in her throat. She whirled around to face her intruder. Her eyes darted around the room. But there was no one there.

“Who said that?” she shouted. Her voice echoed out into silence.

Her eyes zeroed in on the fireplace poker. She picked it up, heaved it over her shoulder, and charged down the hallway to the bedrooms, ready to send whatever trespasser on his way. He who dared enter without permission would suffer the consequences. Was it a vagrant or squatter who’d found an empty house and decided to make it theirs? Last time she checked, though, Pelican Pointe didn’t have a homeless problem. Gran would’ve mentioned it.

After checking each room, looking into closets, and even poking her head underneath the beds, she was satisfied she’d imagined the voice. There was no one here but her.

Puzzled, she turned on her heels and headed to the kitchen, the only room updated since her grandmother’s passing. Her stomach grumbled. But there wasn’t time to think about food. The sound of clanging against metal outside caught her attention.

What now? she wondered as she walked to the farmhouse sink and peered out the window into the backyard. She spotted a man standing in the shadows, fiddling with the latch on the back gate.

Still clutching the metal poker like a sword, her heart pounding in her chest, she threw open the back door. “What are you doing here? It’s a little late for the utility guy.”

“Huh? I’m not the utility guy,” he explained, looking confused and somewhat frustrated. He stared at the redhead, a looker at five-six with green eyes, ivory skin, and a faint trail of freckles across her nose and cheeks. “I’m your neighbor. Daniel Cardiff. I live right behind you across the alleyway on Seagrass. I own the ice cream shop in town. Logan Donnelly said you might be arriving late and asked me to come by with a few groceries to tide you over until morning.”

Sunset’s dwindling light kept Rowan’s exhausted brain from recognizing him. It finally came back to her like a bolt of lightning. “Daniel? The Vanilla Bean Machine by the old bait shop.”

“That’s right. We met when you were here at Christmas overseeing the kitchen remodeling.”

Hard to forget a tall, broad-shouldered hunk with a crop of brown hair, a solid jawline, and a dimple stamped on his chin. She remembered those soulful light blue eyes the color of a robin’s egg.

Tonight, he wore a tight-fitting black jacket that hugged his chest, ripped jeans that showed off his waist, and a pair of black boots. The word sexy leaped into her brain.

She felt like a fool. His wasn’t the voice she’d heard earlier. “Sorry. I’ve been driving all day. My brain feels like mush. You’re the one who made sure my utilities were on, and now you’ve brought food.”

“I can’t take credit for the lights. Logan took care of that.” Daniel held up the bag he carried. “But I brought some coffee, milk, a bunch of grapes, a couple of apples and bananas, some sandwiches from the Diner, and of course, I had to bring samples of our summer flavors for June—cherry vanilla, strawberry, and lavender.”

“Lavender? Seriously? I love lavender.”

“Yeah, I remember.” He stared at the poker she carried. “No need for armed combat. I come in peace.”

Her shoulders relaxed. She eased her grip on the fireplace poker. “Of course you do,” she uttered, letting go of the makeshift weapon and placing it beside the door. Her stomach made a loud churning noise at the prospect of food. “I’ve always thought that letting ice cream melt is a sin.”

“We’re kindred souls then.”

“I don’t know about that, but your timing couldn’t be better. I haven’t eaten since breakfast and I’m starving,” she admitted, ushering him into the kitchen.

Daniel breezed past her and set the sack on the kitchen table. He started unloading the bag, taking the quarts of ice cream out first and putting them in the freezer. He showed off the rest of his offerings before holding up two bottles of water. “I wasn’t sure if you liked flavored tea, so I played it safe.”

“Water’s fine.” Eyeing the sub sandwiches—one piled high with ham and cheese and all the fixings she loved—she went to the cabinet and took down two plates. “You’re staying to eat, right?”

“I thought you’d never ask. I haven’t eaten since lunch,” he added, peeling off his jacket and hanging it on the back of the chair before plopping down. Since she seemed more interested in the ham and cheese, he slid it toward her. “I’ll take the tuna fish. I didn’t mean to scare you earlier.”

“You didn’t. As I said, I’m brain-dead from driving. I pushed a little too hard to get here before dark.” She picked up her sandwich and took a scrumptious first bite. “This is delicious. I’m pretty sure the last time I ate was the egg and cheese biscuit I had from the drive-through before getting on the road.”

“You must be hungry—although Max does make a tasty hot sandwich. You had an uneventful trip along the coast, I hope.”

“Other than crazy-ass drivers with no patience when they get stuck behind a moving truck on a two-lane road with nowhere to pass, I had no problems.” She twisted the cap off her bottle and guzzled down the water.

“It’s an impatient world we live in. Kiki Hyland, my only employee, has been pressuring me to give her more responsibility. So tonight, I caved and left her to close up. I hope to God she remembers there’s a back door that needs locking like the one in front.”

“Ouch,” Rowan said, sputtering with laughter. “It’s tough to get good help these days.”

“Tell me about it. But I do know a couple of high school kids—football players—who’d be happy to earn a few bucks helping a newcomer unload her truck tomorrow if you want.”

She smiled. “That sounds like too good a deal to pass up. Are you sure they’d give up their Saturday on your say-so?”

“You’ll find picking up extra cash is hard to come by around here, especially for teenagers. The choices are bleak.

You either work at an ice cream shop, split the hours and the shifts with someone else, or the coffee shop, although I'm told Chloe Bretton has a lock on that until she goes off to college. You could waitress at one of the three eateries or the pub. Even so, the hours are rarely more than twenty per week."

"Not so unusual for a part-time job. I had not one but two jobs the entire time I went to the Design Institute. I don't know how I would've paid the rent if not for waitressing and roommates. You should've seen the dump I lived in back then."

"I remember those days eating ramen noodles noon and night," Daniel remarked. "You're not still fretting about giving up the high life in San Diego, are you?"

Rowan winced, remembering their conversation last December. "You were right. People don't understand the desire to seek something completely different. I'm not even thirty yet, but I'm supposed to keep the same job I've had for almost eight years without it boring me silly. However, I do have concerns. Living in the city, I walked out my front door and could be at work in minutes. I walked everywhere or took the bus. I never needed a car in downtown San Diego. Living here, I'll need to buy one."

"How did you get back and forth to see your grandmother?"

"I rented a car on those trips. Sometimes a friend would let me borrow theirs."

"So, you're saying the Audi last December was a rental?"

Rowan suppressed her laughter. "You thought I had big bucks? The joke's on you."

"Funny thing about small towns. We have a place that sells cars and a guy who only stocks the best—no clunkers. His name's Brad Radcliff. Tell Brad what you're looking for. He'll track anything down for you if he doesn't have it on the lot. Then there's Wally Pierce. He also sells cars. But they're mostly classic muscle cars from the 60s and 70s. Something tells me that's not what you're looking for."

“Nope. More like a compact that’s easy to park, something small that’s good on gas mileage. None of those monster SUVs that don’t fit into a normal parking space.”

“Brad will hook you up when you’re ready. Do you plan to work from here? Logan said you were considering renting space at the warehouse where he and Kinsey have their offices.”

“The short answer is, I don’t know yet.” She glanced around the kitchen. “This is the only room I focused on after Gran died. And it was Logan who suggested I start with the kitchen and work on re-doing one room at a time. It’s amazing what new appliances and a couple coats of new paint on the cabinets did for Gran’s favorite room of the house. I think, even then, I knew I’d end up living here.”

Daniel’s lips curved up slightly. “I thought you planned to turn it into an Airbnb.”

Rowan made a face. “Don’t remind me. I can’t believe I ever thought of letting strangers come and go here. I have a lot of cleaning to do that I’ve put off for too long. The rest of the house is a mess.”

He polished off the tuna fish sub, wadded up the wrapper, and dropped it into the bag. “Maybe you should think about calling it *your* place now. Driftwood Cottage has been yours for a year. And it has that cute little wooden sign next to the front door with its cute little fishes.”

“Do I detect a hint of mockery in your voice?” Rowan tossed back. “Granddad carved that sign himself. Remind me again what you call your house.”

Daniel frowned and held up his bottle of water in a salute. “Point taken. There was this fleeting moment when I wanted to call it ‘Weed City.’ But then the reference might get misinterpreted. Whereas I’d be referring to the crabgrass, dandelions, and chickweed that took over the front yard, the neighbors might see it as a marijuana den.”

“Weed City? Not a good visual,” Rowan said with a laugh. “I remember that profound sense of humor. I’m pretty

sure that's why I slept with you last Christmas when I was here."

Daniel's lips curved again. "I thought it was because of my intrinsic charm."

Rowan leaned forward, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "Oh, that's definitely part of it. She took a slow sip from her water bottle, her eyes never leaving Daniel's. "But you know what they say, a sense of humor is just foreplay for the brain."

Daniel chuckled and set his water bottle down. "I've also been called a cunning linguist." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively. But when Rowan didn't seem to get the joke, he added, "It's a play on words—clever with language—and other things."

Her somber face completely changed when she burst out laughing. "Of course it is. Had you going there for a minute, didn't I?"

"There's that playful side that drew me in originally. Your moody artistic temperament aside."

"What moody artistic temperament? I'm a passive, creatively even-tempered person," she drawled, leaning closer, "You're not the only one with witty banter. In fact, I've been thinking about a plaque for your front door. I can see it now." Rowan sent him a wicked grin. "Dan's Love Shack. Fitting, right?"

"Weed City to Love Shack?" Daniel scrunched up his face. "Nobody's called me Dan since middle school."

Rowan shrugged. "Hey, it's catchy. And appropriate. For all I know, you could be the Don Juan of Pelican Pointe, Danny Boy."

"That's not me. I haven't been Danny since fourth grade. And it's not catchy at all, more like cheesy. Consider what the neighbors would say. I can see Mrs. Scudder from next door now drawing up a petition and calling on the mayor to have me run out of town."

“Resident lothario be gone, huh? Okay, fine. How about something simpler and boring like Daniel’s Nest?”

His face contorted into a twisted scowl. “That sounds pathetic. And you call yourself creative.”

“All kidding aside, I was really down last Christmas Eve. I had a lot on my plate. I wasn’t sure what to do with Gran’s place. Or what to do about my crappy job. I was kicking all that around when I walked into the bar that night. I wasn’t there five minutes before you were hitting on me.”

“That’s not the way I remember it. You sulked at the next table for at least an hour before I asked you to join me out of pure pity.”

Rowan threw back her head and laughed. “There is that. At least we both knew what we were doing at the time. We can’t even blame alcohol on our three-day sexual liaison. I only had two glasses of wine. And you had that weird rum drink. Although, I have no clue exactly how many you’d had before I arrived. You could’ve been drunker than Otis Campbell.”

“Who’s Otis Campbell?”

“Come on, Mayberry, drunk Otis Campbell. I watched a lot of reruns with Gran.”

“Ah. That’s not very flattering. For the record, my drink of choice is a classy daiquiri without the sugary liqueur.”

“Ah, yes. How could I forget the lecture you gave me that night? I remember that part was a little weird, maybe freaky.”

“Me? Weird? But I’m not the one trying to make excuses for my choices. The sex happened. I’d call it instant attraction. Thinking back, we both needed a friend that night.”

Rowan nodded in agreement. “A shoulder to lean on. That works for me. You offered to show me around town. Remember?”

“And I did. I showed you my bedroom.”

She sputtered with laughter. “You showed me yours, I’ll show you mine. But not tonight. Tonight, I need to send you

on your way and get some sleep. I also need a hot shower. I'm a sticky mess. I'm surprised you didn't run the other way."

He slid his hand across the table and linked his fingers with hers. "You're as beautiful tonight as you were last December."

"Liar," she muttered. "Thanks for the food."

"I can take a hint," Daniel acknowledged as he got to his feet. "But just remember, I'm the only man in town who's seen you naked."

"So far," she cracked. With a snorting giggle, she looked up at the ceiling. "You're not going to let me forget that, are you? Don't think I'm that easy."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Rowan rose from her chair to stand in front of him, blocking his way to the back door.

He stared down into her hazel eyes and lifted her chin. She let him lean in and place a kiss on her mouth. It was a light, feathery meeting of lips. "Rowan Eaton, welcome back to Pelican Pointe."

She grinned. "As welcome wagons go, yours is much appreciated. Thanks for dropping by with supplies. Now you know I won't starve to death before morning."

"No problem. That's what neighbors are for. If you need anything else, you have my number."

She stuck her hands in her jeans pockets to keep from grabbing hold of his shirt and keeping him here the rest of the night. Now that would be a welcome to remember, she decided, something to kick off her fresh start.

Instead, she rocked back on her heels, watched him gather up his jacket, and walk to the back door. She waved as he made his way down the steps to the garden gate and watched him disappear out of view.

She puffed out her cheeks and exhaled. Daniel Cardiff wasn't why she'd decided to make this place home. But since

he was easy on the eyes, she'd give the man major points for checking off the good neighbor box.



After parting ways with Rowan, Daniel wasn't ready to go home yet. He headed to his favorite watering hole, The Shipwreck, located along the pier. Thankfully, by the time he walked through the door, the Friday night crowd still hanging around seemed subdued enough they didn't want to socialize. At the long-scarred mahogany bar, he ordered his go-to drink—the Hemingway daiquiri—and found a table in the back where he didn't have to mingle.

Ten minutes went by before Geniece Darrow brought over his glass. Chewing on a wad of pink Bubble Yum, she blew out a perfect bubble and set his order on the table. “I was beginning to think something bad had happened to you. It's almost eleven, and you missed your nightly cocktail.”

He studied Geniece, a pretty girl with dark hair, dark eyes, and golden skin. “I'm not that predictable. Kiki closes up most nights. She has now for two months.”

“Could've fooled me. You come in here like clockwork, rain or shine, after checking up on Kiki. You're the only guy in town who orders that one drink. You never order a beer like most of the regulars and never stay long enough to get drunk. So yeah, you're predictable but classier than most. These days, Durke stocks Havana rum especially for you.”

“It's nice to feel special,” Daniel returned mildly, savoring the taste of blended honey, lemon, and cinnamon. “How are your classes going?”

A student at UC Davis for three years, Geniece had struggled with her spring semester, mainly chemistry. “If I don't nail biochemistry and pass my final exam in two days, I'll never get into pharmacy school. And when you have a brainy sister and an arrogant brother-in-law who own the local

drug store and remind you every single day how you're an underachiever, it gets old. Not to mention embarrassing."

"Have you tried getting a tutor?"

"Jill hired one for me last month. We've been studying what seems like night and day ever since. But I don't get it. I'm beginning to think I'm not cut out to be a pharmacist."

"So be something else."

"You try telling my family that," Geneice lamented, blowing another bubble before smacking it back into her mouth. "I'd rather go to nursing school. I could get a job at the hospital here. They have all kinds of openings for every shift."

"So do it. Sit your sister down and tell her the truth. It won't matter anyway in a couple of days if you don't pass biochemistry. Just get it out there. You'll feel better."

Geneice frowned. "You went to college, right?"

"Yeah. UC Davis, in fact."

"Are you happy running an ice cream store?"

Daniel thought back to the last couple of years when he'd made the move out of Silicon Valley. "Let's put it this way. I'm much happier making ice cream than working at a dead-end program manager position for a high-tech firm. What turned out as a trip home to visit my sick grandmother, hunting down her recipe to churn out ice cream to cheer her up, changed my life forever."

"But why settle in Pelican Pointe peddling ice cream?"

"Because I grew up in a small town. Coyote Wells. You've obviously never heard of it. Most people haven't. But it took me years of sitting in an office every day to realize I preferred doing something else with my life. I don't miss the backstabbing that comes with working for someone else."

"So you decided to make ice cream?"

"Quality ice cream," Daniel corrected. "I researched seaside towns and discovered Pelican Pointe didn't have an ice

cream shop near the beach. It was simple, really, a process of elimination, and what I could afford at the time.”

“Hmm. Maybe you’ll end up with a chain of stores.”

He smiled and held up his cocktail glass. “That’s just it. I don’t want a chain of stores. I like mine just fine. Will you bring me another?”

“You got it. Besides, I like the way you tip.”

Daniel chuckled before draining his glass. While he waited for his second drink to show up, his mind drifted back to Rowan Eaton. He did his best not to conjure up her wet body in the shower. But it was no use. The image brought a smile to his face.

“What are you grinning about?” Ryder McLachlan cracked. “The last X-rated movie you watched?”

Instead of answering, Daniel fired back, “What are you doing here this time of night? The wife kick you out?”

Ryder pulled out a chair across from Daniel and sat down. “Very funny. Julianne is hosting a baby shower for Ophelia and Seth at the lighthouse. I’m headed up there after I finish my beer to help with cleanup duty. Wanna come?”

“I’ve been wondering what to do with myself on a Friday night. Now I have my answer.”

“You’re still a newcomer. It wouldn’t hurt to do a little schmoozing and give something back to the community.”

“I donated ice cream to the church social last week,” Daniel pointed out. “And I donated more at the Valentine’s Day party at the elementary school. That’s just in the last four months.”

“As riveting as that sounds, you could do more.”

“Did I mention your wife talked me into providing ice cream for the entire school at the end-of-year party?”

“Now that’s more like it. And before you remind me of my civic duty, my crew built that whole school, practically

from the ground up, at a discount after they decided to reopen.”

“They’ll likely put that on your headstone,” Daniel remarked as Geniece brought over his second daiquiri. “Thanks, Geniece.

“Can I get you anything to eat? The grill shuts down in thirty. After that, it’s drinks only,” Geniece pointed out.

“I’m good. We were just talking about Ryder’s claim to fame. I can see it now. Here lies Saint Ryder. His crew singlehandedly rebuilt the school. Or maybe they’ll erect a monument in his honor on Main Street.”

Geniece rolled her eyes and blew another bubble. “Nobody wants to see that. Can I get you another beer?”

“Nah. Two’s my limit,” Ryder said. “I didn’t mean to sound like I was bragging. But I’m pretty proud of that school. When clients want to know about our company’s achievements, the school remodeling job is always at the top of our list.”

“I might know someone who could use a contractor this summer. Her name’s Rowan Eaton. She inherited her grandmother’s house on Cape Geneva, the little bungalow in the middle of the block. She might need help turning one of the bedrooms into an office.”

Ryder narrowed his eyes. “That’s right around the corner from you, isn’t it? How is it you know so much about this Rowan? When did she get into town?”

He’d walked right into that one, Daniel decided, blaming the rum for his loose lips, which prompted him to ignore the question and change the subject. He purposely looked at his watch. “Shouldn’t you be helping your lovely wife with cleanup by now?”

“Oh, crap,” Ryder muttered, downing the rest of his beer. “I’m late. I gotta go. Let me know if this Rowan needs the work done, and I’ll pencil her in for the middle of June.”

Left alone, Daniel’s thoughts returned to Rowan. Suddenly, the summer looked much brighter than it had

before.



After retrieving her suitcase from the truck, Rowan had taken a long, hot shower until the water had run cold. It wasn't a surprise. It didn't take much to drain the old water heater of every ounce of hot water. It had been that way for as long as she could remember. Gran's budget hadn't allowed for a lot of fancy things. A new water heater never entered the equation.

But luckily for her, Lynette Dewhurst had other priorities. She always made time for her only granddaughter. As it turned out, Rowan craved the attention. Her own mother had been less than stable, often requiring lengthy stints in psychiatric wards or shorter stays at local rehab facilities to kick the booze, pills, or whatever Gwynn Eaton's latest addiction had been at the time.

Early on, Rowan realized that her mother would never volunteer as a room mother, bake cookies for a Girl Scout meeting, or show up at a recital. No, Gwynn Eaton had too many problems. One of which was thinking the world revolved around her, twenty-four-seven. Rowan would likely have ended up in foster care at an early age if not for her grandmother.

The last time Gwynn fell off the wagon, Rowan had called Gran from a pay phone outside a rundown motel to pick her up. Roused from her bed in the middle of the night, driving an hour in traffic and the pouring rain, Lynette had put her foot down this time. Gran had decided Rowan would come live with her.

Ten at the time, over the next eight years, Rowan's life would settle down. She had regular meals and a stable roof over her head for the first time. For the first time, she had someone who cared about her well-being. Lynette had given Rowan the love and attention that she had always craved. For that, Rowan would always be eternally grateful.

As she dried off and dressed for bed, Rowan couldn't help but think about her grandmother's kind and gentle nature. Lynette had always been there for her, no matter what. Unlike Gwynn, Gran had never judged her or made her feel like a burden.

Rowan walked out of the bathroom feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. After slathering cream and lotion on her face and body, she climbed into bed. For the first time in months, maybe even years, she fell asleep with her mind thinking about the future and not dwelling on the past.



Chapter Two

Saturday morning, before finishing her second cup of coffee, Rowan answered the door to see three muscular high school football players standing on her doorstep. After agreeing on a price—twenty bucks an hour each—the kids got to work unloading the moving truck.

The sixteen-year-olds worked like pros. In between directing traffic about where to put stuff, she texted Daniel to thank him for sending help.

In under two hours, the teenagers had everything unloaded and arranged throughout the house without complaint or grumbling.

It was the best two hundred dollars she'd ever spent and that was after adding a generous tip to boot. The kids left with spending money, happy as clams. And she had an empty truck to return. Besides, it was time to do some exploring. After all, the town had changed a lot since she'd left ten years earlier. Back in December she hadn't spent much time reacquainting herself with the stores. She intended to do that today because there were groceries she needed to buy.

She used her phone to look up where to return the truck. The address seemed familiar. And when she pulled up, she realized why. The memories came rushing back. It was Wally's Pump N Go.

After squeezing into a parking space, Rowan hopped out of the truck and headed for the office. "Am I in the right place to drop off a U-Haul?"

“You are,” Lilly said.

“Thank God. I’m so tired of driving that beast of a truck.”

“We’ll take it off your hands and get you back home in no time. Let me see your paperwork.”

Rowan handed over the ten-page contract she’d signed in San Diego at the sprawling U-Haul It Mega Center—the opposite of Wally’s Pump N Go.

Lilly went through the checklist, asking her a routine set of questions about how much gas was left in the tank, any problems with the operation of the vehicle, and whether she’d left it in good working order.

“I left it as clean as I got it,” Rowan answered. “And it wasn’t exactly the newest model. It had something like a hundred thousand miles on the odometer. Oh, and the AC didn’t work. I drove all the way without air.”

“Sorry about that,” Lilly said. “But those trucks usually don’t see much maintenance. A time or two, they’ve even broken down on the highway and we’ve had to tow them into town. Be glad it got you here without breaking down and leaving you stranded on the side of the road, I guess that’s the main thing.”

“Then I’m very fortunate.”

“Welcome to Pelican Pointe,” Lilly offered. Reading the name from the contract, she added, “Rowan Eaton. I’m afraid I will need to charge you for filling up the tank, which will probably run you an additional sixty dollars, maybe more.”

Rowan handed over her credit card.

“I’ll be right back. Wally usually handles gassing up those trucks.”

Rowan watched as Lilly disappeared into the garage, where she assumed Wally had his head buried under the hood of a car. If that were the case, she’d probably be waiting a while. Her eyes drifted toward the side parking lot where a row of vehicles sat parked with cardboard stickers leaning up

against the dashboards, their prices indicated the cars were waiting for new owners.

Curious, Rowan went over to the plate glass window, her eyes landing on a two-tone brown and tan colored pickup. Disbelief streaked through her belly. She took a second look and glanced around for the side exit. She went out to the parking lot. Sure enough, the sign said it was a 1984 Dodge Ram Prospector.

“There can’t be two of them,” Rowan mumbled, walking around to the back and rubbing her hand over a familiar dent in the bumper.

“Rowan Eaton,” Wally said, walking up behind her, wiping his hands on a well-worn greasy towel. “You’re Jim and Lynette’s granddaughter.”

“I am. This truck looks exactly like the pickup that belonged to my grandfather.”

“That’s because it’s Jim’s old pickup.”

Rowan continued to circle the truck and inspect every ding in the paint. “Gran used to keep it in the storage shed after he died. I didn’t even miss it all those times I came to visit. There was always so much to do in such a short amount of time while I was here—groceries to buy, doctor visits to make, medicines to pick up. I can’t believe I never asked her what happened to Granddad’s pickup.”

“Well, I don’t know the exact details. But at some point, Cleef Atkins must’ve talked your Gran into selling it to him. After Cleef passed away, I found it in sad shape in his barn.”

“My God, she must’ve needed the money for something and didn’t want to ask me for it. That’s the only reason I can think of that she’d ever have parted with it.”

“Ms. Dewhurst never said how it ended up there. She was like that, a very private woman who rarely engaged in small talk. I came by the pickup through an auction the town held after Cleef passed away. You see, all the proceeds went back into the town’s coffers, so I bought the truck and a few other old cars Cleef had because I like working on the older engines.

I fixed the others up right away. I don't usually have a problem selling these babies. But this one was special. Your grandmother stopped by one day to gas up her old Chevy and spotted it sitting here. She specifically asked me not to sell it to anyone else. I was to hold onto it for you."

"You're joking?"

"Nope. After Ms. Dewhurst died, I started working on it. I had my doubts you'd be interested in such an old vehicle. But I've spent a year in my spare time rebuilding the engine and the carburetor," Wally explained, swiping his hand lovingly across the hood. "She purrs like a kitten. Although she could probably use a new paint job."

"I love her just the way she is," Rowan cooed. "How much do you want for her?"

"You should test drive it first, don't you think?"

Rowan scoffed at that. "This truck belonged to my grandfather. Gran wanted me to have it. How much?"

"All I need from the sale is what I put into it," Wally replied, tossing out a figure.

"That's more than reasonable."

"Jim and Lynette Dewhurst were good people. Your grandfather always called her Vi."

"I know. It broke her heart when he died. Suffered a heart attack. Went out to start the truck one morning around six-thirty and dropped dead next to it."

Wally nodded. "I remember when it happened."

"Six months after he died, she brought me here to live with her. Gran changed my life. Before that, it was chaotic and messy. I moved around a lot with my mother. Every time Mom hit a brick wall, she'd send me here to stay with them."

Uncomfortable knowing those details, Wally changed the subject. "Ms. Dewhurst used to make batches of fudge every Christmas and deliver them around town in tins. She'd tie a big red bow on every tin, the old-fashioned kind of bow, not the kind you see that sticks like a sticky note."

The memory made Rowan smile. “I started helping her deliver those tins. Delicious fudge. Somewhere, I bet there’s a recipe for it. I can give you cash on Monday. Or I could write you a check today drawn on the bank in town. There’s money in the account. You can go with me to the ATM and verify the balance if you want.”

“Not necessary. I know where you live. You can drive it off the lot today after we do the paperwork for insurance purposes. How does that sound?”

“It sounds too good to be true, too wonderful. Can you believe it? I finally have a car of my very own.”

Wally headed toward the office but stopped mid-stride. “You don’t own a car at all?”

“No. And I didn’t even come in here to buy one,” Rowan claimed, wiping tears out of her eyes. On impulse, she leaned in and hugged Wally. “You always were one of Gran’s favorites. She used to worry about you meeting the right person. I take it Lilly took care of that.”

“Oh, yeah. Big time.”

“Good for you. Thank you for keeping Granddad’s truck for her, for me.”

Gushing women were always a mystery to him. Wally spotted Lilly and let go of Rowan. “You do have a driver’s license, though, right?”

Rowan hooted with laughter and began to dig through her handbag for her wallet. “I promise I do. I use it mostly for ID. But I used to drive Gran’s Chevy in here to gas it up. Remember?”

“Yeah, but I never asked to see your driver’s license, now did I?” Wally pointed out with a laugh.

Rowan latched onto her wallet and finally pulled out the piece of plastic, holding it up for him to inspect. “Doesn’t expire for another three years. See?”

“Good enough for me. If anything breaks down on this puppy, call me. I don’t want anyone messing up my hard

work.”

Delighted with Wally’s kindness, Rowan giggled. “No worries there. I know who the genius is behind working on forty-year-old cars. Your name should be in the Hall of Fame for restoring old cars.”

Lilly beamed with pride. “Wally’s the best. You’re going to love your new wheels.”

“Every time I drive it, I’ll think of Granddad. It’s got a lot of history behind it for me. Good memories. It’s like a piece of him will always be with me. I can’t wait to take it for a spin.”

“Then we’ll get you on the road,” Wally promised, ushering her into the office.

After getting the paperwork squared away and handing over the check, Rowan climbed into the driver’s seat. She turned the key and the engine roared to life, just like Wally promised. She put the truck into gear and drove out of the parking lot, making a left turn onto Main Street. With the windows down, the breeze blew through her hair, and the sun poured down on her face. Enjoying the experience, she lifted her chin and pulled into Drea’s Flowers.

Rowan had a stop to make.



Like most folks in town, Jim Dewhurst had planned for his funeral and that of his wife, Lynette, years in advance. That meant buying cemetery plots in Eternal Gardens and waiting for the inevitable day when they would be laid to rest side by side.

Rowan marked this visit carrying two mixed bouquets that combined the couple’s favorite flowers—a handful of purple violets paired with huge white dahlias.

At her grandfather’s grave, she knelt down so she could access the in-ground metal canister before dropping one of the bouquets into the vase, and then re-arranging the flowers to

her liking. “Sorry, Granddad, but that’s all the violets Drea had on hand. They aren’t as pretty as the ones you and Gran grew. But they’ll do for now until I can start work on the flowerbeds and grow my own. You might be waiting another season for that, though.”

She moved over to Gran’s side and went through the same ritual with the vase, fluffing the floral arrangement into a fuller display. “I’m sorry it took me so long to decide to give up my job. I’ve been indecisive. But it seems that’s no longer the case. I just bought Granddad’s old truck from Wally. I was nervous about all these life changes happening so fast. But not anymore. Somehow, knowing the pickup is still around means it’s still in the family like you and Granddad would have wanted.”

As she spoke, Rowan’s eyes filled with tears. For the first time, she realized how much she missed her grandparents. Even though she knew they were at peace and together forever, there was a void in her life she couldn’t fill or replace.

She stood up and wiped her eyes, taking a deep, shaky breath of fresh air. She’d needed this reminder to renew a sense of purpose and determination that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

As she turned to leave, she noticed a figure standing a few yards away, watching her. It was a man wearing khaki shorts and a yellow Oxford shirt over a teal T-shirt that said something about a local surf shop. His penetrating blue eyes spooked her a little. She had never seen him before, but something about him made her feel uneasy. She started walking back towards her truck, anxious to put some distance between her and the stranger.

But suddenly, she changed her mind and stopped. “I’m not letting you run me off from this moment. What’s your problem? This is my time with my grandparents.”

“Rowan Eaton.”

“That’s right. Who are you?” A sense of dread moved through her as she recognized the voice. “Wait a minute. You were at my house last night.”

“There’s something you should see.”

“Get real. I’m not moving from this spot. You take one more step toward me and I’ll scream my head off if I have to.”

“We seem to be out here by ourselves. The name is Scott Phillips. I’m buried over there. I never made it back from the war.”

Rowan’s eyes darted to the truck. If she broke into a run, she doubted she could make it without this lunatic grabbing her and dragging her into the trees. “Look—” she began, only to watch the man vanish. “What the—?”

Panicking, she didn’t wait around to finish her own question but took off in a run back toward the truck. As soon as she got behind the wheel, she pushed the lock on the driver’s side door. She turned the key in the ignition. But the engine didn’t make a sound.

She looked up to see the man standing in front of the pickup.

“You’d think as often as I’ve done this, I’d be better at it by now,” Scott sighed, hands on his hips. “I’m not here to harm you. All I want you to do is get out of the truck and walk back through the headstones past your grandparents’ plots. There’s something you should see before you leave here today.”

Rowan responded by reaching across the bench seat and locking the passenger door. “Why on earth would I want to go anywhere with you?” she screamed right before pressing down on the horn. But the horn didn’t make a sound.

“What is going on here?” she yelled. “Why are you doing this? I don’t even know you.”

“Let’s try this another way,” Scott suggested, vanishing once more. This time, he reappeared next to her.

She screamed again and fumbled with the lock. When it finally popped up, she practically fell out of the door onto the ground. Recovering her balance, she took off running as fast as she could run.

“I must be losing my touch,” Scott grumbled as he watched her streak across the cemetery, dodging headstones as she went. He waited with the patience of a priest until she stopped to look back. That’s when he made his move. He did the disappearing act and showed up standing next to her.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not here to hurt you?” Scott said, raising his voice. “There’s a headstone in this very graveyard with your name on it.”

Bending at the waist, trying to catch her breath, she straightened, the statement getting Rowan’s full attention. “You’re delusional. You’ve obviously escaped from an insane asylum. I happened to know there’s a state hospital not two and a half hours from here.”

“I’m not real, you idiot. I’m a ghost. I haven’t escaped the purgatory here on earth yet!” Scott shouted, losing patience. “Just shut up and follow me.”

With that, Scott disappeared again and reappeared across several rows of grave markers. He waved his arms. “Over here. Now!”

Reluctantly, Rowan forced her feet to move. She trekked across the grounds, careful not to get too close. She glanced around plotting her escape route and realized this was the baby section. Feeling even more uncomfortable, she crossed her arms over her chest. “If I humor you, will you go away and leave me alone?”

Scott ignored her and pointed to a headstone. “Rowan Avery Eaton. Born August 31, 1995. Died November 27th, 1999.”

Rowan moved closer to a foot-high angelic statuette nearby. She glowered at the granite sculpture before forcing herself to look at the headstone and its inscription. “That’s my name and birthdate, August 31, 1995.”

“How do you explain that?”

Rowan stood there speechless.

“Well?” Scott prompted.

She cleared her throat. “Um, I don’t know. It’s obviously a coincidence or a mistake. It doesn’t have anything to do with me. I’m standing right here very much alive.”

“It’s a mystery,” Scott stated in a no-nonsense tone. “You need to figure out why it’s here.”

She watched as the man’s form and figure dissipated into nothingness. She waved her hand through the air where he’d stood. “Maybe I’m the one hallucinating. Or dreaming. Or having a nightmare in broad daylight,” she muttered, resisting the temptation to pinch herself.

Still shaking, Rowan took out her cell phone and took a photo of the headstone before heading back to the pickup. Behind the wheel, she went through the truck paperwork and found Wally’s phone number, keying in the digits.

Inside the Pump N Go, Lilly answered the phone.

“Hi. It’s me, Rowan Eaton. I’m out at Eternal Gardens and the truck won’t start. The engine won’t turn over.”

“Oh my goodness,” Lilly said on the other end of the line. “What happened? It was running fine when you left here an hour ago.”

“I don’t know. Maybe the battery’s dead or something.”

“I’ll send Wally out there right away to check it out,” Lilly assured her. “Sit tight.”

For some inexplicable reason, Rowan decided to try to start the pickup again. She stuck the key in the ignition, and it started right up. She rolled her eyes. “Lilly, never mind. It seems to be running fine now.”

“Great. Maybe you should bring it in on Monday and Wally will give it a thorough going over. The last thing we want is you driving an unreliable vehicle stranded on the side of the road.”

Feeling like an idiot— wasn’t that what Scott had called her?—she mumbled her thanks and added, “I might bring it in on Monday if I have any more issues. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“No bother. Drive safe getting back home.”

“Drive safe,” Rowan repeated as she slid the pickup into gear and stepped on the gas. “It’s not the road I’m worried about, it’s the nutjob running around talking nonsense about me being dead.”

Just to prove a point, she tooted the horn, which now worked as well as it had the day her Granddad had driven it off the showroom floor. And the engine, the engine hummed like a well-oiled machine.



Rowan spent the rest of the day unpacking and trying to put the encounter out of her mind. Around mid-afternoon, when she got hungry, she brewed another pot of coffee and nibbled on grapes and an apple. When that didn’t satisfy her, she cracked open the lavender ice cream and devoured half the carton.

No matter how much she ate, she tried to put it all out of her head. But binging on ice cream didn’t keep her from picking up her phone and staring at the image of the headstone.

“Rowan Avery Eaton,” she murmured as she opened up her laptop to do a Google search of the name. It felt weird Googling herself. And just as she figured nothing out of the ordinary popped up.

She snapped the lid shut and admonished herself for falling for what was obviously some type of scam. But several minutes later, she reopened her laptop and Googled the name Scott Phillips. Photos of a National Guard soldier from Pelican Pointe, California flashed across the screen. Scott had indeed died in Iraq. That part was true. She blinked in disbelief at his obituary, rereading each paragraph several times before deciding she wasn’t going crazy. The guy even had a park in town named after him. Despite verifying his story, though, she

had a tough time getting past the incident, especially the headstone.

She jumped when her cell phone dinged with a text message. It was from Daniel.

Want to have dinner with me tonight?

I'd love to but I thought you were stuck at Vanilla Bean until closing.

I think I can trust Kiki one more night to hold down the fort long enough for me to take you out to eat.

Sounds like a plan. Casual or dressy?

Depends on your mood. The Pointe is fancier, dinner by candlelight. Longboards is low-key pizza and pasta.

It occurred to her she might need a quiet environment to tell him about her day.

How about we order a pizza, and you pick it up on the way here? I'll dig out the candles. :)

Now you're talking. Seven, okay?

Seven's fine.

Making dinner plans didn't mean she could put off buying groceries. She decided to push Scott out of her head and think about a list of things she needed. After writing down everything from toilet paper to wine, she grabbed her keys and bag and headed out the door.

Cape Geneva was located four streets over from Murphy's Market on Main Street. So it didn't take long to make the trip. But at the last minute, she decided to take the long way around via Ocean Street, driving past the pier and Daniel's ice cream shop. The Vanilla Bean Machine seemed to be doing a brisk business with a line out the door. Rowan recognized a successful enterprise when she saw it. No matter how much he protested, he'd likely be looking at getting a bigger shop by the end of the year.

She decided to test the radio on the Dodge, pushing the buttons until she found an oldies station that came in loud and

clear without static. To the sound of the Scorpions' *Winds of Change*, she continued along Ocean Street, past the hospital until the road narrowed into the lighthouse where she turned around at the keeper's cottage. Before heading back down the hill, she stopped to take in the view from the cliff. The sea shimmered in the golden sunlight and stretched on for as far as the eye could see.

Truth was, Rowan didn't like the water. She'd never been shy about telling anyone interested enough to ask. She'd had nightmares about drowning ever since she could remember. And yet, here she was, living in a seaside village smaller than San Diego.

As beautiful and tranquil as the scene was, a corner of her mind nagged with a troubling edginess that refused to go away. Chalking it up to the incident with Scott, she put the truck in gear and headed to the market.

She found a parking place on the side of the store and looked forward to browsing the aisles. She'd shopped here many times but always with a list from Gran. Now, as she walked through the double doors, she tried to remember the layout. After grabbing a cart, she started in the liquor section. Sticking to the same local winery label called Dancing in the Moonlight she'd sampled in December, she decided on two bottles of white. When she spotted a red from the same vineyard, she added one of those to her cart. But then a huge display of rum caught her eye. Smiling to herself, she picked out a bottle with a Havana label, wondering if Daniel would be impressed.

She moved through the coffee section, picking out a robust Costa Rican blend she'd never tried before and headed through the cereals, where she grabbed her favorite Special K. The meat aisle proved challenging because she wasn't sure how much she needed to buy for one person. She ended up choosing small cuts she could make into a stir-fry. From there, she perused the produce section, grabbing an assortment of organic vegetables and lettuce for a salad. In the dairy section, she bought more milk for her cereal, cream for her coffee, picked up a tray of cheeses with cold cuts just in case she

needed a snack. She was about to head to checkout when she caught sight of a woman she recognized from her Google search—Scott’s widow—Jordan. The woman had two kids in tow.

Rowan wheeled her cart in that direction, but before she could introduce herself or start a conversation, she saw Scott standing a few feet away. Feeling lightheaded, she changed course, and ducked behind the bread display.

What had she gotten herself into? She was beginning to think giving up the security of a stable job and moving back to this weird little town had been a huge mistake.



Chapter Three

“Wait a second. Slow down. You’re saying there’s a headstone at Eternal Gardens with your name on it? And Scott Phillips pointed this out to you when you went out there today to visit your grandparents?”

They’d already polished off the pizza and drank half the bottle of red when Rowan dropped her bombshell.

Sitting across from her on the sofa, Daniel did his best to play catch up, still trying to process the gravity of the situation. “Maybe it’s as simple as your grandparents purchasing a future plot for you and somebody made a mistake with the dates. Could be nothing more than a misunderstanding. You did say this headstone was several rows over from theirs. Maybe that’s the closest they could come to getting you near them, especially after you came to live with your grandmother. Cemeteries fill up, and the plots go fast. That’s a fact. But the thing is, if that’s the issue, it wouldn’t make sense for Scott to show that kind of interest in your headstone.”

“See? None of it makes any sense.” She showed him the photo she’d taken. “That’s my full name, my date of birth. No question about that. But it says I died in November of 1999, age four. I don’t see how the people who make the monuments could’ve made a mistake like that. Or why Gran would’ve allowed it to sit there all that time without correcting it.”

Daniel studied the image and picked up his wine glass. “That is weird.”

“That’s an understatement. It freaked me out. The whole thing freaks me out. I can’t stop thinking about it. Then I go shopping and see Scott again at Murphy’s Market. Why didn’t you mention back in December this town was haunted? That certainly never came up in conversation.”

“You were only here for four days as I recall. Hard to cover all the town’s quiriness in that short amount of time. Not only that, before you got here, I was pretty new to the area myself. I’m not exactly the expert on our resident ghost.”

“That’s not making me feel any better. Scott said something about being stuck in purgatory here on earth. He didn’t seem to be in a great mood.”

“I hate it when ghosts get moody,” Daniel cracked before turning serious. “Okay. Here’s what I’ve heard. You probably already know most of the basics. Ghostly sightings of him are prevalent around here. They’ve been happening now for more than a decade. People accept seeing him as a kind of rite of passage. For some reason, it’s usually the newcomers. Although he’s liable to pop up around long-time residents. Whoever it is, views him as their protector, a guy with good intentions who fixes problems.”

“Seeing as how I died back in 1999, I’d say that’s a problem he won’t be able to fix. Besides, up to now, I never thought much about ghosts. Even when companies organized ghost tours in the Gaslamp Quarter near my house, I never actually believed people would see anything spooky. I’d see mostly tourists taking the walking tour, usually around Halloween. But I thought it was hokey and another way to milk them out of their money. Do you believe in ghosts?”

Daniel took a sip of wine and leaned back on the couch. “I didn’t until I moved here. There’s no denying that Scott’s been a mystery around here for a while now. People claim to see him in different places, usually around the pier, or out at Jordan’s B&B. You know Scott’s widow remarried his old friend, Nick Harris, another soldier from the National Guard. She and Nick had a son together in addition to Scott’s daughter Hutton. They called the boy Scott, which ironically has to be a tribute to his memory. People have also reported seeing him in

the cemetery where he's buried, like you did today. Some have even claimed to have seen him in their homes. Others say he watches them from a distance. But no one knows the real reason behind his presence. Some people say he died while trying to save someone, others think that he's stuck in purgatory because he has unfinished business. But no one knows for sure."

The spooky conversation had Rowan draining her glass. She felt a cold draft that made her shiver, common in an old house. But the subject matter wasn't putting her at ease. Reaching for Gran's hand-knitted throw on the back of the sofa, she wrapped it around her legs. "And you think he's interested in me because of that headstone?"

"It's hard to say, but it's possible. Maybe he's trying to warn you about something. Or maybe he's trying to tell you something important, a message from your grandmother maybe. I've read stories about people getting messages from beyond the grave. Never experienced it myself but it could be what's happening here. Maybe this is Scott's way of trying to communicate with you."

Daniel shifted his weight and leaned closer. "Or it could be more sinister, like a warning."

"A warning? You're just messing with me now."

"No. Really."

"What do you mean?" Rowan asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"What if someone is trying to harm you? Someone here in town. Maybe they're planning something, and this is a sign that you need to be careful," he explained, picking up the wine bottle and pouring more wine into her glass.

Rowan sat in silence, mulling over Daniel's theory. In a way it made sense. After all, she had been receiving strange calls back in San Diego on her landline before she gave up her loft. But those had sounded like kids doing the typical heavy-breathing crank calls. And then there were the odd emails from

addresses she didn't recognize. She'd thought the emails were probably spam. But what if they weren't?

"Maybe someone is trying to scare me," she admitted as she told him about the strange phone calls and emails. "Maybe someone is after me. They started after I made the decision to live here."

"Who else besides me knew that, though? I didn't tell anyone."

"Logan Donnelly knew. But I seriously doubt he makes crank calls and sends weird emails."

"Word could've gotten out that you were coming here," Daniel said. "Small towns live on passing along those kinds of juicy details. And if that is the case, you need to be careful."

"Okay," she finally said. "So what do we do? Do we go to the police? Do we try to find out who's behind all of this?"

"How seriously does the police take stalkers these days? I don't think the authorities will help much. They'll probably think you're crazy."

"Gee, that makes me feel so much better. Not."

Daniel took hold of her hand. "Take me out there. Let's see this headstone. I need to see it for myself."

"I'm not sure I can find it in the dark. Plus, there's another problem. The cemetery closes at sunset. The caretaker locks the gate. I looked it up online before you got here."

"Come on, where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm pretty sure I left it behind when I was there this afternoon."

"We could climb the fence and get in that way."

She sent him a look of disbelief. "It's more like a six-foot tall stone wall with an iron gate. Besides, you're an upstanding member of the community, a businessman. What would people say if you got caught breaking into a graveyard?"

"Who cares? I want to see this headstone with your name on it."

“Daniel, who says the answer is out there at Eternal Gardens? The answer could very well be somewhere in this house, a few feet from where we’re sitting.”

“That’s true. But whoever’s in that grave could yield DNA. I’ve seen enough murder mysteries and true crime stuff to know that much.”

Feeling anxious, Daniel stood up from the couch and walked to the window. He gazed out into the darkness. He realized breaking into Eternal Gardens was a risky move, maybe even stupid, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that the answer to Rowan’s problem lay within the graveyard. He turned to face her. His blue eyes had gone darker with determination. “Look, I know it’s crazy, but I need to do this. I won’t force you to come with me, but I have to see it for myself.”

She sighed, rubbing both sides of her temples. “Fine. But if the caretaker catches us, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Daniel grinned, feeling a rush of adrenaline at the thought of scaling a stone wall. He tugged her off the sofa and pulled her into his arms, planted a long kiss on her mouth. “Partners in crime. Who knew?”

“I think you’re enjoying this. Who knew you had a devious side? I should probably change into something more appropriate, like all black.”

He chuckled. “There you go. You’re getting into the spirit of things now. I think jeans and our jackets should be fine. But we need to grab flashlights and maybe a rope.”

“I don’t believe I’m doing this. Just last week I was a respectable albeit boring graphics designer. Now I’m heading into a life of crime.”

“We’re not planning anything nefarious,” Daniel replied. “We’re not robbing a grave.”

“At least not yet,” Rowan tossed back. “You act like we’re on a mission to dig up whoever’s underneath that plot.”

“Not yet,” he fired back. “Look, you’re simply gonna show me this headstone with the date you died on it. How

tough is that?” He turned her around and swatted her fanny. “Now get your coat. We have a break-in to facilitate.”



As they drove north out of town toward Eternal Gardens, the silence in the car was palpable. So was the tension. The air seemed stuffy and made it hard to breathe. Behind the wheel of his Subaru Crosstrek hybrid, Daniel hit the button to roll the window down. On his left, the blackness of the ocean beckoned. He could hear the waves crash up against the rocks. His mind raced with thoughts of what they might find.

In the passenger seat, Rowan had reservations. But she couldn't argue with Daniel's reasoning. Getting another look at that headstone seemed imperative tonight as if she needed to make sure it was real. She needed someone else to see that it was actually there. Right now, confirmation meant everything to her.

As they approached the iron gate Daniel spotted the big-ass chain and the oversized padlock hanging there to keep out the riffraff. He estimated the height of the wall around the six-foot mark, but it still looked daunting in the dark. He made a first pass to check the area's security before turning around.

“What are you doing?” Rowan asked.

“I'm looking for cameras.”

She burst out laughing. “In Pelican Pointe? The only place I've seen a camera is on Main Street in front of the bank's ATM machine.”

“A security guard then,” Daniel revised.

“I believe the website mentioned a caretaker living at the back of the property.”

“As long as he doesn't carry a shotgun.”

“Let's hope he doesn't worry too much about someone breaking in,” she added, playfully punching him on the arm.

“You should know things like this. How long have you lived here?”

“Normally, I don’t make a habit of disturbing the peace, let alone the dead. Right now, I’m just ticking all the boxes, wondering what time this caretaker makes his rounds,” he explained, shooting a U. After pulling the car to the shoulder of the road, a sense of foreboding came over him. “A graveyard at midnight isn’t for the faint of heart.”

“Second thoughts?” she prodded.

“No. You?”

“Let’s do this, get out of here, and get back home.”

“I’m all for that. I’ll lift you up and over first,” Daniel offered, gathering up their flashlights. “That’s the plan. Then I’ll pull myself up and over to join you.”

Rowan nodded and opened the car door.

The air was chilly for late spring and windless as the two made their way toward the darkest corner of the wall.

He cupped his hands, creating a place for her to step and lifted her closer to the top until she found something she could grab onto and pull herself over. Once she was on the other side, he hoisted himself up and over, dropping down to join her.

They started walking, the only sound was the crunching of leaves beneath their feet.

He decided the place was surprisingly small for a cemetery, especially the only one in town.

Rowan dragged Daniel across the grounds, silently counting each row until she reached her grandparents’ plots. From that reference point, she began heading in a diagonal, south-easterly direction toward the smaller plot. It didn’t take long before she arrived at the one Scott had shown her. Aiming the flashlight onto the granite, she highlighted the name *Rowan Avery Eaton* for his benefit.

For several long seconds, Daniel simply gaped at the inscription while Rowan danced in place in the cold, waiting

for his reaction. She wasn't prepared when he blurted out, "My God, hearing you talk about it is one thing. Seeing a photo doesn't do it justice. Seeing it for myself makes an impact. It makes for an eerie sight, Rowan, seeing your name and birthdate like this. Something is definitely wrong about it."

She ran a hand through her hair. "That's why Scott practically forced me over here, so I'd know about it."

Daniel began to pace. "We need to come up with a next step, a plan. We need to find your birth certificate, see if anything's wonky about it. You know, like maybe you were adopted and never knew it. Is there any way you could ask your mother?"

"Daniel, I thought I mentioned my mother is in a nursing home in San Sebastian. Gran chose the location because it takes half an hour to get there from here."

"You did mention it, but you didn't elaborate on her condition."

"Nine years ago, she suffered a stroke from one too many overdoses. She's basically comatose."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Like you said, it's not something you bring up in conversation. My birth certificate is in a box somewhere. So are most of my possessions right now. I'd probably need to go through each one to get my hands on it."

"I'll help you." He took another long look at the headstone. "But I'm beginning to think the only way to learn why there's a gravesite with your name on it is exhumation. But how do we exhume a four-year-old we have no connection to? And who owns this plot? Who put her here? Who's buried here?"

Rowan shivered in the chilly night air and tugged her jacket tighter. "All relevant questions. But ones we should ask by a fire with a hot drink in hand."

"Agreed. Let's get out of here. There is someone we might turn to for help. Two someones actually. I used them to

solve a twelve-year-old missing person's case.”

“You never mentioned that.”

He took her arm and headed back to the car, trying to avoid bumping into other granite markers and headstones. “It’s not something you bring up in conversation. It happened back in high school. My girlfriend went missing the night of the prom. Lyssa Mayfield. I thought I was in love. Okay, maybe that’s a stretch but I was eighteen. Turns out she was seeing an older guy, a construction worker from out of town. But I didn’t know any of the details until I hired private investigators—Brogan Cole and Lucien Sutter—websleuths they call themselves. Long story short, they dug a little deeper, did some research, contacted the police chief back home, called in a search and rescue team who found that Lyssa and her new boyfriend had driven off the road into a lake that night. They’d been sitting there for a dozen years at the bottom of the lake, their car stuck in mud. Mystery solved.”

“Her going missing haunted you.”

“Well, if we’re being honest, her parents believed that I’d killed her.”

“They did not.”

“Yeah, they did. Lyssa disappearing without a trace was bad enough. But her parents thinking I’d killed her might’ve been worse.”

“So these websleuths are good?”

“They got an outcome and a result for me that worked. I’d recommend them any day, any time.”

“I don’t think I have the money for that kind of private investigation,” Rowan pointed out when they reached the wall.

“For me, they waived the fee and returned my check. I’m still not sure why they did it. But I can talk to them about their fee.”

“We,” Rowan corrected. “We’ll talk to them then decide if we need their help. If I can find my birth certificate, maybe it

will clear things up and we won't need outside help from anyone."

"You don't really believe that do you?"

She shook her head. "But like you said. We have to start somewhere."



Daniel drove Rowan back to her house, both of them lost in thought.

Rowan couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about the whole situation. She had lived her entire life thinking she was an only child, but now there was a four-year-old girl buried with her name on a gravestone. Knowing her mother's lengthy list of problems firsthand as only Rowan could, she wondered if Gwynn had kept a much darker secret.

As soon as Daniel pulled into the driveway, Rowan twisted in her seat to face him. "Could I be a twin?" she heard herself ask aloud.

Daniel took the question like a professor working his way through a puzzling hypothesis. Hand on chin, he thought it over for several minutes. "Was your father ever in the picture, ever involved in your life?"

"No, not that I remember. The only man I remember is my grandfather."

"Let's not jump to conclusions then. We'll cover all the bases first."

"Like find my birth certificate," Rowan said, hopping out of the Subaru. She ran up to the front door, turning the key, and went straight to the bedroom. Kneeling down, she pulled out a box from under her bed, a box she'd put there only hours earlier.

Daniel watched from the doorway as she started rummaging through the contents. After a few minutes of searching through old papers and stuff from school, she found

her birth certificate. She slumped down on the bed to scan every line. Her heart sank. Everything seemed to be in order. Her birthdate checked out, single birth by all accounts. Gwynn Eaton was listed as her mother. Some guy named Atticus Eaton was listed as her father. Her place of birth San Francisco. Nothing odd about any of it.

He sat down next to her. “Do you see anything that stands out? Anything weird about it?”

Rowan shook her head. “No. Everything seems to be in order. See for yourself.”

Daniel took the document, reading it, line by line. “Have you ever considered getting in touch with this Atticus Eaton?”

“Why? He’s probably another heroin addict. He might even be dead by now.”

He put a comforting arm around her. “Okay, you can cross the twin theory off the list. One down. I promise you, though, we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Feeling defeated, she rested her head on his shoulder. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“We can still talk to Brogan and Lucien. They have a website. I could go on there tonight and send them an email explaining the situation, ask if they have time to help.”

Her head popped up. “Before you do that, I just thought of something. I have a vague memory of Gran mentioning before she died that she kept my birth certificate in a safe deposit box at the bank.” She flicked her finger over the one she’d just found. “What if this piece of paper is a fake?”

“You’d have to wait until Monday to get into the bank and find out. Do you have the key for it?”

Rowan grimaced. “I’m pretty sure she kept the key in the nightstand.”

“Do really think your mother and grandparents are that devious? Do you really feel they’d keep that kind of secret from you?”

“I don’t know what to think. But my imagination is revving up in overdrive. I’m beginning to conjure up all kinds of scenarios.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t know my mother. Look, I don’t want to be alone tonight. Why don’t you build a fire in the fireplace? I’ll give you the whole sordid backstory about Gwynn Eaton. Just know beforehand, it’s not pretty. I don’t want you judging me or feeling sorry for me, either.”

He scrubbed a thumb down her cheek and tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “No one gets to pick their parents. Why would I judge?”

“Because I didn’t win the lottery when it came to mothers.” She patted his chest. “You start the fire. I’ll make us a drink. I’ll even try making you one of those daiquiris you’re so fond of.”

He cocked a brow. “Really? You have rum?”

She poked a playful finger into his belly. “Of course I do. Doesn’t everyone?”



Rowan got busy in the kitchen making the drinks while Daniel grabbed several oversized pillows and a blanket from the bedroom closet. When she brought in the tray, she found him already sprawled out in front of the fireplace, his long legs stretched out, trying to get comfortable.

He noticed she hadn’t fixed a drink for herself but was sticking to wine.

She waited for him to take his first sip. When he did, she saw his face light up and break into a wide smile. “Did I get it right?”

“I think I’m in love. You didn’t forget the cinnamon.”

She sat down cross-legged next to him. “Heavy on the lemon, light on the honey.”

“A little sweet, a whole lot sour. Perfect.”

“There must be at least a hundred variations of this drink online. Why the Hemmingway daiquiri?”

“Purely an economical way to go. My college roommate kept a stash of rum on hand. His dad was a distributor. While all my friends began drinking sugary, fruity stuff using Malibu rum that made you sick after a couple of drinks, I went in another direction—sour but not tart, less sweet. I discovered how cheap it was to mix them together. Lemons don’t cost much. The school cafeteria always had them sitting around near the tea. They kept honey on the tables, cinnamon too for oatmeal. The cheap angle was a poor college student’s dream.”

He knew her well enough to know she’d gone into stall mode. “Now, tell me about your mother.”

“Gwynn Eaton,” Rowan murmured and took a sip of wine. She let her head fall back on the couch cushion and closed her eyes as if talking about the woman was too painful to face otherwise. “My first memory was her passed out on the floor, a group of people standing over her. There was loud rock music blasting in the background. I’m fairly certain that time, somebody had the good sense to call an ambulance. I remember them wheeling her out the door. She’d overdosed.”

She opened her eyes and stared into the flickering flames of the fire. “Then there’s this other memory I have when the stench of marijuana filled the air as people took out their needles and shot up. Again, we never seemed to be alone but always had a large group of people hanging around who were in the same shape she was. During the worst times, the places we lived in were downright filthy. I didn’t attend school on a regular basis until I was probably eight or nine years old.”

“It must’ve been incredibly difficult to keep up with your class.”

“Oh, it was. I remember Granddad and Gran showing up, packing up my stuff, and loading me into the pickup more

times than I could count. They'd get her into a rehab facility, any one of half a dozen or so. God knows how much money they spent trying to help her kick her habit. Gwynn would stay sober for a while. One time it was for almost a year. But she always relapsed. Always. She spent a lot of time in rehab facilities or psych wards. One or the other. Social Services would contact my grandparents and they'd come and pick me up. And the cycle would start all over again."

"What caused them to finally take you in?"

"I remember Gwynn overdosing at a motel with it pouring rain outside. Gran showed up. So it wasn't much of a surprise when Gwynn shot up once too often and suffered a stroke, a massive one. It's that simple. She's basically a vegetable, has been for years. That's not how the doctors would describe her condition. But various ones told Gran eight years back that she'd never get any better. And she hasn't."

"I'm so sorry, Rowan. That must've been incredibly difficult on you and your grandparents."

"What did I say earlier? Don't feel sorry for me. It was tough, but I learned to cope. I survived. My grandparents were amazing, and when it was just Gran. She did everything she could to shield me from the worst of it. She made sure I went to school and had a normal childhood as much as possible. And she never complained once. We didn't have a lot of money, but she loved me and did everything she could to make sure I had food and a place to live."

"After the age of ten."

"Well, yeah. But before that, off and on, I'd come here to stay, sometimes for weeks and months at a time. That's why I can't understand how the Gran I knew would keep a secret like that headstone. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't add up. Gran wasn't like that. She was warm, funny, caring. We used to watch old movies together. I just can't believe she'd ever be a party to keeping something like that without telling me."

"Maybe she never worked up the courage."

"I suppose."

“Do you mind me asking a personal question? How do you afford the kind of care your mother needs?”

“Granddad had a life insurance policy. When he had his heart attack and collapsed, the payout was something like five hundred thousand dollars. Gran banked every penny. She lived like a pauper, clipping coupons, never eating out, scared to spend a dime on herself because she was afraid she’d run out of money to care for Gwynn. There were times when she went without to make sure Gwynn stayed in the nursing home.”

“And now that she’s passed away?”

“Some of the insurance money is still there. I haven’t touched it, and I won’t. It’s earmarked for Gwynn’s care. How can I spend it when my mother needs to be in there long-term?”

Daniel listened as Rowan continued talking about her past. He could tell it was difficult for her to relive it, but he knew it was important for her to get it all out. He reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that.”

Rowan gave him a half smile. “It’s okay. It’s made me who I am today.”

“And who is that?”

“Someone who doesn’t give up. Someone who knows that life isn’t always fair, but you have to keep going anyway.” She thought back to the scene at the cemetery with Scott. “I didn’t even back down when I butted heads with a ghost.”

“And you went out tonight to a graveyard in the dark,” Daniel pointed out with a grin. He could see the strength in her eyes, even as she spoke about the darkest times in her life.

“I couldn’t very well let you go by yourself.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then Rowan leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” he asked, turning his mouth to hers.

“For listening and not judging.”

He stayed silent for a moment, contemplating everything Rowan had just revealed. He could see the pain and sadness etched on her face, and he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and make it all go away, at least for a little while. He reached over and took her chin. “Don’t even think about sending me packing tonight. I don’t want to leave you alone, even if all we do is sit by the fire.”

“That sounds nice.”

He adjusted the pillows so she could get more comfortable. “If you turn around, I’ll give you a shoulder rub. You look like you need it.”

She moved her hair out of the way so his hands could get to work and settled next to him. “I’m so exhausted, Daniel. I feel like I’ve been on the go for three days.”

“Shh,” he whispered as his hands moved along her shoulders. “You could probably use eight solid hours. Close your eyes. Let the wine work its magic.”

After ten minutes or so, she drifted off. He held her like that until the fire burned down to ashes before he himself fell asleep.



Chapter Four

Rowan woke up in their makeshift bed on the floor to an empty space beside her and the smell of bacon and coffee wafting from the kitchen. She'd slept like the dead, the first good night's sleep she'd had in weeks. But what she really needed now was to brush her teeth and get in a shower before facing Daniel and breakfast.

She kicked off the blanket and tiptoed down the hallway into the bathroom. After reaching into the tub and turning on the water, she undressed, shedding her jeans and top while the water heated. Testing it first before stepping over the rim and into the tub, she pulled the shower curtain around her. She shampooed her hair first, then slathered the sweet-smelling bodywash gel all over that left an air of hibiscus and vanilla lingering.

Her thoughts drifted to last night and how Daniel had been there for her. She felt safe and cared for in his arms and admitting that made her heart flutter a little. Not since college had she fallen for a guy so fast. She couldn't deny that she was developing feelings for him. If she was honest, those feelings had been there since December.

When the curtain jerked open, she jumped. But then she saw Daniel standing there with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Want some company?”

“You'll have to play catch up,” she noted, eyeing his clothes. “Starting with the shoes.”

He toed off his trainers, slipped out of his jeans, and pulled the T-shirt over his head. Once he joined her under the water, his hands went around her waist.

“Good morning,” he whispered in a husky voice.

“Mmm,” was all she could muster before he leaned in to cover her mouth. When he moved down to her neck, Rowan let her head fall back. A surge of warmth moved through her. “You scared me just a little. Even if this isn’t our first shower together.”

“Didn’t mean to,” he replied as his hands slid down to cup her hips. He shifted to the other side of her neck before going in for another kiss, this one more heated than the last.

Rowan felt herself surrendering, one velvety layer after another, her body responding to his. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Feeling caught up in desire, she deepened their kiss.

Hard, lean muscles angled against silky curves. As water cascaded over his chest, she trailed little kisses, licking away the drops while his fingers encircled her breasts.

Through the steamy haze, he used his mouth, his tongue, to take her higher. Wrapped in sensations like a throbbing ache, there was need now, glorious need.

Pleasure hummed along to a sweet song as she dug her nails into his back. By the time he reversed their positions, and she was up against the tile, he picked her up, slamming his way inside. He set the rhythm. Her hips matched the pace. Bodies jerked and quivered, as they shuddered to the slippery, slick finish.

To catch his breath, he rested his chin on the top of her head. “Okay to turn off the water now?”

Panting like she’d dashed up several flights of stairs, she managed to mutter, “I think that’s a good idea.”

Just as she got the words out, the water went icy cold. “I’m surprised it lasted this long.”

Daniel reached behind her and turned the handle. Shivering now, they broke apart long enough for him to grab a towel from the rack, which he handed to her. “You first.”

She threw the towel around her shoulders and opened the linen closet to get him another. “There’s more than one.”

“I hope you like cold eggs,” he said, using the towel to pat his face dry.

She took his chin. “I’ll take sex over hot eggs any day of the week.”

“Good to know,” he muttered before planting a sultry kiss on her mouth that made her head spin.

She dried her hair, bunched it up in a ponytail and grabbed a scrunchie, twisting it into a knot. She angled toward the bedroom to get dressed, then stopped. “If I haven’t said this before, you’ve got some moves on you, Daniel Cardiff.”

“I’m not bad in the horizontal position, either.”

“Now you’re just bragging.”

Over cold eggs and toast, they did a rehash of last night’s events. As she crunched on a piece of crispy bacon, she laid out another theory. “If not a twin, maybe the girl in Eternal Gardens is a sibling.”

Daniel shook his head. “You said it yourself. That would mean your grandmother never mentioned it before she died. Think about it, she went to her grave without saying a thing about another child.”

“I just don’t think Gran would do that. I’m beginning to agree with you. To find out the truth, it may take exhuming the grave. And that would mean getting the police involved.”

He took a gulp of cold coffee. “Don’t be mad. But after I woke up early—camping out on the floor wasn’t all that it’s cracked up to be—I contacted Brogan and Lucien. They sent an email back before we had shower sex. I went to find you to tell you about it but got slightly distracted.”

“Slightly?”

He grinned. “Bad choice of words. Anyway, their advice is to go directly to Brent Cody and level with him. Tell him about the grave. It is your name and birth date on it. That’s reason enough for an exhumation.”

“Don’t forget the eerie date of my death.”

“That should be enough for Cody to get a judge’s order.”

“But what if it’s not? I’m not doing anything until I get to the bank and check Gran’s safe deposit box tomorrow. Comparing birth certificates might get us somewhere.”

“Whatever you decide, unfortunately, you’re on your own until afternoon. Sundays I work the mixers, turning out all those delightful concoctions I sell to the masses.”

“Really? That sounds like fun. Want me to help?”

“I’d love the company, but if you need to stay here and unpack, then do that. I should finish by noon. After that, we could spend time on my boat.”

Rowan flinched. “Um, I’m not really a water person.”

“But the beach is six blocks from here with a gorgeous shoreline. Not to mention a fully functional harbor. We’re practically a fishing village, definitely a seaport.”

She shrugged. “Sorry. I don’t mind hanging out at the beach—I lived here for eight years before I moved to San Diego—I just don’t like boats.”

“We’ll have to fix that. What if I give you a ride around the bay going no more than five miles an hour? If it’s a seasick issue—”

Rowan bristled. “It’s not a seasick issue. You aren’t listening. I’m not getting on your boat. I don’t go on cruises. I don’t ride ferries. I don’t get in canoes or kayaks. Not even paddle boats. I don’t get in hot tubs. I don’t set foot on boats. Not ever. I stay on land like a normal person.”

“This could be a dealbreaker,” Daniel cracked. “I love my Sundancer, thirty-two feet of sheer joy. She’s called *Avalon*. I lived on that boat when I first got here before I bought my

house. My uncle left her to me in his will. The same uncle that bought me my first truck back in high school.”

“It sounds like the two of you were close. But I’m not going on the water,” she insisted. “I don’t doubt you love it, but I’m not a boat person.”

“Did you have a bad experience or something?”

She thought of all the nightmares she’d experienced since childhood and grimaced. “Other than screaming the house down when Gwynn tried to coax me into a swimming pool with her coked-out friends? Nope.”

Ready to change the topic, he let out a sigh and glanced at the wall clock above the table. “It’s not even eight o’clock yet. How about we table this discussion for now?”

“Fine. I’ll stay put and see how much unpacking I get done in four hours. Don’t you open up at noon, though?”

“Yeah. We get a lot of traffic from the after-church crowd around that time. But Kiki has agreed to take an extra shift today. She could use the dough. She and her boyfriend are planning a trip to Big Sur to visit an aunt or some distant relative. She needs the extra cash for gas.”

“How old is Kiki?”

“She’s seventeen but graduated high school last December after taking vocational classes. I’ve tried pushing her toward college, but she’s not the least bit interested. How’d you know you were a graphics designer?”

She glanced at the clock again. “I don’t think you have time to hear another chapter out of my life story. But I’ve always been good at drawing. You know, the old-fashioned doodling on paper kind before morphing to canvas. But for some strange reason, the pay is better when it’s done on a laptop using a software app. Go figure.”

“You do book covers, advertising, and marketing, right?”
He stood up and started to clear the dishes.

“What are you doing? I’ve got this. Go. Get out of here. Get your ice cream blended. You don’t want to disappoint the

kids if they can't get their chocolate fix.”

“Who says it's just kids? I get more adults that need a chocolate fix than I do children.” He went over to the kitchen counter and snapped the lid shut on his laptop. He tucked it under his arm and bent to give her a kiss. “I'll text you when I'm all squared away. Maybe we'll just take in a movie at The Driftwood.”

Rowan noted he didn't sound overjoyed at spending his Sunday afternoon in a dark movie theater versus sunbathing on the deck of his boat. “Let's just play it by ear, shall we?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks for breakfast,” she hollered right before he hurried out the back door. “And make more lavender ice cream!”

“I heard that,” he called out as he bounded down the steps.

Left alone, she sat there sipping her coffee. Why were all the guys she met married to their boats? “Or surfboards,” she said aloud, remembering a certain surfer who was the sweetest, nicest guy, except when it came to understanding her fear of water.

She got up to carry the dishes to the sink and began rinsing them off. Gran had never bothered to get a dishwasher, but thanks to the upgrade to the kitchen four months ago, Rowan had one now. She loaded the plates and the pans Daniel had used into the belly of the appliance and hit the start button. “Music to my ears.”

She whirled around to see Scott standing next to the table. “You really need to stop doing that! How many people have you given a heart attack by scaring them to death, appearing out of nowhere?”

“Touchy, aren't we?”

“I'm not. Couldn't you give a shoutout next time or maybe rattle a chain?”

“Like I haven’t heard that one before. Why are you so afraid of the water?”

“Not you, too. Isn’t it enough that I’ve had to put up with people making fun of my phobia. For as long as I can remember I’ve been afraid of the water. What’s the big deal?”

Scott stuck his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts and pondered that. “Have you ever tried to get to the bottom of your nightmares?”

“No. Why should I? It doesn’t bother me like it seems to bother everyone else.”

“Did it bother your grandmother?”

Rowan lifted her shoulder. “Gran accepted it as a quirky part of who I am. Why the questions? I have more important things to think about than riding around in Daniel’s boat. But I have a few for you. You’ve been around town for a long time. Why the sudden interest in me? Why didn’t you show me that gravesite before I left for San Diego? Why show it to me now and then not do anything more to help me figure out why it’s there?”

“First, you were a kid back then. You wouldn’t have been able to handle knowing it existed with your name on it.”

“Says who? In case you haven’t noticed, I had to grow up pretty fast with a mother like Gwynn. If I’d known about it sooner, I could’ve asked Gran for an explanation. Did she know about that particular Rowan Eaton and how she died?”

Frustration had Scott scrubbing his hands over his face. “The short answer is yes. She’s known the truth since the beginning.”

Curious how far this conversation would go, Rowan went over and sat down at the table, motioned for Scott to do the same. “What is the truth? Let’s talk about this like two civilized adults and stop playing games. I’m doing my best not to think the worst. But it’s difficult when the image of that headstone keeps popping up in my brain. I can’t just unsee that, can I?”

Instead of answering, Scott forced out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “All I know is what the rumors were. The story was that Gwynn Dewhurst had a baby girl at the age of seventeen up in San Francisco.”

“Who’s story?”

“Lynette’s. I’m not sure what the truth is exactly. Lynette claimed the father, this Atticus Eaton—the one listed on your birth certificate—was never in the picture. I’m pretty sure your mother was never married. I might be wrong, best to check for yourself, but I’m almost positive she wasn’t. Gwynn lived in this house with the child in relative peace. I don’t remember the little dying, though, let alone how she died. But her death could have been enough to set Gwynn on a path of self-destruction. She started hanging around with a bad crowd. The path she took from there you already know. I’m not sure yet how the headstone fits into the whole picture. That’s the puzzle. That’s the truth you need to find out.”

Reeling from that, Rowan slumped back in her chair. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Scott’s face twisted into a painful grimace. “I don’t think you’re Gwynn’s natural daughter. Or that you have blood ties to Jim and Lynette Dewhurst. There, I’ve said it. It’s on the table, so to speak, out in the open.”

“I did ask for the truth. But there seems to be a lot you don’t know. You’ve just admitted as much.”

“There are gaping holes everywhere. And that’s your journey of discovery.”

“How would I prove that Gwynn Dewhurst ever gave birth to a child in 1995? How would I determine who died back in November 1999 at the age of four without getting the authorities involved? The hospital would have records,” Rowan answered her own question, mulling over the direct approach. “But how would I be able to access that information? There’s the census. But in 1999, that would hardly be up-to-date information. They only conduct a census every ten years. The online obituaries might be more helpful. The cemetery should keep logs of its burials.”

Scott saw the wheels turning and egged her on. “Did Gran have any other living relatives that might provide you with a DNA sample that could be compared to the child at Eternal Gardens? Think outside the box.”

“Not that I’m aware of, but good thinking. I’ll dig around the house. Now that I know Gran kept this secret from me, I should be looking for anything that tells me where I came from, right?”

“Driftwood Cottage is the best place to start. Just remember, though, once you go down that path, there’s no telling what you may find.”

“I get it. The entire house of cards comes tumbling down on my head. I could be anybody’s daughter from her group of friends. Or do you think Gwynn snatched some random kid out of a stroller? Knowing her like I do, I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“It’s a possibility. You could go to one of those genealogy websites and see what comes up.”

Rowan brightened. “That’s not a bad idea. How long would I have to wait for them to send me a kit?”

“You’re asking a guy who hasn’t used a computer in over a decade?”

“Probably a week,” Rowan noted. “I wonder if I could get a kit locally?”

“Brogan and Lucien would know. And Brent Cody certainly would.”

“But the police chief would ask questions,” Rowan determined. “I need one like yesterday.”

“So now you’re eager to get at the truth?”

Rowan glared at Scott. “Gwynn turned me into her dead daughter, and Granddad and Gran went along with it. Do you know what a bitter pill that is to swallow? Do you realize I could’ve stayed in San Diego and been oblivious to all this?”

“But do you want to be oblivious about who you are?”

She made a growling sound in her throat. “I guess not. I need to find this Atticus Eaton. Maybe he holds a key piece of the puzzle.”

“If your mother didn’t make him up.”

“I hadn’t considered that possibility. Make up a name for the father. How clichéd is that for an unwed mother? That sounds like something good ol’ Gwynn would do. Could this get any more confusing? Technically, if what you say is true, I’m not even the original daughter.” She narrowed her eyes into slits. “Could you be wrong about this? Because last night I was convinced I was a twin. Now, less than twelve hours later, I’m basically accusing the woman I assumed was my mother of kidnapping someone else’s child.”

“Think about it this way. If Gwynn isn’t blood, then you’ve no link genetically to her history of addictions. Don’t try to deny that you’ve been afraid for years you’d end up like her. Although you do enjoy the obligatory glass of wine occasionally, you make it a point to never drink to excess. If you have no blood ties with Gwynn Dewhurst, then you’re in the clear.”

“There is that one bright spot. How do you know all this stuff about me? Should I be concerned about privacy?”

But when she looked at Scott for an answer, he’d disappeared.

“Figures,” Rowan muttered. “I guess ghosts don’t like it much when they’re the ones in the hot seat.”



Daniel parked his Crosstrek in the alleyway behind the ice cream store and went in through the back door, flipping lights on as he went.

Located at the southernmost tip of a small strip shopping center right off the pier, the Vanilla Bean Machine sat nearest the harbor. The shop consisted of a narrow space twenty-four

feet wide by thirty-two feet long with a combined serving counter and workstation on one side and room for eight small tables lining the wall on the other. The simple layout included a closet storage area with a walk-in refrigerator/freezer combination near the back door and an all-inclusive restroom.

He'd spent six months looking for the perfect piece of property that fit his main priority—it had to be near the beach. If you intended to sell ice cream to tourists, there had to be a draw that attracted people to the area. He knew that his bottom line depended on the locals, but he had to get the tourists through the door to put him over the top six months out of the year.

Santa Cruz had been too expensive, way out of his price range, so he'd looked around for other options. The winning deal came by way of Logan Donnelly, a real estate broker who wanted to attract more small businesses to Pelican Pointe. Between Logan and the banker Nick Harris, who dangled a generous lease option for the first eighteen months and a remodel allowance to get him started, he jumped at the offer.

With the money his uncle had left him, Daniel was able to afford the renovations on what could only be described as a rathole. But with a willing crew from Tradewinds Construction that typically built boats, they were able to overcome the deplorable conditions and accomplish the impossible within a matter of eight weeks. The Vanilla Bean had opened its doors with two commercial ice cream makers, shiny stainless-steel equipment, new fixtures, ceramic tile floors, sparkling countertops and sinks, new paint on the walls, and an eager owner who made a habit of personally greeting his customers.

But at the moment, he didn't feel particularly eager or friendly.

In the storage area, he opened the refrigerator, gathered up all the ingredients that served as his base—milk, heavy whipped cream, pure vanilla, and sugar—assembled the various fresh fruit mixes that created the custom batches that needed replacing, and loaded it all onto one of the two carts he used to transport items from the back of the store to the front

or vice versa. He wheeled it into the main dining room, where he stood next to the heavy-duty Plexiglas display case mounted on an antique maple wood base and inspected Kiki's cleanup routine from the night before. Kiki had been known to miss a few steps, but today, the counter appeared to be spotless.

Pleased with that, Daniel began to check the inventory. Sliding open the display case, he noted the almost empty cartons of cherry, vanilla, blueberry, and chocolate, making a mental note of the four.

He noticed that the peach was half-empty and wondered if what he had on hand would last through the afternoon until he could make more on Monday morning. After circling back to the storage room to grab the bag of chocolate mixture made from organic cocoa and semisweet chocolate chips that his grandmother had perfected over the years, he went back to the workstation.

For several long minutes, he stared at his reflection in the mirrored backsplash. He shouldn't have expected Rowan to appreciate a boat. Had he ever dated a woman who shared his love of the sea, especially when they could enjoy it from the deck of a spiffy little watercraft? Why couldn't he find a woman who liked to slather on sunscreen and sunbathe on the water? Not that he had all that much spare time to spend cruising around the bay. Or fishing. But that was hardly the point. And what was it with Rowan's phobia about water? That seemed just plain weird.

When he finally snapped out of his brain fog, he unloaded everything onto the workspace, next to the ice cream machines that cranked out the different concoctions. He started with chocolate, always a favorite. After snipping open the bag filled with his grandmother's premade gooey blend, he dumped the ingredients into the top of the unit and hit the button. He repeated the process on the other machine, this time with different ingredients, a brand-new recipe he'd wanted to try for months. With both machines going, the whirring noise filled the eatery.

Each machine could make eleven gallons in an hour, then required freezing for at least four hours before eating. Depending on what he had left in inventory from a week's worth of sales, it might take him four to eight hours to make up all the assorted flavors needed for the next week.

Today, he already knew he wanted to finish work by noon. That's why the peach would have to wait until tomorrow or maybe Tuesday when he got around to it. He'd push the new fruity flavor instead as a backup if anyone made a fuss.

He glanced across the room to see a figure he recognized. He'd seen a photo of Scott Phillips in a write-up online not an hour earlier when he'd done some research. Somehow, the guy had managed to sneak into the shop. "I heard you liked to make an entrance. I can now boast to my customers that I've seen the infamous resident ghost for myself."

"You should probably cut Rowan some slack about her fear of water. There's a story there. Aren't you the least bit curious as to why she feels that way?"

"Sure I am. I spent all of Saturday night trying to help her make sense of encountering a ghost, especially after you dropped that bombshell show-and-tell gravesite deal. What were you thinking?"

"I admit it wasn't my finest moment. But you can't deny she needed to know about the grave."

"No need now arguing about your method," Daniel grumbled as he wiped down the counter where he'd spilled chocolate. When he finished, he tossed the towel onto the cart and faced off with Scott. "But I do take issue with a couple of things. Why didn't any of this come to light when Rowan lived here before? You had ample time to confront her at the cemetery whenever she went out there to put flowers on Jim Dewhurst's grave. And isn't there any way at all you could wave your magic wand and tell her if Gwynn Dewhurst kidnapped her from one of her sketchy friends? Maybe point her in that direction. It'd certainly save us some valuable time."

“Do I look like I carry around a magic wand?” Scott deadpanned. “As to the first issue, Rowan asked the same question. I’ll tell you the same thing I told her. She was a kid. She needed to have a chance at a few better life experiences before dealing with this sort of thing. As to the second part, I can only speculate that Gwynn indeed must’ve grabbed a kid somewhere that wasn’t hers.”

“But you don’t know for certain?”

“Another thing I don’t carry around with me is a crystal ball that tells me everything that ever happened in the past.”

Daniel shoved off the counter. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I pissed her off when I asked her to spend the afternoon on the water. After that, she seemed—”

“Frosty,” Scott supplied.

“As frozen ice cream,” Daniel retorted. “If it’s any consolation, I plan to make it up to her.”

“Make sure you do. At least you knew your mom and dad. Rowan never had that.”

When Daniel started to respond, Scott drifted into vapor, there, on the other side of the display case. “That is so weird.”

“What is?” Kiki said as she entered the main dining area. “Did you know you left the back door unlocked?”

“I must’ve forgotten to turn the lock when I got here,” Daniel admitted, eyeing the clock. Kiki was twenty minutes early. He wasn’t used to an eager employee starting this early. “What are you doing here before noon?”

“I thought I’d help with the mixing, but I see I’m not the only one who got a jump on things. Want me to clean the windows?”

“Did you mop last night?”

“No. Was I supposed to?”

“It’s always a good idea. Mop now and save the windows for a lull.”

“You got it. You remember I’m taking the weekend off next week, right?”

“I remember,” Daniel said absently, already thinking ahead to Rowan. Maybe he should make her lunch. He took out his phone. By the time Rowan replied, Daniel had the Vanilla Bean Machine living up to its name. The whole place smelled like a combination of sugar and vanilla.



After Scott’s vanishing act, Rowan tried to unpack a few boxes until she became distracted when she came across a dusty carton containing papers tucked away on the top shelf of Gran’s closet.

She dumped the contents onto the floor and started organizing everything into piles by their importance. The deed to the house was in there, a document that proved Jim and Lynette had paid off their mortgage in 1990. Other papers showed Gran had taken out a thirty-thousand-dollar loan in November 1999, using the house as collateral, and paid it off ten years before she died.

She went through the stacks, looking for anything that didn’t add up. Not having a clue what she was looking for, it took forever. She even had to go through everything a second time, then a third. But then her eyes fell on a thick brown envelope, worn from years of handling.

She undid the clasp and tipped the contents out into a pile of old photographs.

Her phone dinged with a text.

How about lunch? Meet me at my house. I’ll throw together a pasta salad. You in?

She smiled. *Absolutely. What time?*

I’m finishing up here in twenty. Give me until one-thirty.

Sounds like a plan. I have something to show you.

Great. See you in an hour.



Chapter Five

At the corner of Seagrass Lane sat a 1930s Spanish-style, one-story bungalow with a red tile roof and terracotta-colored walls made of adobe. Built from water-resistant clay that kept the house cool in summer and warm in winter, Daniel had doted on the upkeep. He'd filled the front lawn with lava rocks instead of grass. The no-grass environmentally friendly option worked because Daniel had used native grasses and drought-resistant succulents to soften the landscape. The eye-catching covered entryway focused on its arched front door painted dark blue, accentuating the otherwise dull, earthy exterior.

When Rowan rang the doorbell, she heard Daniel on the other side of the door humming to himself.

"Aren't you in a cheerful mood?" she cracked when he answered the door. Standing in the entryway, she noticed the place smelled like a mixture of orange blossoms and lemony citrus. "It smells like an orchard in here. My house could use a bottle of that Febreze stuff or one of those plug-in air fresheners."

"It has been sitting vacant for the better part of a year," Daniel pointed out with a grin. He led her into the den. "I figured this time I might as well make an effort to make a better impression than the first."

"I don't remember complaining. We were distracted, as I recall. You took down the Christmas tree."

"Around the middle of February," he quipped. "I decided to switch to a sesame ginger chicken salad for lunch. I hope

that's okay."

"Sounds great. This is what's new," she noted, waving her hands up and down his frame. "I don't remember this culinary side to you back in December."

"Over the winter, I found that I liked to cook. Who knew? Or rather, I throw things together in a pan and see what happens. Earlier, I sliced a few mandarin oranges to toss on top." When she gave him a blank stare, he added, "On top of the salad. And when I got home, I made fresh orange juice. I guess that's what you're referring to—the orchard thing."

Looking around, Rowan decided the place was just as charming as the outside. He'd decorated his living room with earthy tones and rustic touches that made it feel warm and inviting. The main room was cozy, with a cream-colored sofa and a matching armchair facing the fireplace. The walls were painted a warm beige, and there were a few framed paintings of landscapes and photographs of what she could only guess was family. A vase of fresh flowers sat on a small round table by the window.

As he led the way to the kitchen, Rowan spotted the round dining table in the corner next to a sunny window set with what looked like delicate dishes on an elegant white linen tablecloth. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble for me."

"It's no trouble. I wanted to make up for—I might've been kinda, sort of an ass about the boat thing—it bordered on insensitive."

"You sounded disappointed that I wasn't into boating. It's okay. I might've overreacted." Rowan took a deep breath and looked at Daniel. She tried to ignore that pull in the belly and tried to remember what she'd been about to say. When the thought came back to her, she opened her bag. "I'm not sure how your morning went making ice cream, but I think I might've found something in a box of Gran's stuff that might be useful."

She pulled out a weathered brown five-by-seven envelope. "For starters, I couldn't find any baby pictures of me or any pictures before the age of five, so I went looking. The

only thing I found was this envelope buried in the pile I dumped on the floor. Long story.”

She slid out a stack of old photographs and placed each one in a row down on the kitchen counter. “Most of these are of my mother—school photos, some taken in the backyard. Like this one. It’s my mother at the age of nine or so. It has her name written on the back and it’s dated 1980. But these other pictures are of a newborn girl taken right after birth and a toddler up to the age of four. She doesn’t look like me. This child has lighter hair—a blondish-brownish color. Mine’s more copper colored. I have freckles. She doesn’t. And the nose and mouth are different. That’s what I think, anyway. Here, take a look. A second opinion would be invaluable right now.”

Daniel studied each photograph, even holding one up to Rowan’s face. “You’re right. These aren’t you unless you had plastic surgery.”

She held up her hands. “Not me. I don’t like needles. Another phobia,” she admitted. “How about something to drink?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Where are my manners? What would you like? I could open a bottle of wine.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll try the non-alcoholic approach for now. Some of that fresh orange juice sounds fine.”

“I also have fresh lemonade.”

“Of course you do,” Rowan said with a grin. “Don’t mind me. I’m slightly envious. While I’m still settling in, dealing with a ghost that’s dropped a mess in my lap, you’re all cozy and normal, making lemonade.”

He grabbed glasses from the cabinet, opened the fridge, and took out a pitcher. After filling it with cold liquid, he handed the glass off. “I’ve been here longer. As for the photos you found, let’s not go down the rabbit hole just yet.”

“How can I not? It’s obvious I’m not that kid in the photos. There’s somebody in that grave with my name on it. Or, more likely, she was here first, and I’m the outsider.”

“Look, even if the rabbit hole keeps getting bigger and bigger at this point, let’s get more evidence before we take that leap. The first order has to be a DNA test. Period. You’re just spinning your wheels until you find out definitively. You know it’s true.”

She drained her glass of lemonade. “Sure. But how do I accomplish that without going into court?”

He cocked a brow. “Do you have anything lying around with Gran’s DNA on it?”

Her lips puckered, trying to remember. “I boxed up some of her things when I was here last May immediately after the funeral. I’d planned to finish going through her stuff in December. Obviously, that didn’t happen like it was supposed to. Is it true that all you need for DNA is a hairbrush? Because I think hers is still in a box.”

“If there’s a root on any of the hairs, that’s a goldmine. You find the hairbrush and I’ll call in a favor with Brogan and Lucien. They use a lab in San Sebastian that has a quick turnaround. And that same lab has access to genealogy.”

“Without having to go to the cops and have them tell me I’m a whack job? I like that plan better,” Rowan said, pouring herself more lemonade.

“If we get DNA and it doesn’t match with yours, then you’ve got something to take to Brent that won’t make you sound like a whack job.”

“You know what, bring on the food. I’m suddenly a lot hungrier than I was.”

Daniel removed the salad from the fridge. After adding soy sauce and sprinkling in sliced almonds, he tossed everything together—chopped green and purple cabbage, fresh cilantro, grated carrots, mandarin oranges—and served it up with cold grilled chicken. He drizzled a sweet and tangy Asian sesame vinaigrette dressing on top for the finish.

“Yum. It’s good, really good,” she said, sampling her first bite. “Where did you say you learned to do this?”

“Glad you like it. It’s a quick and simple meal. Jordan Harris taught a class out at Promise Cove last January—five dinners in under thirty minutes—it was a big hit, standing room only. Jordan used fresh chicken. But this is bagged stuff I picked up in Murphy’s refrigerated section.”

“Nothing wrong with bagged. Does she do that often? Give lessons.”

“A couple of times a year. Last fall was her dessert class.”

“Ooh. What’s for dessert?”

“Ice cream.”

Rowan perked up. “Lavender?”

“What’s with all the women in town asking for lavender? It’s definitely a gender thing. The guys go for rocky road or the basic chocolate and vanilla while the women prefer the more seasonal flavors, especially during spring and summer.”

“I don’t know about them, but it’s the light and creamy texture for me. It offers the best of both worlds. And the color reminds me of spring lilacs. I love lilacs.”

Daniel made a mental note of that and got up to refill their glasses.

“Did your grandmother make lavender ice cream when you were a child?”

He eased back in his chair and thought of his grandmother on his father’s side. “Maureen Albritton Cardiff—everybody calls her Mamie—even her kids and her grandkids. She has a slice of French Cajun in her ancestry. She was a whiz in the kitchen, including whipping up her own simple but delicious recipe for ice cream.”

“And your mother? You never mention her.”

“My mother—Valerie Cardiff—is a piece of work. She seems to adore my sisters, dotes on them. That’s probably why they get along so well. My mother has always seemed distant where I’m concerned.”

“And your dad?”

“Dad often did his own thing. He worked a lot. But he spent his downtime in a solitary endeavor, either fishing or hunting. At least that was his story on weekends. I spent more time with my uncle—Dad’s brother—than I did with my own father.”

“The uncle that left you the boat.”

“Yeah. Uncle Bobby. There were lots of times Dad avoided coming home because he and my mother didn’t always see eye to eye on almost everything. They fought a lot when he was home. It was my mother who pretty much ruled the roost. What she dictated was law.”

“Sounds complicated. Few marriages are a sun-drenched walk in the park every day of the week.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“At least your mother tried with the family dynamic. Mine checked out on me years before I came to live with Gran.” She thought about Scott’s theory and what he’d told her earlier about Gwynn kidnapping a child. She relayed that information to Daniel.

He picked up his lemonade. “Wow. Maybe she lost her own daughter. That might explain why she went off the deep end. She couldn’t cope.”

“Then why would she take another person’s child only to screw up so badly and lose custody later?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she saw it as a second chance. Once addiction grabs hold of you, it’s ugly. Sometimes there’s no way out. Your mother lost control and never got it back again.”

“The second chance experiment certainly didn’t work, now did it?”

He got up to clear the dishes. “What do you say we put this aside for the rest of the afternoon and focus on something happier? Let’s take a walk on the beach. You did say you prefer land, right?”

“You’re right. I’m tired of hearing myself talk about all this. A walk on the beach means you get to show off your precious. Your boat,” she clarified, her lips curving. “I’m not a complete shrew.”

“A shrew? Have you been reading Shakespeare?”

Rowan sputtered with laughter. “Petruchio trying to tame the wild Kate? I’m surprised at you, Daniel Cardiff. In the eyes of the modern woman that play reeks of sexism and sexist stereotypes.”

“You’re the one who used the word ‘shrew,’ not me.”

“Let’s see this boat of yours.”

“Really?”

“From land, Daniel. I’m not getting anywhere near the water. Got any binoculars I could borrow?”



On their six-block walk to get to the beach, Daniel avoided the pier, coming in from the south side of the harbor. However, as they got closer to Smuggler’s Bay, within the span of a few minutes, he noted Rowan had gone from teasing and cracking jokes to a wall of silence.

Holding her hand, Daniel led her through the trees to a secluded spot behind the Fannin Marine Rescue Center. The sun was high in the sky, casting warm rays on their faces. As far as the eye could see, the water in the harbor sparkled like a million glittering diamonds. For a moment, the scenery proved serene and calming. But the minute Rowan heard the sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline and caught sight of the boats bobbing in the bay, the tranquility he’d hoped for shattered.

Rowan’s heart rate had quickened. She yanked her hand out of Daniel’s and looked around for a place to sit down. She picked the nearest rock without venturing further out to the jetty and twisted off the cap to the bottle of water she’d

brought. After chugging down a big gulp for courage, she patted the rock beside her.

He sat down next to her shoulder to shoulder. An arm went around her back. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

But he noted that she didn’t look fine. Beads of sweat had popped out on her forehead. She’d turned pale. He’d never seen anyone react to standing ten feet from the shoreline like this. “I’m sorry. I thought this was a good idea. Beautiful day. The beach is so close—”

She didn’t let him finish. “It’s a perfect day for a walk. I’m fine, really.” Forcing herself to calm down, she filled her lungs with the ocean air and decided to change the subject. “Which boat is yours?”

He gestured toward a gleaming thirty-two-foot cruiser anchored some twenty feet away. “*Avalon*. In Celtic legend, it’s the place where they forged King Arthur’s sword.”

Rowan raised her brows and turned to look at him. “A fan of King Arthur would know that Avalon is also where they buried him.”

“That’s one interpretation,” Daniel replied, glad to have her talking. “It’s also known as a place of rebirth and healing.”

“If you say so.”

“You wouldn’t understand the connection between a man and his boat.”

“Try me,” she said with a wink.

Daniel leaned in closer, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “It’s like a woman, you see. She’s beautiful, she’s powerful, and she’s always there to take you away from your troubles at the end of the day.”

Rowan tried to hide the amusement that threatened to bubble within her. “More like an escape hatch from the day’s grind.”

Daniel chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “That too. I won’t lie. To me, the wind and waves can cast a magical spell when you’re on the water.”

She could see his pride in the boat on his face and knew it held a special place in his heart. She knew he expected her to be more thrilled about it. “I’m not suggesting it’s a bad thing. Everyone needs an escape hatch. No argument from me. I appreciate you trying to take my mind off things.”

“But you’re ready to head back home.”

“No, not yet.” She took his hand in hers and stood up. “Let’s walk down to where it’s anchored and take it slow. Don’t get your hopes up. I have no intention of getting on it. But why don’t you hop on board, and I’ll take a photo on my phone, maybe even a video.”

“It’s a start,” Daniel said, looking into her eyes. As soon as he got the chance, he planned to look up fear of water. Because something seemed way off about Rowan’s phobia. But for now, he accepted the offer at face value.

Hand in hand, they walked toward the *Avalon*. But he felt her stiffen up the closer they got to the ramp.

“I’ll stay here,” she said as she gave him a little push onto the slip. “I’ll watch you board.”

Beginning to feel silly about the entire exercise, he made his way out onto the dock and hopped aboard. He immediately felt the hypnotic rhythm that had always lifted his spirits whenever he was on the water. Now, standing on the bow, he felt the weight of her gaze. He saw her take out her phone, saw her lining up the shot, and waved while she took a series of photos.

The tide came in and out, the ocean lapping against the boat. The gentle rocking of the skiff became a mesmerizing fear, slowly inching its way to the pit of Rowan’s stomach. The darkness of the water crept in, enveloping her like thick molasses. Her head began to ache. She felt like she could no longer breathe. She tried to claw her way to the surface.

Unaware Rowan was in trouble, Daniel hammed it up for the photos until she dropped like an anchor in front of him, he couldn't get off the boat fast enough. He ran to where she'd fainted. Out cold, he patted her cheeks. When that didn't work, he picked up the water bottle and used the contents to douse her face.

That brought her around with a shriek, stuttering incoherently in a half-moan just before her eyes fluttered open. She tried to sit up but instead managed to latch onto his T-shirt. Trembling, she whispered, "I think I just blacked out."

"Scared me half to death," Daniel grumbled, wrapping his arms around her. "Give a guy a warning next time, will you? You tried to tell me this was a problem and that you hated the water. But I didn't listen. Has this ever happened before?"

"It happened a couple of times in high school," she confessed. "Since then, I got the message and steered clear of the bay."

"That might be an excellent idea," he sputtered. But he was still trying to recover from the stunned panic of watching her fall, his stomach churning in knots, his heart beating at a rapid rate. Doing his best to regain his composure, he plopped down next to her. All he could think about at the moment was how the hell she planned to live this close to the water in a seaside village.

She must have read his thoughts because, still clinging to him, she muttered, "I'll be okay. What I could really use about now is some lavender ice cream—a double scoop."

"Are you sure you're okay? Do we need to go to the emergency room?"

Wiping water from her face, she tried to get to her feet. "I'm fine. It's a panic attack. Some people categorize it as an anxiety attack."

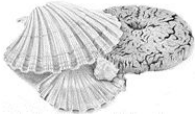
"Do you take medication for it?"

"No. I usually just avoid the water. Can we go now?" She looped an arm through his.

"Sure. Let's go get that ice cream."

“Mind if I hang onto you for a bit?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”



Chapter Six

They spent Sunday evening back at his place. After scrolling through several streaming channels, they agreed on a movie—an action-packed thriller—with Keanu Reeves taking on a steady flow of underworld assassins. They watched the film munching on popcorn without much chatter between them.

But Daniel couldn't get past the event near the water. It nagged at him. He couldn't forget how she had dropped like a rock right in front of him. If she'd been in the water, she might've drowned.

As intriguing as the final scene was, when the movie ended, he'd lost track of the plot.

While the credits rolled, Rowan yawned and stretched and curled up next to him, snuggling into his side. "You've been awfully quiet."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Sorry, just thinking."

"About what?" she asked, her voice soft and dreamy.

"The beach—you know—what happened." He turned to her, his eyes clouded with worry. He took in her face, her hair. Her eyes seemed sleepy in the low light, but he noticed they had flickered with irritation. "What?"

"Let's not talk about that," she suggested, yawning again.

He toyed with a loose strand of her hair. "There's a therapist in town who—"

She jerked away, fire in those green eyes of hers. “I’m not pouring my problems out to a therapist. I did that enough as a kid with social workers. I won’t go down that road again. If you’re unable to drop what happened, then I’m going home and going to bed.” She stood up. “I have to finish going through Gran’s things anyway. I left a mess spread out on the floor to come over here this afternoon.”

Daniel sighed. He should’ve known he couldn’t force her to talk about it. He took her hand and tugged her back on the sofa. “You do look tired, but you don’t have to go home yet. It’s not even nine o’clock yet.”

“But I do have to head to the bank tomorrow first thing.”

“The lobby doesn’t open until ten.”

“Good to know,” Rowan said with a nod. With an awkward silence hanging between them, she stared at the TV screen, the menu looping on repeat. “I’m not ready to go home to that empty house. Want to watch a comedy on Netflix?”

“Sure.”

She sat back down, angling toward him before picking up the remote. “Look, I appreciate you worrying about me, but I shouldn’t have pushed it so close to the boat. I knew better. The thing is, I was trying to impress you.”

This time, Daniel recognized the minefield and kept his mouth shut. He took the remote out of her hand and hit play. “Just know that I’m here if you need to talk about it.”

Satisfied, the debate was over, she settled back on the sofa into the comfort of his arms and slumped against him. But the comedy series turned out to be a dud and put Rowan to sleep before the first episode ended.

He turned the volume down on the TV and waited until her breathing evened out, indicating to him that she’d gone into a deep sleep, before extricating himself from her embrace. Getting to his feet, he bent down, scooped her up, and carried her into the bedroom. She woke up briefly when he slipped off her shoes.

In a husky, drowsy voice, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Just getting you ready for bed,” he replied softly.

“Oh,” she muttered, a half-smile forming on her lips.

Daniel tossed the comforter on top of her and tucked her in.

She curled into a fetal position and reached for his hand. “Stay with me.”

He hesitated for a moment before crawling into bed beside her. They lay there in silence for a while until Rowan shifted, turning to face him. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” He reached out, running his thumb over her cheekbone. “I’m here for you, Rowan. Whatever you need.”

She smiled dreamily, leaning into his touch, but her eyes fluttered closed as she drifted off to sleep again.

Daniel lay there for a while, watching her sleep, a pang of tenderness tugging at his heartstrings. He had never felt this way about anyone before. Why now? Why her?

Instead of dwelling on it for long, he got up and tiptoed into the living room. He cut off the TV, grabbed his phone off the charger, flipped off the lights, and walked down the hallway to lock the front door. But as he reached the entryway, he heard a faint noise coming from outside. It sounded like someone trying to jiggle the lock on the window. Then, as if the neighbors had spotted a prowler, Daniel heard someone walking fast, hurrying over the rocks in his front yard.

Peering through the peephole, he couldn’t see a thing, so he turned the knob and walked out onto the covered veranda, letting his eyes scan the street. That’s when he caught the faint sound of footsteps receding on concrete like they were running along the sidewalk.

He caught a shadowy figure disappearing around the corner of the house, running toward the alley, then darting through his neighbor’s back hedges. Somewhere in the

distance, he heard a car start up, heard the engine rev, and take off in a hurry. The noise of the motor echoed out into the night until it dissipated. But it was too dark to tell where the sound originated from.

He walked over to check the front window and realized someone had worked hard to jimmy the lock without success. During all the time he'd lived here, he'd never once given a thought to security—until now. Standing in the darkness, goose bumps formed along his arms. For several long seconds, he stared at his phone, wondering if he should call 911. What would he tell them, though? That someone had walked across his lawn in the dark? Not exactly a reason to alert the cops.

Instead of calling the police, maybe it was time to install cameras around his property. Had he interrupted a bold burglar who attempted a break-in with the lights still on?

Daniel wasn't sure what to think as he went back inside. But he made sure all the outside lights were on, hoping that might deter anyone considering giving it another try. Before heading to bed, he checked the rest of the doors and windows throughout the house.

After brushing his teeth, he undressed, plugged his phone into the charger on the nightstand, and crawled into bed next to Rowan, her red hair splayed across the pillow, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

But sleep wouldn't come.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, his mind racing with a dozen possibilities of what might've happened. None of them good. What if the intruder had succeeded in breaking in? What if Rowan or he had been hurt or worse? His heart rate spiked at the thought. He couldn't shake off the vulnerable feeling that settled in his gut.

He glanced at Rowan, fast asleep, oblivious to the events of the night. Her usually peaceful expression looked different under the dim light of the room. It was the face of someone who'd had a long day, and he didn't want to wake her up with his paranoia.

Instead, Daniel reached for his phone and started browsing for security cameras. He needed to do something to feel safe again. His search led him to a website with a variety of options. There were cameras designed for inside and outside installation with night vision features and high-definition image quality.

As he browsed through the different models, it dawned on him then. What if the intruder had made this his house the second stop? What if the first stop had been Rowan's place on Cape Geneva?

With a determination that hadn't been there earlier, he got out of bed, grabbed his phone, and went into the living room, where he dialed 911.

"This is Daniel Cardiff at 1802 Seagrass Lane. There was an attempted burglary here. But when I scared him off, I think the guy moved on to a house at 1821 Cape Geneva Drive." Not exactly the order of events, but close enough, Daniel muttered to himself. "Could you check out the Cape Geneva address? It belongs to a Rowan Eaton, who only moved in a couple of days ago."

"I'm on my way," a voice on the other end of the phone vowed.

If he'd made a mistake, he'd apologize, Daniel contemplated as he walked back into the bedroom to wake up Rowan.



Daniel and Rowan arrived back at her house just as a police cruiser pulled up at the curb. Still not fully awake, Rowan followed behind Daniel, who entered the house first. As soon as he flipped on the lights, they both knew someone had been inside. The living room was in complete disarray. Someone had removed drawers and emptied the contents, then tossed them on the floor. They'd tossed books into a pile for meanness and flung the sofa cushions into the dining room.

“They must’ve been looking for something to steal,” Rowan muttered.

“Then why not take the TV? Or the laptop?” the responding officer replied, his dark, serious eyes scanning the mess before pointing toward the shiny MacBook Pro left in plain sight on the dining table. Standing just inside the doorway, he looked younger than his thirty-eight years as the dim light hit his bronze skin. He had straight black hair cropped at his collar and worn tucked behind his ears. Wearing a pair of light-colored jeans and a dark blue uniform shirt with a gold PPPD insignia on the long sleeves, his sidearm of choice was a Glock 17.

“Theo Woodson,” he added, introducing himself before sidestepping an overturned lamp near the sofa. “You should’ve let me come in first.”

“Sorry,” Daniel murmured. “No idea why I rushed inside like that. They didn’t make it inside my place. I suppose I was in a hurry to see if I was right.”

“About the break-in?”

“Yeah.”

“When was that?” Theo asked.

“About thirty minutes ago. I don’t remember seeing you in the Vanilla Bean Machine before.”

“Near the pier? Not much for ice cream,” Theo countered, checking the lock on the front door. “There’s no forced entry here that I can tell. Did you lock up when you left?”

Rowan winced. “I’m not sure. I used the back door to get to Daniel’s house via the alleyway. He had invited me over for lunch. And I was in a hurry. I might’ve left the front door unlocked.”

She wandered across the room and was about to start tidying up until Theo stopped her. “Let’s at least document this for the record. Do you see anything at all that *is* missing?”

She glanced around, then without answering, Rowan dashed into the bedroom.

Daniel traded looks with Theo and followed her down the hallway. He found her on her knees going through the pile of paper on the floor.

“The box of Gran’s stuff I dumped here this afternoon when I found the photos. See? This is the mess I left. There are mortgage papers and deed documents still here.”

Theo scowled at both of them. “I feel like I’m not getting the whole picture here. Mind telling me what’s really going on?”

Rowan plopped down on the bed and covered her face with her hands. Her breath hitched and her voice cracked. “I don’t understand any of this. I only arrived Friday night, barely forty-eight hours ago. Less than twenty-four hours after I got here, I found out there’s this headstone in the town cemetery with my name and birthdate on it, along with my date of death back in 1999 when I was four years old. Then I found a box Gran had stashed away with photos in it of another child. None were of me.”

Theo’s eyes darted around the room as he tried to grasp the situation. He thought he’d seen everything back in Seattle. But now it seemed he’d walked into a funhouse with a distraught female worrying about photos. “And you’re upset because your grandmother thought more of that child than she thought of you?”

Rowan’s head snapped up. “What? No. I’m upset because I didn’t even know the child existed, let alone that she died in November 1999. Don’t you understand? The child had my name. How is it possible that two girls from the same family have the same name with the same birthdate? I’m not dead. I’m sitting right here.”

“Mind if I ask how much you’ve had to drink tonight?”

Before Rowan could answer, Daniel’s temper flared. “Unless she was driving, which she wasn’t, that’s irrelevant. I called 911 about a break-in at her place.” He took a step toward Theo. “But for the record, what she said is all true. I’ve seen the headstone for myself. Rowan, show him the picture you took on Saturday.”

Rowan swiped through her phone until she held up the photograph to the cop. “This is at Eternal Gardens. It reads Rowan Avery Eaton. That’s my name and my birthdate. Me. I have a birth certificate and driver’s license to prove it.”

“Twins, maybe?” Theo proffered.

“Not according to Rowan’s birth certificate,” Daniel clarified. “This whole thing has sort of ruined her homecoming. She grew up here from ten to eighteen. During those years, her Gran had custody. We’re not sure exactly what’s going on, hence the papers dumped on the floor. She was looking for some answers. Now the break-in tells me someone is looking for something very specific that has nothing to do with the ownership of the house or a fancy MacBook Pro.”

Theo rubbed the back of his neck, shifted his feet, and adjusted the holster attached to his belt. His eyes drifted to Daniel. “I take it the two of you were together at your place when this happened, right?”

“Yes.”

Theo nodded and angled toward Rowan. “Okay. Here’s what we’re going to do for tonight. You go back to Daniel’s and get yourself a good night’s sleep. If you haven’t packed a bag, gather whatever you need, a change of clothes, toothbrush, etc. In the meantime, I’ll take photos of this mess and hopefully get some usable prints to run through the system. And yes, I’ll dust both doors. But it looks like whoever came in here just walked in. Tomorrow, the first chance you get, drop by the station when your head’s clearer and make a formal statement about this girl who died. I’d recommend writing it all down first so that it makes more sense, maybe comes off a tad more cohesive.”

Daniel helped Rowan throw a few things into a bag and got out of there. But as soon as they got outside, he ushered her to his Subaru. “I see now why you were reluctant to go to the police. That guy was a jerk.”

“At least he didn’t accuse you of having too much to drink,” Rowan snapped. “Me, he treated like some hysterical

female with a personality disorder. And I didn't even mention the ghost part."

"It's weird," Daniel proclaimed as he started the car and headed around the block to his house. "This guy is so new he doesn't seem to know about the basics stemming from Pelican Pointe's most famous resident, ghostly or not. How could he not know about Scott Phillips?"

"Ignorance is bliss. I might not have moved back here if I'd known," she conceded.

"You're looking at this all wrong. It's not Scott's fault your family history isn't what you thought it was. He just happened to deliver the message."

"If Scott sees himself as helping, I don't see an upside to all this chaos," she noted.

After pulling up in his driveway and waiting for the garage door to go up, he shifted in his seat to look at Rowan. "What about learning the truth? Don't you want to know where you came from?"

"What are the odds I came from a normal family who's pined after their missing kid all these years? What if I came from someone just like Gwynn, only worse? Look at it from my perspective. I trusted the woman who I thought was my beloved Gran. And look how that turned out. I'm not exactly on a winning streak."

"But she obviously loved you. She tried to protect you as best as she could, even from her own daughter. She took you in and raised you like you were hers."

"God, I do sound ungrateful and pathetic, don't I? This is all hitting me from so many angles. I'm confused, angry, hurt, scared, and worried that I've made a terrible mistake giving up my job. I have savings and some money from Gran, but what if I can't make it here as a graphics designer?"

"The house is paid for, right?"

"There is that."

“You’ll at least have a roof over your head. But the one thing I’ve learned since moving here is that the people in this town go out of their way to support new residents or a new business. They did me. They’re mostly friendly. And if money’s that tight, then work from home instead of taking on a lease with Logan and Kinsey, at least until you get your first steady clients.”

“I did manage to bring two with me from my former firm. Clients.”

“Then build on that.”

She reached across the front seat and ran her fingers down his cheek. “Are you always this upbeat?”

“No. But I see the potential here between us. Don’t chuck it away because you’re scared right now.”

“You don’t even know who I really am.”

“I know you’re a great kisser, adventurous in bed, you have a stubborn streak a mile wide, a killer sense of humor, and you like my grandmother’s lavender ice cream. What else is there to know?”

She leaned in and took his chin. When their lips met, her troubles seemed to melt away. She sunk into the kiss, heat simmering between them until they broke apart.

She couldn’t let fear control her. She had to embrace her new life and the knowledge that things were not as they appeared. No matter how painful it might be, she had to uncover the truth about her past. “You’re right. Let’s do this. We’ll take on Gran’s secrets, one by one. But you need to promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“We won’t move too fast on this thing between us. My life’s a mess right now. Things need to smooth out for me before I can even think about focusing on a relationship. I have my house and you have yours. We’ll take turns spending the night at each place. When you need your space, you’ll let me know.”

“And? That won’t be a problem,” Daniel replied, driving into the garage and cutting the engine. He skirted the hood to open her door. “You forget, I know what it’s like beginning a new chapter. This ice cream thing was a scary proposition when I took it on. Do you think I dreamed as a kid of becoming the ice cream man?”

For the first time in hours, she tittered with laughter. “No. But I think you’ve found your niche. The ice cream man cometh. You’re much happier working for yourself than the dead-end career you had managing software releases for some tech billionaire.”

“And? I know there’s a point you’re trying to make but I must be missing it.”

Grabbing her bag from the back seat, she followed him into the mudroom, where she stopped to take off her jacket and hang it up on the peg by the door. “All I’m saying is that the next few weeks might get emotional for me. Or they could be extremely disappointing. In other words, I might be sky-high one minute or hit bottom the next, depending on what I discover about my Gran, my mother, or anyone else lurking out there on the fringes. In the grand scheme of things, you don’t really know me. I don’t know me. That’s the other half of scary, along with the uncertain job thing.”

He toted her bag into the kitchen and then tossed it on a chair. “So, you’re worried about something that hasn’t happened yet? I get it. We’ll take things as slow as you want to go. Just keep me in the loop when you’re on top of the world one minute and down the next.”

She trailed after him into the kitchen. “I can’t say I’m loving your sarcastic wit right now. It makes me sound like I’m bipolar, trying to cope with relentless mood swings. I’m not manic depressive, for God’s sake, I’m simply trying to tell you that the next few weeks might become a rollercoaster ride.”

She let out a grudging sigh as she cornered him at the counter. “How did my life go this far off the rails since

yesterday? All I wanted was a fresh start in Gran's old house. Was that too much to ask?"

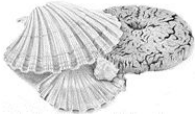
Beginning to understand the depth of her fear, he took her hand and kissed the palm. "It's okay to panic about all this hitting you at once. I'd panic, too. Why do you think I'm standing here trying to convince you that you don't have to go this alone? All these questions you have right now will sort themselves out. It'll take time and patience, but we'll get to the truth. We just need to tackle one problem at a time, keeping in mind that none of this is your fault."

She rested her forehead against his chin. "I'm not sure I can sleep."

He cupped her face in his hand. "Try. Tomorrow's a big day. First, we pick up a DNA test kit from that lab. The bank after that, then we see Brent Cody and lay all our cards on the table."

She looked into his eyes. "Things could get complicated."

"That's okay. As long as we're working toward fitting the pieces of the puzzle together, we'll be fine."



Chapter Seven

Daniel's alarm went off at seven-ten and when he blinked awake, he found the other side of the bed empty. But she'd left him a note on her pillow.

Gone to pick up breakfast croissants. If you wake up before I get back, start the coffee, or just text me and I'll grab cappuccinos.

She'd drawn a heart at the end.

He rolled over and picked up his phone, keyed in a text. *Get the cappuccinos.*

But after sending the message, he heard the mudroom door open and close. Curious, he got up, pulled on his boxers, and walked bare-chested out to the kitchen.

Rowan whistled at the sight, a sack in one hand and a tray of coffee in the other. "Be still my heart. I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed the keys to your car. Nice ride, by the way. At first, I thought I'd walk home and grab my truck, but then I thought, why do that when yours is parked in the garage."

She handed him a ten-ounce disposable cup with The Perky Pelican logo on the side. "Two shots of espresso with steamed milk. I didn't get your text but decided to splurge anyway on the espressos. The barista promised it was a perfectly layered blend."

"Paula Bretton," he muttered, breathing in the intense aroma of the full-bodied Colombian brew.

Rowan nodded. “Sounds right. There was a hunky older guy helping her out, a musician who said he owned the T-shirt shop.”

“Malachi Rafferty.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” She leaned in to give him a peck on his cheek. “You look like you’re not awake yet. How’d you sleep? I’d let that coffee cool before gulping it down. One breakfast croissant has bacon, egg, and cheese, while the other has sausage. Take your pick. I have no preference.”

Still trying to determine if he liked this cheery, chatty side to her this early in the morning, Daniel grunted, “All I want is caffeine.”

She nudged him into a chair at the table. “Go for it. I’ll take the bacon then.”

Rowan took a seat to study him better. His brown hair was mussed up. His blue eyes were bleary from sleep. The stubble on his chin had a day’s head start. Not so perfect or upbeat after all, she decided and sent him her widest smile.

He unwrapped the sandwich and took a sip of coffee, watching her over the rim. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re adorable.” She waited until he took another sip of the hot liquid and leaned closer, her hand finding its way to his upper thigh. “You know,” she whispered, “we could always go back to bed. I’m sure we could find ways to keep ourselves occupied until the bank opens.”

The hot liquid stuck in his throat and began to burn. He started coughing.

Rowan hurried to slap him on the back. “Gee, I’m so sorry.”

He smiled and ended the fake cough. “Gotcha.”

She slapped him on the shoulder. “That’s the thanks I get for offering a lazy morning spent in bed with you. Even after I got breakfast.”

He dug into the croissant. “We need to stay on track. Grab your Gran’s hairbrush, spit into a test tube, and leave both at

the lab for comparison.”

“I need to clean up the mess back at the house, anyway,” Rowan suggested. “We should probably take our own pictures of the break-in, too.”

“What do you expect to find inside the safe deposit box? You did locate the key, right?”

Rowan nodded. “It was in that box of stuff from her closet, not the nightstand. Weird. I could swear she kept it there.”

“How come you didn’t think to check it right after she died?”

“Because Gran left her will with her lawyer, Kinsey Wyatt, and a copy of it in one of the drawers of her nightstand. Kinsey had everything lined up for probate. Gran prepaid for her funeral. So that was all taken care of. The will already had paperwork attached to it that I was to give to the bank. Kinsey told me to see Naomi Townsend. Naomi helped me with the money side. There didn’t seem to be a reason to open the safe deposit box until this weekend. To answer your question, I have no idea what’s in there.”

“Hmm.”

“Meaning?”

He lifted a shoulder and wadded up the sandwich wrapper. “I don’t know. I thought my family had a lot of secrets. But yours might be a Pandora’s box ready to pop.”

“Gee, thanks. That’s a cheery thought. So your family had secrets? Do tell.”

Daniel shoved to his feet. He tossed the trash into the bin and gulped down the now-cool coffee. “The uncle I mentioned —”

“Uncle Bobby,” she provided.

“That’s the one,” Daniel nodded and flinched. Like a sour taste in his mouth, he spit out the rest, “He and my mother had a long-time affair.”

Rowan's eyes widened. "Define long-time."

"They were carrying on for at least fifteen years. I'm beginning to wonder if Uncle Bobby named me executor of his will because he thought I belonged to him instead of my dad."

"And he left everything to you, right?"

"Pretty much everything of value, plus a sizeable chunk of money, enough that I could think about starting my own business."

"Along with the boat," Rowan added. "Hmm. And he bought you your first car, didn't he? That's something a dad might do. Learning about the affair is the reason you had a falling out with your mother."

"One reason, sure. But not the only one. Look, we should probably get moving if we're planning to tidy up the house before we go."

"Thanks for telling me about your family," Rowan said as she added her trash to the bin. "Knowing that somehow makes me less embarrassed about my own messy backstory."

"Why be embarrassed? It's not like we had anything to do with where we came from. We're not responsible for the life choices our parents made. Right? I need to take a shower and get dressed."

As he marched past her toward the bedroom, she grabbed his arm. "Maybe you should think about taking a DNA test and finding out *your* true parentage. Ever think of that?"

Daniel nodded. "Sure. Why not? It might clear up the doubt in my head. We'll ask the lab for two test kits instead of one. We'll do it together."

"Do you have anything they could use to compare your DNA to Uncle Bobby?"

"As a matter of fact, I have his old captain's hat he wore whenever he went boating. I'll give them that and see if they can derive any skin cells or sweat from it. Who knows? We

could both be opening up a new chapter of our mysterious history.”



Inside the San Sebastian lab, a technician showed them to a small private room—more like a booth—to complete their test kits and bag the items they wanted the lab to compare once the results came back. The entire process took less than thirty minutes.

But when the tech told them it might take as long as eight weeks to get the comparisons done, Daniel dropped Lucien Sutter’s name as an incentive. “He and his wife, Brogan Cole, are the ones who recommended this place. After all the work you did for them, I assumed we’d get our results back with the same speed.”

The tech smiled. “Mr. Sutter paid dearly for that speedy result.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. How much extra do you charge for expedited service?”

The technician tossed out a figure. “That’s for putting a rush on the results and letting a genealogist get a crack at your family history.”

“When you consider we’re getting answers faster than most, five hundred extra a piece isn’t that bad. And I’m paying for my half,” Rowan insisted. “I’ll even pay for yours if it will hurry things along.”

“But I don’t need genealogy,” Daniel pointed out. “You do. I just want to know who my dad is.”

“*If* the results tell me there’s no blood relation to Lynette,” Rowan stressed before noticing the technician’s impatience. She angled toward the guy and looked him straight in the eye. “I know you think this is boring, but it isn’t for us. People usually don’t come in here unless there’s an urgency or a family mystery to solve. In my case, it’s a matter of finding

out why my name also belongs to a dead four-year-old girl with my birthdate.” She showed him the picture of the grave marker. “That’s not something I see every day, my name on a headstone.”

“No problem,” the tech muttered. “I can make notations for the lab on your kit that you need the genealogy done. On the male sample, we’ll use the M-Vac process to gather the cells from the cap and just compare DNA. How does that sound?”

“That’ll work. Is a credit card okay for payment?” Rowan asked, reaching into her bag for her wallet.

“We take any form of plastic from Mastercard to American Express.”

When they got back in the car, Daniel protested. “You didn’t have to pay my half.”

Rowan settled into the passenger side of the Crosstrek and snapped her seatbelt into place. “Look at it this way, it made things a lot simpler for the technician. One swipe and we were out of there. Consider it payback for the groceries you delivered to my door Friday night. Or all the meals you’ve cooked me since last December. And I probably wouldn’t be using this lab if not for you. Or getting the results back as quickly. I mean, come on, waiting eight weeks for a DNA test to come back would be pure agony.”

“If, you’re sure.”

“I am. Now step on it so we can get this bank thing out of the way. I need to get my home office up and running today. I have a Zoom call with a client tomorrow morning. The thing is my internet is slow.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“That’s because the house isn’t wired for Wi-Fi, just basic speed that takes forever to load. Six years ago, I had to beg Gran to get that installed even when I offered to pay for it. After much haggling, she finally relented, but only because I told her I needed the internet for work when I came back for visits. The coffee shop has faster internet than I have. I’m not

sure that will work on a Zoom call. What if it drops? Now that I'm out on my own, I can't afford to make my business look small-time. Things like slow internet could be a real turn-off."

"The town has fiber optic capability now, even as far north as the B&B. Ryder McLachlan is a whiz at installation. Leave it to me. I'll give him a call. And if, for some reason, Ryder can't get you wired today, you can use my office at the house for the Zoom call."

"See? Is there anyone in town you don't know?"

"My Christmas card list doesn't consist of all three thousand residents yet. But as the major supplier of ice cream, I'd say I know most who come into my shop on a first-name basis."

"That's handy, especially when you need WiFi."

"Or a plumber," Daniel retorted, pulling up to the bank just as the doors opened.

"I can wait here in the car if you want," Daniel offered.

"If you need to get to work, I can walk back home."

"I just need to go check and make sure Kiki took care of things last night and didn't get distracted when her boyfriend showed up."

"Who's the boyfriend?"

"Jared Washburn. He picks up extra hours from Tradewinds whenever they need him for a weekend job. He's a nice enough guy, I suppose, but he hangs around Kiki a lot when he isn't working. I depend on her to relieve me at the store in the evenings and on weekends. But if you ask me, Jared has too much free time on his hands. He hangs around the shop while Kiki's working. That usually means he distracts her, and she forgets the checklist about closing up. I'll be twenty minutes at most."

"No problem. I'll probably be inside longer than that. You go take care of business. I'll see you at the house."

Rowan got out of the car and followed a few customers into the bank, who headed toward the teller window. She, on

the other hand, veered toward the assistant manager, Naomi Townsend, sitting at her desk. She crossed the lobby and sat down in one of the empty chairs. “Hi, Ms. Townsend. Remember me, Rowan Eaton? My grandmother was Lynette Dewhurst. You helped me last May with my grandmother’s bank accounts after she passed away.”

“Of course, I remember. You were living in San Diego at the time. But now you’ve decided to move into your Gran’s house as of last Friday.” Naomi grinned, leaned across her desk, and whispered, “You’ll love small-town living.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“What can I help you with?” the bank manager asked.

“Gran had a safe deposit box here. We discussed it last spring. But now, I need to access it. I brought her death certificate with me and a copy of her will if that helps. And I have the key.”

Naomi waved off the documentation. “I don’t need to see that again. I made copies of it for the file last year anyway. Come on. I’ll take you in the back. We have a special place for box holders to sit where you can take all the time you need to go through the box.”

Naomi led her to the vault area and to an adjacent room with a table and a chair. “Your grandmother had one of the larger boxes. You go wait in there, and I’ll bring it in.”

Rowan sat down and began to fidget with the strap on her handbag. Why was she so nervous about this? Then she realized it was the anxiety about not knowing.

Naomi came in carrying a rectangular metal box, five by ten by two feet long. “Here you go. Take as long as you need.”

Rowan could tell the box was heavy by the way Naomi carried it. “Thanks.”

Left alone, she studied the box like it might hold the secrets to the universe. A full minute went by before she realized she was wasting time staring at it. She took a deep breath, stuck the key in the lock, and lifted the lid.

The contents resembled what she'd found inside the cardboard box at home—a jumbled mess of papers, two property deeds, an odd assortment of recipe cards with Gran's favorite dishes written down in longhand, five large envelopes, none labeled, and a handwritten list of her household furnishings for insurance purposes.

She started with the largest envelope and worked the clasp free, hoping to find more photographs. But she was disappointed. Inside contained nothing but old, yellow newspaper clippings about a boat accident at sea that sunk over twenty years ago. There were dozens of articles about the shipwreck, about the Snelling family lost along the coast north of Pelican Pointe during a Christmas vacation. The various articles appeared in different newspapers. From the San Francisco Chronicle to the Oakland Tribune to the more local Santa Cruz Sentinel, Lynette Dewhurst had kept them all. Rowan stuck the envelope down in her bag to read later before opening another thick envelope. This time, she found nothing more than outdated receipts for repairs done on the house from twenty years back.

She picked up a small purple bag trimmed in gold with the Crown Royal logo on it and brushed her fingers over the velvet. "I didn't even know Gran drank whiskey," she murmured to herself as she peered inside to see various denominations of coins. If she added up all the Eisenhower silver dollars, Kennedy fifty-cent pieces, and quarters, it probably totaled thirty dollars in change. Poor Gran, Rowan thought. She saved every nickel and dime she could over the years.

At the bottom of the box was another envelope, this one smaller. She was stunned to find a bundle of twenty-dollar bills tucked inside. After counting out the cash, she stopped at four thousand.

Rowan studied the money laid out on the table. "I don't understand, Gran. Where did all this cash come from? Why were you eating canned beans and peanut butter sandwiches most of the time if you had this kind of cash stashed away?"

Deciding at the last minute to empty the box and take everything with her, she stepped out of the room long enough to get Naomi's attention. "I don't have the space in my bag to take all this with me. Would you happen to have a sack or a grocery bag I could use?"

"Sure. Let me check the breakroom. I'm sure there's something in there you can use."

A few minutes later, Naomi returned carrying a cardboard box. "Will this do?"

"Perfect. Thank you." Rowan began to load up all the cash and envelopes.

After returning to the lobby, she saw Daniel waiting near the front door. "So, what did you find?"

"Not here," Rowan whispered, handing him the box before steering him through the double doors. Once they were outside on the sidewalk, she kept her voice low. "Before we go to the police, there's something you need to see. We need to go to my house and unload this stuff, especially the cash."

"Cash? Are we celebrating that you're now a millionaire?" Daniel joked.

Rowan snickered. "I wish. No such luck. Gran had a stash all right, but it was slightly more than four grand." At the car, she stopped to take the box out of Daniel's arms so he could unlock the doors. "Aside from the fact that Gran lived very frugally, the money's not the weird thing I found."

Intrigued, Daniel took the short route to Cape Geneva.

Inside the cottage, Rowan laid everything out on the dining table. She took out the money first, the bag with the coins, the inventory list, and the old newspaper articles.

Daniel picked up one of them, read most of it, and then skimmed the others. "I don't get it. Why would your grandmother care about a ship crashing into the rocks and an entire family drowning?"

"The victims. One was a little four-year-old girl named Hallie Snelling. When Naomi went to get a box for me to put

this stuff in, that's when it hit me—Hallie Snelling, a four-year-old child—maybe that's who's buried in that grave.”

Daniel scowled. “That's a decent theory. There's just one problem with it. Why would your Gran bury little Hallie Snelling and put a marker with your name on it? That doesn't make sense. Isn't it more likely that you could be this Hallie Snelling? The real Rowan Eaton was already buried for a month or more when this shipwreck occurred.”

Rowan dropped into the nearest dining chair. “Okay. But every single newspaper article claims that Hallie drowned.”

“According to these clippings, the entire family supposedly went down with the ship. But they're dated right after it happened. There are no follow-up articles to the story.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I don't understand any of this, Daniel. If there's nothing to this Hallie Snelling theory, then why did Gran hold onto all these newspaper stories?”

He took a seat across from her. “What if Gwynn did lose a child? They had a funeral. But then, after a few weeks, your mother shows up here at the house with another little girl. Gran gets curious and starts digging, wondering where Gwynn got hold of another four-year-old, seemingly a month after her own died. Short of kidnapping somebody's child, explain how Gwynn managed to get a kid. Those articles prove your Gran was serious about getting answers even if they didn't come from Gwynn.”

“You're saying Gwynn never told her where I came from. She just showed up with a kid, and Gran went along with it. What kind of person does that to another mother? Gwynn didn't just find me on the roadside, then tossed me into her car. No. There's a deeper story here, one that needs pursuing. But I need facts, proof of something, not speculation.”

“I see your point. But just remember, people do strange things out of love or when they're grieving.” Daniel glanced at his watch. “I need to get to work. When do you want to go see Brent Cody?”

“I’m not sure I do. I’m not in the mood right now to be told I’m the one who’s crazy. By now, Officer Woodsong has had time to write his report and make it as unflattering for me as possible. Hence the reason I mentioned proof. At this point, I have nothing concrete to tell anyone, let alone a cop.”

“So you want to wait?”

“Hey, I have a business to run, bills to pay like everyone else, and a huge mystery hanging over my head about who I really am. I’d say Brent Cody will just have to wait.”



Chapter Eight

To take her mind off everything, after Daniel left for work, Rowan tried to organize the small dining room into a suitable office space, using the table as a desk. She unpacked all the boxes labeled “workstation” and “office” and set up her Apple iMac desktop, including her twenty-seven-inch monitor. She spent an hour testing and configuring everything to make sure the devices performed to her satisfaction. She played with the setup until she found a spot where the screen wasn’t affected by the glare.

By one-thirty, Ryder had come and gone and worked his magic getting the WiFi up and running. Immersed in making sure all the software updates were current on her laptop, she was oohing and aahing over internet speed when she glanced up to see the ghostly Scott standing in the doorway. “What now? Do I have another dead sibling somewhere?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny,” Rowan said, pushing back from her makeshift desk. She stood up and flung her arms out wide. “Who knows what else is out there that I don’t know about? Why is this happening now when I’m just starting my own company? Why did you have to show me that stupid grave? Couldn’t you have waited a week, a month, maybe wait until Christmas to deliver bad news in my stocking?”

“You need to talk to Brent.”

“Why should I go to the cops? Have you met Theo Woodsong? It wouldn’t hurt if you introduced yourself to him

in the middle of the night. After all, timing is everything.”

“I’m not talking about Woodsong. Talk to Brent.”

The doorbell rang.

“That’ll be him now.”

“Who him? The Chief of Police?”

“Brent needs to know.” In a shimmering burst of scattered light, Scott vanished.

“Great,” Rowan muttered, trudging to answer the door.

Brent Cody wore a white shirt with a PPPD insignia over the pocket, dark jeans, and work boots. No uniform for this top cop. He carried a black leather-bound notebook tucked under his arm. “Rowan Eaton?”

“That’s me. Might as well come in. I’ve tidied the place up in case you’re thinking about walking into a crime scene,” Rowan enlightened. “Your guy took his own photos.”

“I read the burglary report,” Brent said, wiping his feet on the welcome mat before entering the living room.

“There was nothing taken. Did the report mention that? Someone came in here and trashed the place, looked around for something, then moved on to Daniel Cardiff’s place—where I was staying at the time—and jimmied the lock on the window there. Coincidence? Daniel didn’t think so.”

“The second attempted break-in wasn’t in the report,” Brent noted with a frown.

Rowan crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive manner, prepared to do battle. “Ah, you mean Officer Woodsong omitted key details? Now, there’s a surprise. Maybe it was because he assumed I’d been drinking—I hadn’t, not a drop all day—especially after I mentioned my name appearing on a headstone at Eternal Gardens. My mistake for full disclosure. Should I mention that Daniel had to wake me up to come over here? I was half-asleep. In my defense, I’ve been in town for approximately seventy-two hours—I’ve dealt with burglarizing, vandalizing, and your department marginalizing what happened. I’m not drunk or crazy. And I don’t do drugs.

I'm perfectly sane and more than a little miffed. I didn't even call the police Sunday night. That was Daniel's idea to involve a surly officer who implied I was drunk and making things up. I didn't wreck my own house after just moving in here."

"Are you finished?" Brent snapped. "You left your doors unlocked."

"Trust me, I won't make that mistake again either. Forgive me for thinking I'd moved back to the quiet little town I remembered as a kid. Don't worry. I'll install security cameras and a state-of-the-art alarm system before I depend on local law enforcement to keep me safe."

"Take a deep breath. I'm here to get the full story from you without assumptions or accusations. Let's sit down and have a civil conversation about what you think is going on. Take me through everything that's happened since Friday night, and we'll address it, one detail at a time."

Rowan blew out a breath and plopped onto the couch. "Fine. Please. Have a seat."

Brent followed her lead and sat down across from her, opening his notebook and taking out a pen. "Let's do this in chronological order. I know you inherited the house from Lynette Dewhurst. And you decided to move back after several years in San Diego."

"Yes. I'm a graphics designer."

"So what happened on Friday after you arrived?"

"Nothing. Daniel showed up with groceries. A neighborly thing to do since I only met him last December when I was in town."

"Okay then, Saturday. What happened Saturday?"

"After Daniel sent over a team of high schoolers to unload the van for me, I went to the Pump N Go to return the moving truck. While I was there, I spotted what looked like my grandfather's old pickup. Sure enough, Wally says he found it in some farmer's old barn. He fixed it up because Gran asked him to hold onto it for me. So I bought it—even wrote Wally a check. That doesn't happen in San Diego."

Brent smiled. “Standard operating procedure here. Wally knew your grandparents.”

“He did. And after I got in the truck, I was feeling nostalgic. So, I drove over to the florist, picked up two sets of flowers, and took them out to the cemetery.”

“And this is when you spotted the headstone with your name on it?” Brent supplied.

After learning from her mistakes, she left Scott out of the frame. “That’s right. A few rows away from my grandparents, I was shocked to see Rowan Avery Eaton carved in granite on another marker, especially with an August 31, 1995, date of birth that matched mine. But it also had the date that I died—November 27th, 1999. It freaked me out. But I had the presence of mind to take a photo.” She swiped through her pictures until she found the right one and held her phone out to Brent.

“That is extremely odd,” he agreed, studying the image. “And your grandmother never mentioned anything about this?”

“Not a word.”

“What about your mother?”

She explained about Gwynn’s condition and the nursing home. “Gwynn hasn’t been verbal for almost eight years now. I get weekly updates from the doctor or the staff, but I’m not sure which or that it matters who sends them out. I only know that her condition has gone downhill since I was here in December. I know she’s in bad shape. Before you ask, I haven’t been to see her since Christmas.”

“I’m sorry.”

Rowan shrugged off the sentiment. “No need. It’s the way things are. Any thoughts on who could be buried in that plot? Because it isn’t me.”

“And asking Gwynn about it—?”

“Is a waste of time,” she provided. “She couldn’t answer even if she wanted to. But you’re more than welcome to go out

to the nursing home and see for yourself.”

Rowan took back her phone and swiped through her contacts. “Here’s the name of the place and the number for Gwynn’s doctor.”

Brent jotted down the information. “And Lynette Dewhurst had no other relatives that you’re aware of?”

“Nope. A few weeks after my grandfather died, I came to live here with Gran. I was almost ten. I’ll be twenty-eight at the end of August. It was always just the two of us—Gran and me—even before my mother ended up overdosing. By the time she went into the nursing home, I hadn’t seen Gwynn in maybe three years. She hung around San Francisco a lot back then. Twenty-five miles south of there is Half Moon Bay. She loved that place. I might have been sixteen or seventeen the last time I spoke to her. That was probably my last chance at a lucid conversation. And, even then, she was high as a kite and not making any sense, rambling on about wicked people cheating her out of something or other. She had a habit of complaining. If I’d known about the headstone, I would’ve asked Gran about it, not Gwynn.”

“What do *you* think it means?”

“Does it matter what I think? Theo Woodsong believed I was a twin. But then my birth certificate says single birth. And why would a mother give her twins the same name?”

“But you’ve had time since Saturday to come up with a theory,” Brent pressed.

She felt like this guy was trying to back her into a corner. So she mulled over what Scott had told her before taking the bait. “Okay. Okay. Here it is. But label me a nutcase and the rumors will fly.”

“I won’t do that.”

“If you say so,” she mumbled, uncrossing her arms and leaning forward. “This is what I think. The woman I thought was my mother, Gwynn, had a child. That child died around the age of four. I don’t know what her cause of death might’ve been, but she and Gran buried that little girl in the cemetery.

At some point, they ordered a headstone for her. Maybe a month or two later, in her grief, Gwynn decided in her drunken-addicted state to snatch another child to replace her. That was me. The problem is I don't have any proof. I don't know fact from fiction. I'd need DNA to point me in some sort of direction. You should know that I took a DNA test this morning to see if I'm related to Lynette Dewhurst. If the results come back that I am a blood relative, then fine. End of story. I'll accept the headstone as a fluke. But if the test proves I'm not related, then I have no idea who I am or what to do next."

"I'll look into the death of a child, find out a cause of death, and go from there. Anything else you want to tell me?"

Rowan shoved off the couch and headed for the dining table where she'd left the newspaper articles spread out. She let Brent take the time to catch up before showing off Lynette's collection of stories about the *Celestial Moon*. "I found all of these in Gran's safe deposit box. Why would she hold onto these if she didn't suspect I was the little girl who was on that boat? The timing of that shipwreck is approximately four weeks after my date of death on the headstone. You convince me that there's no connection, and I'll shut up. Otherwise, my imagination will continue running wild until I stumble onto something that makes sense. Maybe I'm Hallie Snelling."

Brent took a seat before picking up each article and reading it. He then organized them into chronological order.

"Well?" Rowan prompted.

"You've made a compelling point. I agree there are lots of puzzle pieces here beginning with the headstone. I'm just not certain they add up to anything yet. Give me time to do some digging, starting with the birth of a daughter on August 31, 1995. I'll verify as much as I can with what I have. Running down records from vital statistics should be a no-brainer. I'll let you know when I'm able to verify a birth and a date of death. How does that sound for starters?"

"Then you don't think I'm nuts?"

Brent took out his phone and began taking photos of each article. “No. You have every reason to question things. I’ll assign this to Eastlyn. She’s the best online researcher I have on the payroll. And she’s like a dog with a bone. She might drop by later with a few questions of her own. Sort through this stuff before she gets here and pick out anything you find suspicious. Pick out what you want to turn over to us for further digging.”

“That’s fine.”

“In the meantime, I want to assure you we’ll get some answers. And when you get the DNA results back, I hope you’ll share those with me, in confidence, of course.”

“Sure. I’ll do that.”

“Good. Then we’ll talk soon.”



After leaving Rowan’s, Brent headed back to the police station. But he wasn’t happy. Sitting behind the wheel of his cruiser, he wasn’t sure if his disappointment was directed at Theo Woodson and the way the newest recruit had handled last night’s complaint or his own lack of direction and leadership. Maybe he’d misjudged Theo’s eye for detail. It wasn’t like a seasoned cop—especially one from a big city like Seattle—to overlook mentioning a second attempted break-in one street over by laying the groundwork for what might be considered a crime wave on his new turf. His team needed to share details like that. Reports from one shift to the other were vital—standard operating procedure—used to update co-workers on what happened the night before in case a follow-up became necessary.

Aside from that misstep, a good officer should never make assumptions or make accusations. It wasn’t illegal for anyone to drink inside their own home, So why bring it up on a burglary call?

All Brent knew was that the issue required a conversation with Theo to find out the reasoning. He had to make sure they were on the same page going forward. And the talk needed to take place before tonight.

He pulled into the parking lot behind the station and took out his phone. After hitting speed dial for Theo's home number and getting a voicemail, he left a succinct message. "I need to see you in my office as soon as you get this. We need to talk before your shift starts."

Brent took a deep breath and got out of his cruiser, walked up the familiar steps to the back door, and down the rear hallway. Before heading into his office, he stuck his head into the lobby. He waited for his most experienced officer to end her phone call before getting her attention. "Eastlyn, my office now."

Dressed in the department's latest fashion statement, a dark blue uniform with matching shirt and pants, Eastlyn Parker gathered up her iPad and followed him into his office. Recognizing the serious tone of Brent's voice, she was either in trouble or it indicated a major update in the car theft ring she'd been pursuing for the better part of six months. Since she hadn't recently done anything stupid, she figured it was about the case.

With a Beretta holstered at her waist, her golden-wheat hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, she leaned her weight against the doorframe. "What's up?"

"Shut the door."

"Is this a sit-down talk or a friendly chat?"

"We're not exchanging recipes," Brent snapped. "I have a job for you. You'll need to take notes."

He waited for her to take a seat before ticking off the details and then shoving his phone across the desk. "Take a look at those newspaper articles. You'll need to retrieve the real clippings from Ms. Eaton this afternoon and make copies for our file. Before heading there, try to find out everything you can about that shipwreck."

Eastlyn squinted at the screen, trying to read the small print. “This says the boat sunk maybe fifteen miles north of Smuggler’s Bay. Kids drowned. And before Christmas. How sad is that?”

“And I have a feeling it plays into Rowan Eaton’s mysterious history. How? I’m not sure yet.” He swiped through the photos to the one taken at the gravesite, then detailed more of Rowan’s theory. “How often does something like that occur? A woman returns basically to what she considers her hometown and discovers something like this. She’s so concerned about the child with her same name and date of birth that she did a DNA test this morning to find out if her grandmother is really her grandmother. Let’s face it. Rowan Eaton is a walking mystery. That mystery encompasses her very existence. It isn’t just the names that are the same, but the dates of birth. Think about it. What would you do if you saw your name and birthday on a headstone that indicated you died at four years of age?”

“I suppose I’d freak out. Didn’t this woman grow up here? That can’t be a coincidence.”

“She certainly spent enough time here as a kid before leaving for San Diego. After that, she came back to visit her grandmother. The woman left her everything she had. But for me, it’s not knowing who’s buried there or how the girl died. I want to know what happened to that four-year-old child back in 1999. And if it’s not Rowan Eaton, then who is it? And who signed the death certificate? What was the cause of death?”

“You got it. Mind if I ask another question, though? If nothing was taken, why was this thing at Rowan Eaton’s house classified as a burglary on the log sheet?”

“You let me worry about that. You focus on searching vital statistics statewide for a baby girl named Rowan Avery Eaton with that birthdate. I want details on her short four years on earth. I also need you to run down any missing children’s reports, females, from around the time of death, anywhere within the state. Narrow it down to within a three-month period after November 27th, 1999. Also, check the cemetery records and find out when that headstone went up and who

ordered it. I want exact dates. Pull Colt off patrol to help you track down any leads you turn up.”

“What about a warrant to exhume the child buried there?”

“We’ll put that on hold for now, depending on the results of Ms. Eaton’s DNA. But I’ll probably type one up just in case it comes to that.”

“Anything else?”

“I want the usual deep background check done on Rowan just to cover all our bases.”

“You think Eaton might be fabricating this?”

“No, I don’t. But it won’t hurt to make sure we know who we’re dealing with from start to finish. Maybe take her fingerprints when you visit her this afternoon. If she resorted to taking a DNA test, she shouldn’t object to fingerprinting.”

“Sure. What about Woodsong? He could do that. He’s been itching to take on more responsibilities other than night patrol.”

“All of us work nights when the situation warrants it. Keep me posted on updates every step of the way.”

“Will do,” Eastlyn promised as she got to her feet, opened the door, and ran smack into Theo’s chest. “Hey, you’re here early. What’s up?”

But she quickly sized up the situation because Theo had showered, shaved, and put on his full uniform. And the chief wasn’t exactly pleased about seeing him.

“Got a call from the boss,” Theo replied. “Thought I’d better get in here and tamp down any fires I’ve started.”

“Close the door on your way out, Eastlyn,” Brent commanded, settling into his chair. When the door banged shut, he cleared his throat. “Thanks for coming in early. I wanted to have a heart-to-heart about last night’s call on Cape Geneva.”

Theo hadn’t slept well, and it showed. The dark circles under his eyes meant he wasn’t adjusting well to the night

shift, maybe not even adjusting to the move he'd made. "Okay. What about it?"

"I know you're new to the department. I don't want to come down too hard on you, but why didn't you mention that there was a second attempt made to gain entry to another house one street over at Daniel Cardiff's place? Two attempted break-ins in one neighborhood are significant. It's information the day shift needs to know."

"I thought I did mention it in the report."

Brent pushed the paperwork across the desk that proved otherwise. "Where is that information? Show me."

Theo squirmed and shifted his feet. "Did Rowan Eaton make a formal complaint?"

Brent frowned. The question told him a lot more about Theo's interaction with the homeowner. "Ms. Eaton did not file a complaint. We do follow-ups here, Theo. Those usually fall to me, especially on a Monday after a weekend. If it's something simple like a noise complaint or a stolen bike, a phone call will suffice. But when it concerns a break-in, a burglary, a robbery, a theft of any kind, or a domestic disturbance, I usually follow up with an in-person house call. That's why I read every single report myself. Personal contact is part of the job. As the chief of police, I want to know what's going on in my backyard. It's my job to make sure you understand how important it is to communicate with your fellow officers. Your report is crucial in doing that. You're an experienced police officer, a big-city detective. You should already know that. I realize you might consider working here a demotion, a step backward. But everyone here works the night shift. No exceptions. When we do the next rotation, you'll move up to days and—Eastlyn or Colt, I forget which—will replace you on nights. Because we're a small outfit, I expect everybody to pull their weight. I went over all this when you expressed interest in the job."

Fighting off a headache, Theo rubbed his forehead.

"Is there something else going on here that I should know about?" Brent asked, his demeanor shifting into concern. "Are

you settling in okay?”

Theo ran a hand through his dark hair. “It’s an adjustment. The whole divorce thing, starting over in a new place, has me second-guessing myself. I’m not as familiar with the residents as you are. If I implied Ms. Eaton came across as intoxicated, I’ll apologize.”

“She was half asleep, Theo. Daniel had gotten her out of bed on a hunch that the same person who tried to break in at his place had already been to her house. Turns out he was right. So it wasn’t that hare-brained. There’s also this headstone photo she showed me.” Brent took Theo, step by step, through the same scenario he’d taken Eastlyn, catching him up on Rowan’s story. “I’m not trying to come across as harsh or condescending, but you need to listen to people when they tell you something. No matter how ridiculous it might sound, you need to at least write it down in your report. Make a notation of the absurd or outrageous. It’s the only way for the team to know how the call went down. Being unfamiliar with the townspeople is not an excuse. These people are now your people whether you’re feeling that warm and fuzzy yet or not. You need to convey to them that you care about their problems. I don’t expect you to become a social worker. Just take down what they say and write up your report to reflect their statements. Take the job seriously, even if we are small potatoes.”

Theo sighed in audible frustration. “I never meant to minimize what Rowan Eaton said to me. I’m sorry if it came across that way.”

“You’re apologizing to the wrong person. Maybe next time you see her, try expressing your heartfelt apology to her. The headstone thing might not be Seattle-homicide worthy, but we have a mystery to solve regardless. It could be nothing, or it could be something serious that happened decades ago. We won’t know that until we can explain why Rowan Eaton’s name is on that headstone.”



Chapter Nine

Rowan's meeting with Eastlyn lasted an hour. This cop she liked. She even agreed to come into the police station where she handed over a box of stuff that she thought needed another pair of eyes.

Unlike Woodsong, Eastlyn seemed to grasp how odd the headstone was. She also seemed to have done a thorough background check on Gwynn. She knew the woman had a drug and alcohol problem that went back forty years or more. For law enforcement, that meant she might be fully capable of snatching a child in a drunken, addicted state.

As the two women chatted and bonded over coffee inside the conference room, Rowan relaxed, especially after Eastlyn provided insight into how they intended to approach the investigation.

"I'm already checking records at Eternal Gardens, looking into everything about the timing of the headstone. When did the caretaker get permission to put it there? When exactly did the funeral take place? The cemetery should keep meticulous logbooks of everyone buried there. Plus, the chief asked me to use November 20 as a starting date, looking for any child abductions within the state around that time. But I've decided to widen the search to Nevada and Arizona on the chance that Gwynn might've been that desperate. Anyway, rest assured that we're hitting the ground running on this. And to make sure we follow every possible lead I'll need to take your fingerprints before you walk out of here today—for the file—

in case we need them down the road for identification purposes.”

Eastlyn laid a hand on Rowan’s arm before the woman could object. “We may have access to your thumbprint on your driver’s license, but we need a full set for matching purposes.”

“You’re talking about using my fingerprints if you discover a child was abducted during that time period, aren’t you?”

“Kids usually don’t have their fingerprints on file. But the weird thing about the 1990s in California is that lots of parents had their children fingerprinted as part of a big safety push, especially after several high-profile abductions made the papers. If you were snatched during late 1999 or early 2000, maybe your birth parents went that extra mile, too,” Eastlyn explained. “Let’s hope we get lucky.”

“Lucky,” Rowan repeated as she stared at the opposite wall. “Sure. It’s just that four days ago, nothing like this would have ever occurred to me.”

“I know this all feels like a lot to take in, but I promise we will do everything we can to get to the bottom of it. The Chief or I will keep you updated on any developments. In the meantime, don’t hesitate to reach out to me if you remember anything else about your childhood that might be relevant to our investigation. Anything at all.” She handed Rowan a business card with her contact information and smiled. “Or if you just want to talk, that works, too. Now, if you’ll follow me, we’ll get you fingerprinted and out of here.”

“How many people get to walk out of here after getting fingerprinted?” Rowan cracked as she pocketed the card. Grabbing her bag, she trailed after Eastlyn down the hallway to a booking room, where she went through the routine of getting each finger inked and then Eastlyn rolling the tip onto a print card.

Fascinated, she watched the cop work, impressed by the way the woman handled herself. “You have no idea how glad I am that you’re taking the headstone seriously.”

“Maybe by itself, it’s not that weird,” Eastlyn admitted. “But when you add in those newspaper clippings about a little girl drowning roughly five weeks after the date on the headstone without a body washing up, that’s more than an eerie coincidence. Then there’s you, sitting here with the same name on the gravesite. Good thing the boss’s radar went up right away.”

The process was quick, but for Rowan, it felt like it dragged on forever. She couldn’t wait to leave and put this whole ordeal behind her.

Eastlyn must have noticed her unease. “We’ll transfer these to a computer and keep them digitally for as long as the case is open. If there’s no reason to keep them, we won’t.”

“Really? You’ll remove them from the system?” Rowan asked while Eastlyn handed her a towel to clean off the ink.

“You bet. Unless you’ve committed a crime,” Eastlyn added with a wink.

Rowan rubbed at her fingertips, trying to wipe off as much ink as she could. “I haven’t. I pay my taxes and live a law-abiding life. I promise.”

“Then you’re free to go.”

Rowan thanked Eastlyn before heading out the door. As soon as she reached the pickup, she slumped against the door. She jumped when she caught a shadow out of the corner of her eye. Theo Woodsong stood a few feet away.

“I wanted to apologize for last night. I should’ve taken your comments more seriously. I’m not usually so insensitive when I go out on a call. Maybe it’s the new guy not yet comfortable in his surroundings.”

She noticed the distress on his face, the lines tightening at the corners of his eyes, the dark circles giving way to worry. He looked slightly rattled or maybe embarrassed. Or maybe the lack of sleep was catching up to him. It was that vulnerability that had her annoyance softening. “Don’t worry about it. I was stressed out, agitated, and worked up about the mess in the house. You might say I didn’t have the best

weekend. If you want the truth, last night, I was second-guessing myself about moving here.”

“We have that in common. Two newbies. Me? I left Seattle in my rear-view mirror. See? I should’ve been more understanding. Maybe I’m losing my touch as a police officer. I never considered how upset you were about the headstone.”

“It’s okay. It sounds crazy when I tell people about it.”

“If it’s any consolation, I think Brent was right to take it more seriously than I did.”

“We’ll see. They’re making inquiries. Isn’t that the standard line at the beginning of an investigation?”

Theo chuckled. “It is. Look, I need to get moving. I start my shift in two hours. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks. I will. And Theo,” Rowan tossed out, “hang in there. I’ve been told this place is a nice spot to call home.”

“I’ll try to keep that at the forefront.”

From across the parking lot, Rowan spotted Daniel carrying a double-scoop ice cream cone. “What’s this?”

“My newest concoction. I call it orange blossom custard. I just took it out of the freezer. You’re the first person to taste it other than myself.”

Her eyes twinkled with delight. “I’ll be your guinea pig any time.”

“It’s the least I could do after I got your text. It’s not every day you get fingerprinted.”

“Your gesture—while exceptionally grand—doesn’t entirely take away the humiliating sting of feeling like a criminal,” she said, holding up her fingers and showing off the remaining ink. She took the cone, licking the top before it melted and dripped onto her hand. “It’s delicious.”

“Ice cream is supposed to fix everything. I’m sorry it can’t fix this. How’d it go in there?”

“The bright spot was Eastlyn Parker. And Woodsong just apologized. We made peace. He says Brent is taking this as

seriously as the police take anything, at this point, under the circumstances. It's all conjecture so far, Daniel. I have no reason to believe my grandparents were part of a sinister plot to cover up a kidnapping. In my mind, that's a huge leap."

"Then maybe it's all a big misunderstanding, and there's a reasonable explanation—which Brent will uncover if given enough time to do his job."

She looped an arm through his, continuing to lick her cone. "That's fine by me. It takes a lot of energy to conduct my own investigation. I'm not sure I'm up for it. Besides, Eastlyn seems motivated. In fact, they all do. Wanna ride in my pickup?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Rowan finished off her cone before getting behind the wheel, her fingers sticking to the steering wheel. "Black ink and ice cream. I don't think I'd get that combo in San Diego."

"We can make a quick stop by the store. You can wash off your hands there."

"Good idea. It's time you showed me the secrets behind your ice cream empire. And if you don't mind, we need to sleep at my place tonight. I have that Zoom call at nine in the morning with my biggest client. I need to be at my best, not rushing around in the morning trying to catch my breath."

"So morning sex is out?"

She grinned. "I didn't say that. I just need to make sure I get a good night's sleep and don't look like I'm struggling to cope with a major life change."

"Who's the big client?"

"A medium-sized public relations outfit in Los Angeles. They do a lot of marketing and advertising for a chain of restaurants, a designer who makes trendy sunglasses, and several high-end fashion stores. Their need for brochures, special packaging, and marketing collateral could keep me afloat for at least a year or more. I know it sounds dull. But it puts food on the table."

She drove down Main Street, took a left onto Crescent, and pulled up in front of Vanilla Bean. “What do you think?”

“About the truck? It suits you. I didn’t think it would, but it does.” He waited until she cut the engine before sliding his hand across the seat into hers. “With so much on your plate, we’d better make sure you get eight hours tonight.”

“If I’m in bed by ten, that still gives me time to make dinner.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a homecooked meal. Aren’t you coming in?”

She rubbed her hand in a circle around the steering wheel. “This old thing has had more stuck to it than a little ink and sticky sugar. And if I’m cooking dinner, I need to buy a few essentials that haven’t expired in the last year. I need to clean out Gran’s pantry so there’s room to restock.”

“Does it feel weird getting rid of her stuff? Remember, I went through that with my uncle.”

“I wouldn’t use the word weird. It’s more like the official end of my childhood. There’s no way I can ever repay Gran for taking me in and giving me a home, especially if it turns out I wasn’t even a blood relative.”

“Adoptions happen every day. Kids grow up and never know their biological family yet inherit from their adoptive parents.”

“Whatever it is, it’s something I’ll need to accept, one way or another.” She leaned in and kissed his mouth. “See you tonight.”

He reached for the door handle. “Do I need to bring anything?”

She smiled, patted his cheek. “Not a thing. I’m even taking care of dessert. Although I wouldn’t object if you brought an extra carton of that dreamy orange blossom custard as Plan B. That is if you have any left at the end of the day. Judging by its creamy texture with just a hint of sweetness, enough citrus tartness to give it a slight kick, and its spicy full-bodied floral finish, I’d say you have a winner.”

“I like your review, but I doubt I’ll sell eleven gallons in one day. It’s never happened before.”

“You never know. When word gets out, the good people of Pelican Pointe might need their orange blossom fix.”

“Nah. Mondays are always slow.”



Although her expertise was in graphics design, Rowan knew a thing or two about marketing and PR. She sent out texts to the people she’d interacted with since arriving back in town. While only a handful—a total of four—she felt confident that by getting the word out through Lilly, Kinsey, Naomi, and Eastlyn, they would see to it that everyone in town knew Vanilla Bean had launched a brand-new flavor.

She didn’t stop there.

While shopping at Murphy’s, she decided everyone needed a reminder that Daniel now offered a new flavor. She hinted to the owner that he should carry the entire line of Daniel’s product. After all, his ice cream was the only local brand made fresh right here in town.

“I’ve already talked to Daniel about it,” Murphy informed her. “If we sell the ice cream in here, he wasn’t sure if anyone would walk through the door of the store.”

“But it’s ice cream,” Rowan admonished. “Who doesn’t like the convenience of walking in here just before closing and being able to pick up a carton of mudslide swirling in peanut butter and caramel for that late-night binge after a breakup? It’s better to stock up beforehand when it’s within easy reach of your own freezer. After all, what happens if the shoe drops—the one you’ve been expecting for three months—and Vanilla Bean Machine isn’t open? That seems easy enough. You open your freezer, reach in and grab your favorite go-to flavor you’ve had on hand for just this occasion—a jerk has just broken your heart. If it were me, I’d stock up on orange blossom and chocolate.”

“Ice cream is standard fare for those moments,” Murphy muttered with a nod, attempting to agree. “But ice cream’s not just for women, you know? Men binge, too, when they’re stressed. It’s the ice cream lover in all of us.”

“Aren’t you sweet?” Rowan cooed. “Of course men eat ice cream when they’re getting over the shock. A breakup is a breakup. Research shows they occur most often between nine p.m. and two a.m. Did you know that? What stores around here are open at that time of night?”

“I see your point. But here’s something to consider. Wouldn’t Daniel need a name change to go really all-in on production to sell in stores? As he pointed out himself, you can’t put Vanilla Bean Machine on a carton without people expecting every flavor to be vanilla, right?”

“Good point,” Rowan noted with a frown. “The carton really needs Daniel’s name on it, doesn’t it? Sort of like Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey. I can see it now Daniel’s Deliciousness.”

“Not bad. He should hire you as a spokesperson. Run that clever name by him and see what happens.”

Rowan’s mouth twisted to one side. Why had she gone and opened her fat trap? “You know, my initial response was to let people know about the orange blossom flavor today. Maybe I should butt out and let Daniel manage his own business affairs.”

“You were just looking out for his best interests.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t think it through.” She shifted her focus. “I’m here to pick up groceries for supper, specifically a pot roast. I need your tenderest cut of meat.”

“Served with fingerling potatoes and baby carrots?”

“Is there any other way?”

“That’s my favorite supper,” Murphy admitted, waving an arm toward the meat counter. “I just got in a fresh shipment this morning from San Sebastian’s local butcher. Nothing but grass-fed beef.”

“Now you’re talking. Because I’m running out of time. I need to grab what I need and get the roast in the oven. Otherwise, I’m looking at serving half-raw everything.”

“Tell you what. You grab the vegetables in produce,” Murphy suggested. “Let me pick out the roast.”

“Thanks, but could we keep it around three pounds? Anything larger won’t cook in time,” Rowan pointed out.

“Three pounds it is,” Murphy promised, darting off toward the meat counter more excited as his customer.



Chapter Ten

The moment Daniel walked into the house, he caught the smell of home cooking. It made his mouth water. It wasn't just the aroma of roasting meat but the unmistakable mingling of apples and cinnamon that hung in the air.

Rowan met him at the door. "How was your day?"

"You wouldn't believe how many people came through the door asking for orange blossom flavor. It wasn't the cones or cups they wanted either but quarts of the stuff to take home. We went through gallons."

Rowan's smile widened. "And you said Mondays were slow."

"You made pie," Daniel said, his eyes drifting to the hard shell of crust cooling on the counter.

"I said I'd handle the dessert." She stared at his empty hands. "Where's the backup ice cream though?"

"That's what I'm telling you. We ran out of orange blossom *and* lavender. I left the machine churning. I need to head back there later and transfer the batches into the freezer."

He spotted the linen tablecloth, the good dishes and silverware she'd set out, and the lit candles on the small kitchen table. "You didn't have to make such a fuss."

She perused his tall, lanky frame from top to bottom. She stepped forward to run her hands along his chest. "Oh, I think I did. Besides, this is me settling into my own home as an adult, letting go of childhood, and entering the land of home

ownership, thanks to Gran. I have such plans for this place. Like you did with your house, I intend to slap some fresh paint on the walls, redo the rest of the house, yank up the old carpeting in the bedrooms, and put my own touches everywhere. I want to decorate the walls with splashes of color and add some houseplants, watch them grow. Now let's eat before it all gets cold."

"Need some help?" he asked, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

"You could open the bottle of wine I picked up this afternoon. Dancing in the Moonlight's newest Pinot Noir, a blend of toasty mocha, dark cherry, and jammy fruit with a hint of vanilla tossed in for good measure. That's what the label promises anyway."

He grabbed the bottle of red and scooped up the corkscrew to twist and yank out the cork before filling two glasses. But all the while, he watched as she flitted around the room, humming to herself, getting the meat sliced before neatly arranging the vegetables around it on a serving platter. The scene felt like home to him. It was far too early in the relationship for him to feel this way. But he'd never met a woman so genuine and down to earth.

She could feel his eyes on her as she bustled around the kitchen, but she didn't mind. In fact, she relished the attention. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at her like that—like she was the only thing in the world that mattered. She turned to face him, her eyes meeting his before dimming the kitchen light.

"Candlelight makes a simple meal so much better. Don't you think?" she asked, her voice soft as she took a step toward him, her hand reaching for the glass of wine he held. Her fingers brushed against his, sending little shivers down her spine.

"There's nothing simple about this," he murmured, pulling out the chair for her, his mind splintering into a million lustful ideas. She looked so radiant under the warm glow of the candlelight. Her rusty auburn hair—slightly damp from the

shower—smelled like vanilla and warm coconut. She wore a simple green dress that matched her eyes and hugged her curves in all the right places.

“How’s the wine?”

The question brought him back from his lusty thoughts to reality. He sent her a smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Clearing his throat, he took a sip. “I think Hannah and Caleb have outdone themselves. This is good, really good.”

“Mmm,” she whispered, taking a sip of the wine for confirmation. It tasted rich and full-bodied, not unlike the man sitting across from her. She pressed her lips together, trying to keep her thoughts from wandering down that path to the bedroom.

Across the table, he watched her, his gaze intense as he sampled the roast. “The wine’s good but not as great as the food.”

There was a moment she almost suggested they head to another part of the house. But she’d gone to a lot of trouble to make this dinner special. She refused to let her hormones rule.

Sensing they were on the brink of foregoing the meal, Daniel raised his glass. “Here’s to your exceptional culinary skills. I can’t remember the last time anyone cooked for me like this.”

“Then we’d better make the most of it. Remember to save room for pie.”

From that point, the conversation flowed. They talked about everything from their favorite movies to their wildest, craziest outdoor adventures, keeping the dialogue upbeat.

“I once let a co-worker talk me into going on a three-day, twenty-five-mile hike through Yosemite Valley to Glacier Point, ending up at Bridalveil Fall, a waterfall that plunges six hundred feet straight down. But to get there I had to go through treacherous terrain with exposed ridges, dangerous drop-offs, and cliffs that turned me into a believer. I needed my head examined for trusting a woman with absolutely no empathy or willingness to take a break.”

“I thought Bridalveil Fall was near the entrance to Yosemite Valley.”

“Not if you’re a screwed-up sort with a death wish who insists on coming in from the opposite direction.”

“Yikes. Who was she?”

“Rebecca Scarsdale, a woman I thought I wanted to impress. Turns out she was the female version of Bear Grylls.”

“That would be Megan Hine. In real life,” Rowan pointed out. When he gave her a confused scowl, she went on to explain, “I watch a lot of TV. Megan Hine is the survival expert behind all the stunts. She tests out everything, makes sure the celebrities stay alive. You know, during all those adventure shows that Grylls does with famous people who don’t have anything better to do than crazy crap. Hine has survived living in the desert for three weeks. She’s been chased by people carrying AK-47s, and surrounded by hungry lions—not all on the same trip, obviously—but she claims she knows how to start a fire with a tampon. She knows a thing or two about how to live off the land and eats disgusting stuff—like lizards and bugs—to prove it.”

Daniel glanced down at his plate, pushing it away. “I draw the line at eating lizards and bugs.”

“Same here,” Rowan said with a laugh as she got up to serve dessert. “Ready for pie?”

“Nice segue.”

“That’s me. You definitely want me at your next party. I’m a conversation starter and ender. Nothing like going from lizards and bugs to warm apple pie.”

“I prefer the pie.”

“Then why don’t we eat our dessert on the front porch? You go on and I’ll bring it out.”

“Are you sure? I’ll help you with the dishes.”

“I’ll do them later. Go.” She watched him disappear out the front door before turning back to the counter to slice the

pie. After sliding a piece onto a small plate, she carried it out to Daniel, who waited for her on the swing.

The earthy aroma of summer permeated the air, with a hint of rain lingering in the distance. One of the neighbors had mowed their lawn. Rowan could still smell the fresh grass cuttings wafting through the neighborhood. The first hints of budding lilacs spread their showy fragrance carried on the crisp evening breeze as it mingled with the heavy scent of night jasmine.

She inhaled it all in before taking a seat next to him and handed off the pie.

“What? You’re not having any?”

“I just ate my way through my favorite dinner of all time. I’m stuffed to the gills. Promise me you’ll take some of that pie home tonight.”

“Ouch. That’s a subtle way of saying I’m not staying.”

“Okay. Take some home in the morning. But you mentioned how you needed to head back to Vanilla Bean tonight.”

“Unfortunately, I do.” He took his first warm bite of fluffy pastry filled with baked apples. “This is incredible. What woman knows how to bake pies these days?”

“I dug out one of Gran’s favorite recipes I found in her safe deposit box. It brought back such great memories of us spending time in the kitchen baking. I was seven or eight the first time she showed me how to make pie crust. By the time I moved in with her, she’d already taught me how to flex my cooking skills. I made my first pie by myself—chocolate cream, as I recall—at eleven. I always thought I was better at desserts than actual meal prep. But Gran wouldn’t hear of things like that. In her mind, I was as much of a whiz at throwing together a meatloaf or whatever meat we could afford at the time as I was at making a chocolate cake from scratch.”

“You can make a cake from scratch?”

“I can,” she said with a grin. “I’d simply forgotten I could cook like that. Living single who takes the time to cook when I can pick up the phone and order takeout from the Chinese restaurant down the street?”

“Cooking is a dying art. How did she force a surly teen to cook?”

“Who says I was a surly teen? She didn’t force me. I volunteered to learn. When you’re used to having a mother who doesn’t even bother stocking up on the basics—milk, bread, cereal or peanut butter, let alone a box of mac and cheese to make for supper—you realize you’re grateful for a real meal. And my turn to cook was always on Saturday nights. I made sure we had dessert on hand while watching her old movies. Remember, Gran never had cable TV. We had to rely on a station in Santa Cruz that showed classic films like *Casablanca*. As I got older, though, we’d sometimes settle for mixing up a batch of chocolate chip cookies on Friday night before settling in on the couch for a salute to Humphrey Bogart or a Katharine Hepburn marathon. But I’m convinced Bogie was always her favorite.”

“It sounds like you and your gran were incredibly close.”

“She was my rock, Daniel. I suppose I was an old soul whenever I was around her. And do you know what’s even weirder than that? I never wanted to disappoint her. Even when I started dating, I knew I didn’t want to end up like my mom. I stayed away from the fast crowd, the people who did drugs or drank heavily. I’d seen enough of that road to hell to last a lifetime. Instead, I hung out with the nerds, volunteered to make signs or do whatever project that allowed me to draw or paint.”

“I’d like to see some of your early artwork.”

“It has to be around here somewhere. Although, to be honest, I haven’t really seen anything other than the painting I did when I was fifteen that Gran hung in her bedroom.”

“The one above her bed, the old Victorian that’s now home to Promise Cove B&B? Were you aware that Scott Phillips grew up there?”

“No way. Really? Maybe I made a connection to that place even then, probably Scott, too. My gran loved that painting. But there should be lots more around here. Maybe she stored them away in the garage or the shed. Weird. I spent one summer painting nothing but landscapes. While other normal teenagers were at the beach, I turned my room into my art studio, trying to become the next Georgie O’Keeffe. There was my flower phase. I painted dahlias in every shade known to womankind. Then there was my blue and white period. That lasted until I ran out of blue and couldn’t afford to buy more.”

Her laughter rang out into the night. She glanced over at the flower beds and the withered shrubs. “You wouldn’t know it by looking at them now, but Gran used to grow the most beautiful dahlias as big as your fist.”

“Give yourself time. By the end of summer, you’ll bring them back to their glory days.”

“I’m not a miracle worker. I know my limitations.”

“I’m not sure you have limitations. Have you listened to yourself tonight? You seem so much lighter, happier, and more in tune with what you want than I’ve ever seen you before. It’s almost as if you had an epiphany or something at the police station.”

“Maybe I did. You were right about turning things over to Brent. I know I resisted but it’s for the best. Instead of beating my head against a brick wall, I realized I needed an objective third party to get answers. I don’t have the time or the tools to investigate properly.”

“You never said what wild adventure went totally off the rails for you.”

“Didn’t I?”

“You know you didn’t.”

“Hmm. Maybe that could mean I don’t want to discuss it.”

“Does it involve water?”

“As a matter of fact, it kinda does.”

“Come on. I told you about Rebecca. The least you can do is share what happened.”

“Okay. Fine. I took a trip to the Grand Canyon with my roommates at the time—four girls sharing a townhouse—one of which had a filthy rich daddy who footed the bill for the entire thing. What they failed to mention when I said yes was that they planned to water raft the Little Colorado River.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah, well, they knew I had a fear of water. Somehow, they all got the bright idea that this trip would ‘cure’ me of my phobia.”

“So they kept the truth about the trip from you? How?”

“They never said a word about their true intent. That’s how. They lied until we got there. I had this bad feeling once we pulled off the road, and I spotted the lodge and this old bridge in the distance. Where there’s a bridge there’s water. Then they all started talking about the loading ramp for watercraft, and some place called Marble Canyon and how that spot was the entrance into the Grand Canyon. That’s the first time I heard rafting come up in conversation. They thought it was so funny. Right then and there, I got sick to my stomach. They had to pull over so I could throw up. That’s when I got my first look at the river. And first off, there’s nothing ‘little’ about that part of it. This river flows through rocky terrain with boulders the size of a house. It flows for a hundred miles before meeting up with the main Colorado River. When I refused to get near the water, I may have started screaming. It’s all sort of a blur for me now. One of them later told me that I created such an embarrassing scene that Angie tried to push me down a ravine.”

Daniel balanced his dessert plate on his knee and shifted in the swing. “How’d you get back to San Diego?”

“I called Gran. She wired me the money to take a bus. By that time, my roommates had ditched me at the nearest town. I forget what it’s called. It’s not important anyway. I had to find a new place to live with new roommates.”

“That’s mean what they did.”

“I know. Hence the reason I moved out before they returned from their trip. I didn’t see a future in trusting so-called friends who’d trick me like that. Besides, my lease was almost up anyway.” She studied the night sky, looking up at the stars twinkling above. “I fell in love with this place for real when I turned twelve. I’m pretty sure it took me around two years before I truly settled in and realized I wasn’t going anywhere, that Gwynn couldn’t swoop in and destroy my life.”

“For me, it took a bit longer than that. And Nick Harris dangling a real estate deal I couldn’t refuse.”

“Who’s the savvy businessman now?”

“All I know is that I couldn’t have spent the next twenty years doing what I was doing.”

She didn’t want the night to end. “I can be happy here without being a fan of the water or a beachgoer.”

“Of course you can.”

“Why do you suppose Natalie Wood crawled into that dinghy the night she drowned? They said she was afraid of water. If that’s true, then why would she do that? I’d never do that. You couldn’t get me on a boat, let alone into a dinghy. Just because the boat’s a fancy yacht, does that make it any safer?”

The tone of her voice had changed.

Daniel took notice and reached out to bring her closer. “You’ve given this some thought. I can tell.”

She took the plate and set it down on the porch before scooting closer and curling into his side. “It’s only fair that you should know this phobia about water is real for me. You can spend as much time as you want on your boat. It’s fine by me. As long as you understand that for me it’s not an option.”

“That sounds so definitive.”

“It’s not a declaration of war. It’s a statement of fact. I need everything about it on the table so there’s no confusion down the road.”

Feeling like he was about to step into a minefield, Daniel took the uncomplicated way out. He glanced at his watch. “Let me help you with the dishes before I head back to work.”

“Don’t worry about the dishes. Take care of your ice cream. Come back here when you’re done.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

Their lips met in a tender kiss. “Give me thirty minutes.”

“You’re on the clock. Hurry back.”



Rowan finished putting away the leftovers and loading the dishwasher around ten. But when Daniel hadn’t returned, she decided to change out of her dress and into something more comfortable—a silky camisole set in sexy black. Instead of crawling into bed, though, she decided to wait for him on the couch. With a chill in the air, she grabbed a blanket off the bed and headed into the living room, where she got comfortable on the sofa, curling into the softness of the pillow cushion.

She drifted off to sleep within minutes.

The dream started pleasant enough—visions of paint colors swirled in her head—sent down from DIY homeowner heaven. She saw fresh paint on the walls, envisioned bringing the hardwood floors back to life and adding little touches throughout the house unique to her. In the dream, every room had undergone a redo. Like the kitchen, the bathroom had gone through an upgrade with a gleaming walk-in shower, the kind depicted in magazines. The toilet sparkled and no longer made noises. She’d added new storage in the hallway. The linen closet had ample room for sheets and towels instead of the narrow twelve-inch afterthought it was now. Every room had lost its musty odor and now smelled like magnolias or maybe orange blossoms.

After breathing a sigh of relief that upgrading had been this easy, the mood shifted. She was no longer in the house. A nasty storm had blown in before nightfall. As the wind howled, the rain beat down on her face. Then she was rocking back and forth, the boat beneath her feet creaked and groaned. Surrounded by black water, panic snuck into every part of her soul. As her throat closed, her heart pounded in her chest. She realized she couldn't catch her breath. She tried to scream, but the crashing waves battering the boat drowned out her voice.

The water level grew higher.

And then, there was no boat. She was in the water. She could feel the ice-cold seeping into her clothes, chilling her to the bone. Freezing and shivering now, her limbs felt too heavy to move, as if weighed down by invisible chains. She tasted chlorine. Her heart raced. Her breathing came in short, panicked bursts.

Darkness enveloped her.

Rowan's mind raced with fear and desperation. Clenching her teeth, she tried to claw her way out, but everywhere she looked, the waves were vicious reminders that she was trapped with nowhere to go. Twisting steel fingers wrapped around her neck. Floundering, she tried to grab for anything to hold onto.

As she went under for a final time, the scene jumped. She felt herself floating, lifted up by a strong pair of arms. When her vision cleared, she saw a man with dark hair and intense blue eyes.

From a distance, she heard him calling her name over and over again.

"Rowan, wake up. Rowan, you're okay. I'm here now. You're okay. It's Daniel."

Her eyes fluttered open. When she realized she was no longer drowning, that there was no water, her entire body relaxed. She was no longer on the sofa but huddled in the corner of the room on the cold floor, shaking and shivering like a scared rabbit.

“I came in here and found you hugging your knees to your chest. You looked terrified. Like a cornered animal. Scared me half to death. You had your eyes clenched so tight it looked as if you were praying for a miracle. I wasn’t sure if you were having a nightmare or were already awake from it.”

“It was a nightmare,” she murmured, her throat raw from shouting.

“About drowning, right? You were screaming your head off and muttering something about the water.”

“I tasted chlorine. I can still taste it in my mouth.”

“Chlorine? As in a swimming pool? I thought you were screaming because you were on a boat and had fallen overboard.”

“Maybe. I don’t want to think about it. Was I screaming loud enough that the neighbors could hear?”

“Yeah. That’s when I decided, asleep or not, you needed my arms around you. You’re never supposed to wake up a sleepwalker, but—”

Disoriented, Rowan sat there with her head in her hands. “I’m glad you woke me up, got me out of the dream.”

“I’m sorry I was so late getting back. But the machine kept acting weird. Then the electricity went out. I had to start the batches all over again.”

“What time is it? Was there a storm?”

Daniel nodded. “It’s around midnight. The storm was a fast-moving front that knocked out the lights along the pier. I had to wait until the electricity came back on. Thank God Brent’s house is across the street. Our Chief of Police is on top of any power outage or rolling blackouts. Come on, we need to get you that good night’s sleep you wanted. I’ll tuck you in. Has this happened before? Have you had nightmares like this?”

“A few, but not for a long time. It’s probably stress-related.”

Daniel didn't think so, but he left that subject on the table for later. He locked up, cut the lights out and led her into the bedroom, all the while, his brain kept replaying what he'd seen and heard. Fear of water was one thing. But why had she mentioned the taste of chlorine? Ocean water tastes salty. Boats don't fit into swimming pools. So why had she thought she was on a boat sucking down the taste of chlorine?



Chapter Eleven

Rowan woke before Daniel. Tossing back the covers, she grabbed her clothes, then tiptoed into the bathroom to get dressed. She put on jeans and a top for now but would change before the Zoom call started later.

In the kitchen, she brewed coffee and checked the messages on her phone in case the client had canceled. But the meeting was still on. She went into the dining room to boot up her laptop in preparation for it. Once she'd tweaked the settings on the software app, she headed back into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee.

With the first hit of caffeine came a spate of nerves, a prelude to the Big Meeting. The fix for warding off the jitters was a walk through her grandmother's backyard.

She went out through the backdoor and stood on the porch. The crisp morning air greeted her with the sweet fragrance of Mrs. Dimsdale's row of gardenias next door.

Damp with dew and last night's rain, the musky scent of land and soil had her breathing in the woodsy smell. She inhaled the earthy aroma of new growth, the newly planted wild herbs on the other side coming from Mr. Kercher's garden, and the budding cherry tree near the back fence.

The once-thriving corner of the backyard—Gran's pride and joy—was now a barren wasteland, thanks to a couple of years of neglect. She vowed to fix that, vowed to bring back the garden to its glory days. She could remember as a child, walking through the vegetable patch carrying a basket to pick

cherry tomatoes or enough scallions and peppers for a flavorful stir-fry.

She leaned against the back gate, took a sip of her coffee, and studied the house. Gray and white didn't exactly signal curb appeal. Maybe a soft green or blue would bring out the white trim better. Nothing gaudy or tacky. She'd stick to classic colors, maybe install a new backdoor with a pop of bold.

After deciding to go all in, she strolled around to the side to inspect the condition of the flower beds before ending up standing on the bottom steps of the front porch, only to realize that the front door needed a new look too.

"One thing at a time," she reminded herself.

"Work on getting the plumbing up to date," Scott directed. "Nobody likes listening to the sound of a constantly running toilet. Make sure that doesn't come through on your Zoom calls."

She acknowledged his presence by lifting her cup in salute. "You're chipper at six-thirty in the morning in light of the fact that my toilet kept you awake all night."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"I'm used to it. Makes me feel right at home."

"A woman who's afraid of water wants to hear water running all night. Anyone ever tell you you're sort of weird?"

"I'm weird? That's rich coming from someone who rattles chains for a living."

"Chain-free here. I'm surprised you handed off the investigation to Brent without a fuss."

Rowan stared him down in disbelief. "That was your suggestion. You told me to let go and I did."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd follow my advice."

She glared at him even though she gave him a wide berth as she rounded the house into the backyard.

By the time she entered the kitchen again, Daniel stood next to the coffee pot, leaning against the counter. He'd already showered, shaved, and put the same clothes back on he'd worn the night before. "How'd you sleep?"

"I didn't have more nightmares if that's what you're asking."

"What's your day like after your meeting?"

"Work, if they give me a thumbs-up, creating a fast turnaround design they'll love. But after that, I'm heading to Ferguson's Hardware to pick up paint samples. And I've been curious about Reclaimed Treasures. Do you think there'd be any interest in Gran's furniture?"

"Maybe. They do take consignments."

"Do you think I'm disloyal for wanting to get new furniture?"

"No. It's your house. Your gran would've wanted you to make yourself at home. Otherwise, why would she have left everything to you? She had to know you'd be starting over. Starting over means getting rid of baggage you no longer need to carry around."

"Did you do that with your uncle?"

"Course I did. It was difficult but I knew he'd want me to wipe the slate clean."

Rowan made a face. "That sounds so harsh."

"Do what's best for you." He gulped down his remaining coffee in the mug. "I gotta go. I need to check and make sure the freezer's still working."

"What about breakfast?"

"I'll grab something later. I'm still stuffed from last night's pot roast." He kissed her goodbye in his rush to get out the door and left her standing there feeling ditched.

"Well, that was interesting. Couldn't get out of here fast enough," Rowan murmured to herself. "Scott's right about one thing. I do talk to myself—a lot. Wonder when I picked up that

quirky habit? Next thing you know, I'll be getting a cat, then a second one. Before I know it, the neighborhood will be calling me the pathetic cat lady who talks to herself."

She went to the freezer and took out two frozen spinach frittatas, popped them in the microwave, and devoured them with leftover carrots and fingerling potatoes.

After unloading the dishwasher so she could add her dirty plate, she went out to the dining room to retest the technical aspects of the software she planned to use for her presentation. When that all checked out, she moved into the bedroom.

The countdown had begun.

An hour ahead of time, she brushed her teeth, making sure there was no lingering spinach hanging around. She applied her makeup, the first time in four days she'd bothered. She changed into a white blouse, put on a matching suit jacket and skirt in power black, and worked on her hair, getting it styled into the simple messy bob she preferred. If she did say so herself, she looked like a younger version of Julia Roberts without the millions of dollars in the bank.

That aside, Rowan pronounced herself ready to take on her biggest client. The public relations outfit consisted of three hard-to-please, demanding individuals—all women, who were no-nonsense PR veterans.

After exchanging the prerequisite pleasantries and small talk, Rowan got into the nitty-gritty of sustainable brand building versus flash-in-the-pan strategies, what worked and what didn't. Balancing her know-how with a clever artsy flair, she wowed them with a steady flow of chic designs meant to capture the attention of the eighteen to fifty crowd, the targeted market. With such a wide swing in age groups, the campaign had to be solid. And yet, it seemed all over the place.

After the call ended, she couldn't tell if she'd hit a home run or struck out. She wasn't disappointed in herself but rather the realization that the entire presentation hadn't been the least bit fulfilling. Nor was the response she'd longed to get. It hadn't escaped Rowan that none of the three women seemed

impressed. They had sat there motionless, rarely commenting, with a certain degree of annoyance on their faces. Maybe fancy, upscale Los Angeles PR firms weren't the right fit for her.

For some reason, Rowan wasn't crying her eyes out over it. Instead, she took off the suit, hung it neatly in the closet, and reached for a pair of well-worn jeans and a pullover sweater in periwinkle blue. She pulled on her well-worn boots and grabbed her truck keys. Maybe she'd take Daniel to lunch.

She headed back to the kitchen to drag out the roast from the fridge. Standing at the counter, she made up beefy sandwiches from the leftovers, pulled out the plastic sandwich bags, and stuffed them into a grocery sack before heading out the door.



For as long as Rowan could remember, Ferguson Hardware was the only place in town where you could pick out a colorful bathmat in floral red in one aisle and head to the next to order a porcelain commode or any number of appliances from the pages of a catalog. With an entire aisle dedicated to power tools and another to gardening equipment, she perused the rows of manual tools like hammers and screwdrivers, wondering if Gran had kept all her granddad's collection of stuff. His tools had to be ancient by now. She went past long shelves filled with all manner of nuts and bolts and stopped next to an assortment of lightbulbs. She finally discovered the paint section at the back next to the plumbing fixtures and wondered what genius knew she was in the market for both.

She looked around for help and waved at a man with a nametag that read Matty Cruz.

“Need some help?” Matty asked.

She relayed the problem with the toilet.

“Easy fix. You probably need a new flapper. Sounds like it’s not sealing properly. Is it old?”

“Is it old? Let’s put it this way, Davy Crockett and his coonskin cap might’ve been the hottest fashion craze when they installed that model.”

Matty burst out laughing. “Sounds really ancient. Before you buy a new flapper, there’s a way to test out the old one. Take the lid off the tank, get a stick and use it to hold down the flapper. If the running water stops, then you know it needs replacing.”

“Does this flapper come with instructions about how to install?”

“I can print those out for you at the register. I’ll tell you this much. You start by shutting off the water supply valve under the toilet. It’s easy after that.”

“I trust you, Matty. I’ll take one and try to fix it myself. Now I need paint samples.”

Matty led her over to the paint counter. “Do you want paint cards or the eight-ounce container? Eight ounces allows you to paint as big a spot as you need to see how it looks. You just hold the paint card up to the wall to see if it’s in the general neighborhood of the right color you’re after. Paint cards are free. The little jar of paint costs five bucks. If you want us to match a color you already have and we need to mix it up, then that sample costs six bucks.”

“I think I’ll start with the paint cards and go from there. I’ll make another trip for sample paint when I pick the colors I want to try out on my doors and the walls.”

“It sounds like you’ll be buying a lot of paint down the road.”

“Count on it. An old house that needs sprucing up.”

“Then I’ll leave you alone to browse through the paint chart on the wall.”

After selecting several shades of browns, grays, and blues, she culled through the golden hues, dumping the obvious

gaudy orange before moving to the more subtle green color wheel. As a graphics designer who worked with colors onscreen every day, she knew well that paint often looked very different on a laptop than it did covering the walls at home. She refused to rely on the much-touted online room visualizer. No doubt it could be a great tool, but in reality, the finished room rarely resembled anything like it looked online. If she intended to spend a fortune on paint, she needed to pick the perfect colors the old-fashioned way.

With her hands full of color chips, she headed to checkout to pay for the flapper.

Her second stop was Reclaimed Treasures, conveniently located next door.

As soon as she stepped inside, a voice called out from behind the counter, “I’m Keva Riverton. Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

“Okay. I was just wondering if you might have any interest in buying used furniture. The stuff is decades old.”

“That’s the best kind,” Keva replied with a grin. “Lots of customers these days are looking for second-hand dressers, nightstands, hall trees, or entryway tables.”

“Ah. Well, all I have is a sofa and chair in a garish seventies floral pattern. Here, I took photos of them before I left the house.”

Keva studied the pictures. “Those might work in a large bedroom. I think we could sell those but it wouldn’t be much profit margin. By any chance, did they belong to Lynette Dewhurst?”

“Yes. I’m her granddaughter, Rowan Eaton.”

“I feel like I already know you through your artwork.”

“Excuse me? My artwork? The stuff I painted back in high school?”

“Landscapes, right? Your grandmother sold us at least thirty of your paintings. More than two years ago, she stopped in here with a couple of them under her arm. I picked the rest

up myself and brought them to the store. We sold them all except one. Come on back. I'll show you the one that's still here."

Stunned, Rowan followed Keva to the left side of the store, where the décor section took up the entire back corner. There, in the middle of the display hanging above a stylish mid-century eighty-five-inch sofa in a dreamy shade of green, was a canvas she'd painted when she was sixteen. The landscape—twenty-four by twenty-four inches square—depicted a moody mansion in the background surrounded by wisps of fog and a glowing full moon reflecting off a body of water in the foreground.

Rowan wanted to die right there on the spot.

"I don't mean to come off as an art critic—because I'm not—but the reason it hasn't sold is, and this is my personal opinion, it's a little too gothic, too Collinwood Manor for anyone in Pelican Pointe."

"I bet. My *Dark Shadows* phase," Rowan uttered in disbelief.

"That would explain it. All your other paintings were so bright and coastal cheerful, like that one of the dunes. I bought that one myself. I thought for sure this one would eventually sell if for no other reason than the beautiful full moon rising out of the clouds."

Rowan snickered with laughter. "Yeah. All it needs is a werewolf howling over to the right and you could've gone for the horror crowd. Why didn't you just trash it?"

"Oh, well, I didn't want to destroy art, even if it is—"

"Horrible," Rowan supplied with a laugh. "Why not? I would. But let me get this straight. One day, my grandmother showed up here carrying canvases I'd painted as a kid, wanting to unload them?"

"Pretty much."

"So much for sentimentality," Rowan noted. She thought about the four thousand dollars in the safe deposit box. She

remembered her gran's bank balance at the time of her death. "I know she didn't need the cash."

"Well, maybe she wanted everyone to see your work."

"Maybe." Rowan spun around to face Keva. "You know what, how much will you give me for the ugly sofa and chair?"

Keva threw out a number.

Rowan didn't haggle. "It's a deal."

She picked up the tag on the mid-century couch and smiled at the price. "And I'll take this green sofa."

"I have the chair that matches it on the next aisle over."

"Perfect. If it's in decent shape, I'll take both. Do you deliver?"

"We can have both there by three this afternoon."

"1821 Cape Geneva Drive," Rowan informed her. "Driftwood Cottage. But since you've been there before you know the house."



After paying for the furniture, Rowan sat in the pickup in front of Vanilla Bean Machine, trying to figure out why Gran had sold her paintings without mentioning it to her. It wasn't that she cared about the landscapes. It was the fact that Gran hadn't even brought it up in conversation. It was almost as if Lynette Dewhurst became two distinct personalities before passing away. One personality regularly spoke to her granddaughter about the smallest details, like running errands and what she bought at the grocery store. While the second personality kept certain things entirely to herself.

The sound of Daniel's voice coming from the sidewalk made her jump. "What are you doing sitting out here?"

"You scared me half to death. I brought roast beef sandwiches. I thought we could eat lunch together."

He leaned in to rest his arms on the pickup's window frame. "Great idea. But won't you need to get out of the truck for that?"

"Very funny. I just bought a couch and chair from a person called Keva Riverton."

"Reclaimed Treasures. Did she buy your grandmother's sofa and chair?"

"Funny thing about that." She told him about the paintings.

"Your gran dumped your artwork in a second-hand shop?" Daniel asked disbelief in his voice.

"Artwork is stretching it. More like silly renditions from a teenager. But yeah, that about covers it. She unloaded that crap without a backward glance. Keva told me one sold for two hundred dollars, though. Not, however, the very moody rendition of Collinwood Manor that to this day embarrassingly still hangs there for everyone to see."

"I'd like to buy that."

"Don't you dare. Trust me, it doesn't go with your décor at home. In fact, it doesn't go with anyone's décor unless they're fond of smarmy gothic soap operas. The funny thing is I painted a ton of coastal scenery back then. Keva told me that three-fourths of my landscapes—the ocean, the shoreline, the beach, dunes, the cove, even Smuggler's Bay—included boats."

"I don't understand."

"Water, Daniel. Boats and water. How could I so readily paint something back then that terrifies me now?"

He opened the pickup's passenger door. "Come inside. Let's hash this out over sandwiches and root beer. I'm hungry."

She slid across the bench seat before reaching for her handbag and the grocery sack. "Were you headed to lunch?"

"Yep." He held the door for her and pointed to a tiny table where they could eat. "We don't have a breakroom, so this will

have to do. But if it gets busy, I'll need to jump up and help Kiki. How'd your meeting go?"

Rowan glanced over at the teenage girl with purple hair standing behind the counter on her phone texting like a fiend. "It looks like you're safe for now."

He unwrapped his sandwich. "What about the meeting with the big PR firm?"

"Don't ask. I received a curt email fifteen minutes ago dropping me as their graphics designer. I don't blame them. It wasn't a good fit."

"You're certainly taking it well."

"I am, aren't I? On the flip side, I just spent a thousand bucks for a Crate & Barrel Avondale couch and chair in olive green that would've normally cost me four times what I paid for them."

"And you're excited about that?"

"Over the moon, actually."

"What will you do for a job?"

"I don't know yet. Any shifts open here? Remember, Kiki plans to abandon you for Big Sur soon."

He sputtered with laughter. "I'm sure I could find something for you to do. What about the other client you brought with you when you quit?"

"The publishing house? They hired me to design book covers for their authors and illustrate a children's book."

"There you go."

"But that contract doesn't kick in until July 1st. Until then, I'll just tighten the old purse strings, stop splurging on furniture, and eat bread and water."

"Three weeks shouldn't be a problem. You could always paint more landscapes."

"Oh, please. I'm embarrassed enough to have that thing hanging up in the store. I should go back and buy it."

“Now, now, think of your budget.”

“Keva has it marked down to a paltry fifteen dollars. I’d say that’s a bargain to get it out of there.”

“No one knows who painted it. No one cares.”

“You’re right about that.”

“But we’re circling back to the water landscapes, the boats. If Keva is correct in her description of the paintings, then the question is why did you feel so free to paint back then what gives you nightmares now?”

“Good question. The answer is I have no freaking clue. But you know something, Daniel. I’m beginning to think Lynette Dewhurst was keeping a treasure trove of secrets, secrets she took to her grave.”

“You need to go through every single piece of paperwork in that house, everything you found in the safe deposit box, organize it by category or by chronological order, maybe both. It’s the only way to get a sense of what the woman was hiding.”

“You’re right. I didn’t give everything to Eastlyn.”

“What did you hold back?”

“Mostly the documents I found in the closet. I figured it was easier for Eastlyn to find out anything else she needed from background checks. These days, law enforcement can tell what you had for breakfast at the turn of the millennium.”

“Which, as it happens, isn’t that far from the time period in question. November 1999. How about we go through all that stuff tonight, dedicate the entire evening to sifting through your gran’s papers?”

“Sounds like a dull and boring waste of an evening. What if we do all this, and the DNA comes back fine?”

“What if it doesn’t? Maybe there’s something in those papers you need to know about before someone else decides to show up and toss the cushions off that brand-new couch you just bought.”

Rowan made a growling sound in her throat. “I’ll fight tooth and nail if anyone lays a hand on my Crate & Barrel sofa.”

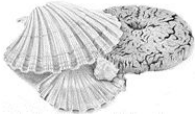
“That’s the spirit. Out of curiosity, can I ask why you had to buy a sofa? What happened to the furniture you had in the loft?”

Rowan cracked with laughter. “Oh, Daniel. I thought you knew I rented that stuff. I didn’t own the furniture any more than I owned the loft. It was a package rental deal when I moved in, and I never bothered to change it. This is the first time I’ve ever owned a house and now I have my own couch.”

Daniel gobbled down his food, eyeing a group of tourists who streamed through the door toward the counter, all talking at once. “I need to go help Kiki.”

“Hey, if you decide you’re short-handed, I’ll work cheap.”

“You got it,” he said, grinning and dashed off.



Chapter Twelve

Two men delivered the sofa and its matching chair as promised. They picked up the old furniture and carted it out of the house. Rowan didn't care where. She was too elated. And she realized how hurt she felt that Gran had gotten rid of all her landscapes. Correction. She was disappointed that Gran hadn't told her about it. Grandmother and granddaughter had been close. Rowan probably talked to her at least four times a week. She made a point to come home for visits during Thanksgiving and Christmas and usually once during the summer. She slipped Gran money in the cards she sent for her birthday and Mother's Day. She sent little gifts for no reason. And yet, Gran had kept her mysterious side well hidden. She'd always admired Gran's strength and independence. But now, she felt like there was a whole other side to her grandmother that she hadn't known existed. She couldn't help but wonder what other secrets Gran had kept from her.

She plopped down on the couch and ran her hand over the soft, chenille-like upholstery as she sunk down into the cushions. She realized this negativity was sucking all the joy out of the room.

Maybe it wasn't entirely Gran's fault.

She thought back to a few conversations. A lot of times, those calls had been hurried, just checking-in types of short chats. Back then, she'd been juggling so many different projects during the week that it was sometimes hard to keep them all straight. Maybe Gran had tried to talk to her, but she had missed the signals or hadn't taken the time to really listen.

Rowan let out a sigh. She suddenly felt a pang of guilt for not having been more attentive to Gran's needs. She had been so caught up in her own life that she had often put the woman who had raised her on the back burner.

She decided this blaming Gran had to stop. Not only was it pointless, but she was probably as much to blame as Gran for a lot of rushed phone calls that morphed into simply touching base. After all, she'd left the landscapes behind when she headed off to design school. Had they been that important, she should've packed them up and taken them with her. Besides, hadn't Gran sold her granddad's beloved pickup to a farmer? Maybe at some point, Gran had decided decluttering the garage was more important than hoarding a bunch of ugly paintings or holding onto a sentimental hunk of junk.

Feeling better, she glanced around the living room and realized the new furniture had completely transformed the space. The old couch and chair had been bulky and outdated, but this new set had a modern look to it that made the room feel fresh and inviting. She leaned back against the cushions again and closed her eyes, enjoying the softness of the material against her skin. She could already imagine herself lounging here for hours, reading her favorite books and sipping a glass of wine.

But first, she had to do something about the dreary paint on the walls. She dug out the paint chips from her bag and tried to find the shade that worked. She needed something that made the whole room seem larger than it was while at the same time making the room pop. Never afraid to go bold, she picked three contrasting colors—butterfly blue, Coventry gray, and a pale yellow called Hawthorne. The next step would be spreading the colors onto the walls. She picked up her phone and dialed Ferguson Hardware, asked for Matty.

"I'm giving you a heads-up on the colors ahead of time if you need to mix them up," Rowan explained.

"Thanks for that," Matty said. "I could get them over to you tomorrow morning. Would that work?"

"That'd be great. Thank you."

“You’re sure these are the ones you want to try?”

“I’m sure. Why?”

“Because they’re very different from each other.”

She stared at the cracked paint on the walls. “You’d better throw in a couple of tarps, goggles, a safety mask, and gloves. And some of that painter’s tape. And paintbrushes.”

“Are you sure you aren’t dealing with lead-based paint?” Matty asked. “A lot of the old houses around here contain lead paint, and the owners don’t even know it.”

“I’m sure. Gran had it tested back when I was in high school. I think. No, it’s just the result of a lousy paint job.”

“Or the weather,” Matty infused. “Living coastal presents its own challenges. Using top quality paint even for the interior spaces is critical.”

“Good point. But this paint has been in place for twenty-five years, maybe longer. Although I do need exterior paint for the front and back doors.”

“Wow. Are you sure you don’t want to hire professionals? It wouldn’t hurt to get an estimate from Tradewinds Construction. They’re pros at painting.”

“They’re the guys who upgraded my kitchen,” Rowan muttered.

“Do you still need the numbers?” Matty asked. “I have one for Ryder, one for Zach and one for Troy.”

“I have their business cards around here somewhere.”

“Do you want me to hold off on sending those samples?”

“No, go ahead and deliver those but leave out the other stuff for now. I’ll need to decide on colors even if the pros do the work.”

“You got it.”

She ended the call just as Daniel sent her a text reminding her about how they planned to spend the evening. He offered to pick up dinner as a bonus.

Overjoyed at not having to cook, she decided it was time to explore the garage and shed and find out what she could toss. Thinking of spring cleaning, she marched through the laundry room, which was an offshoot of the kitchen, large enough to hold a full-size washer and dryer. She hesitated before stepping into the one-car garage, half expecting to see Gran's old Chevy Lumina still parked in its spot, even though she knew better. She'd been the one to call the tow truck to haul it to the salvage yard.

She breathed in the dank smell of mold and mildew and studied the walls that had seen too many spider webs during her lifetime.

After lifting the garage door to let the air rush in—hopeful the breeze would chase away the musty odor—she made her way around the clutter left behind in December. She stepped over a pile of old newspapers and stacks of cardboard boxes. Scanning the back wall, she went in search of the familiar shape of her bicycle.

She caught a glimpse of silvery metal, tucked away in the corner, a forgotten part of her pre-teen years. It was a Huffy Walmart cruiser in periwinkle with silver trim. Until learning to drive, she had spent her teenage years riding it all over town, traveling every street and alleyway, usually by herself.

But now, dust covered the bike in thick layers of dirt and cobwebs. Its once shiny chrome now rusted and dull. After realizing the seat had split and it had two flat tires, she couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness as she remembered all the good times she had riding up and down the street.

Funny how memories could alter a mood, she thought as her eyes landed on the box of Christmas decorations that hadn't hung on a tree for at least four winters. She flipped up the lid on the cardboard and realized the strings of lights were as dusty and cobwebbed as everything out in the open.

Moving outside to the driveway, she walked around the corner of the house to the weathered shed at the side of the garage. Located in the middle of the wall, it leaned at an angle.

She couldn't remember when that had happened, probably after one too many earthquakes.

Once used as extra storage for his gardening supplies, Jim Dewhurst had built this shed by hand using a mishmash of lumber he'd collected over the years. Pine or maple, it didn't matter now because most of the wood was in various stages of rot.

Reaching the door, she gave it a yank but realized the old, rusty padlock refused to budge. She darted back around through the garage and into the laundry room to get the key ring Gran always kept hanging on the peg.

One by one, she inserted the assortment of keys into the keyhole. jiggled it a bit, before finding the right one that worked. After setting the padlock to one side, the door swung open in a slow, squeaky creaking noise on its own, revealing a hoarder's paradise filled to the brim with junk—rusted shovels and rakes and her granddad's old metal toolbox.

Taking her first step inside, sunlight streamed in through the cracks in the walls, casting shadows on the dirt floor. She noticed the smell first, dirt and rot, earth and decay. It was like entering a time capsule with everything perfectly preserved as he had left it all those years ago.

The shed was a cluttered mess with bags of fertilizer, bags of unopened potting soil, clay pots, and other ceramic planters littering the ground. She recognized his tattered gardening gloves left on a stack of old boxes in the corner, covered in another thick layer of dust.

She started to move the boxes so she could go through them, heaving each one into a new stack closer to the door, allowing for some elbow room, when she noticed a metal locker at least four feet tall hidden behind even more boxes. She looked around for something to stand on so she could reach the handle. She slid over one of the large square planters, turned it upside down, and used it as a stepladder. But when she tried to open the locker, she found it locked.

Frustrated and sweaty now, she hopped down from the planter to retrieve the keyring again, trying to force each key

into the hole. But none fit the lock on the handle.

“This is stupid,” Rowan grumbled. “What’s so freaking important in this stupid shed that everything needs protecting like a bank vault? I give up.”

Aggravated by the situation, she kicked at a box and stomped into the house to get something cold to drink.



Inside Vanilla Bean Machine, the delectable scent of freshly made waffle cones and nutty butter pecan drifted throughout the shop, out the door, and along the pier. Maybe that was why he and Kiki had never been busier. It seemed like the entire town had lined up for their freshly churned taste of cake batter or their daily blast of cherry vanilla or to get the warm hug of a chocolate sundae oozing with caramel sauce and hot fudge.

The afterschool crowd had wiped them out of the basic flavors—vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry—leaving them to push the blueberry and peach, and figuring out crazy ways to serve up a banana split with the flavors they had on hand.

By five-thirty, Daniel had exhausted his supply of waffle and sugar cones and ran out of five-ounce single containers. With nothing left to use for a small scoop, he substituted the larger eight-ounce size for single serves. Thankfully, most of the late-afternoon crowd wanted hand-packed quarts to go.

When it calmed down around six, Daniel locked the front door and turned the CLOSED sign around.

“What are you doing?” Kiki asked.

“What does it look like? I’m closing early. I need to start new batches, then push out an order to my supplier and hope they can get everything here by tomorrow.”

“Does that mean I can go? I’m no good at working the machines. You said so yourself. They always mess up when I go near them.”

“That’s because you don’t follow the instructions.”

Kiki shrugged. “I should start packing for my trip anyway. We leave tomorrow morning. You haven’t forgotten about Big Sur, have you?”

“No, no. Go ahead. Maybe I should rethink staying open until nine.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying. It’s crazy around here when you leave at six. I can barely manage the nighttime crowd by myself.”

Daniel rubbed his forehead where a headache began. “I would’ve paid your boyfriend who hangs around here anyway to help out.” Not wanting an argument, he held up a hand. “Take off. Have fun. Take plenty of photos.”

“Oh, I will. I plan to document the whole trip on social media,” Kiki said, grabbing her backpack. “See you in a week.”

Daniel ran a hand through his hair as he watched her leave, knowing he needed a backup plan. He reached for his phone and texted Rowan.

Any chance you’d want to spend the evening making ice cream?

Sure. But you’re still buying dinner. And I want all the lavender I can eat for dessert.

No problem about dinner. I’ll order a pizza and have it waiting when you get here. But no can do on the lavender. I’m all sold out.

Okay. What about orange blossom?

All gone. What’s your third choice?

Cake batter.

Gone. Fourth?

Let’s make this simple. What flavors do you still have?

Chocolate chip.

Ugh. Maybe I should hold out for a better deal.

So you'd rather spend the evening by yourself going through your grandmother's stuff alone?

On second thought, I'll be there in twenty minutes.

He smiled and called Longboard's to place the order, then went through the storage room to do a quick inventory. His supplies needed restocking—from the waffle cone mix to heavy whipped cream, pure vanilla, and bags of sugar, even paper napkins—he barely had enough of everything to get him through the next couple of days. He went online, and filled out an order form for his supplier, placing the largest order since he had opened the store. After requesting an immediate delivery, he hit send.

He also sent an email to his grandmother, Mamie, letting her know what a great week they'd had, reminding her again how much everyone loved her basic recipe.

After loading up the cart with the ingredients he needed, he headed back to the counter and packed the first machine with plain vanilla and the second with chocolate. As the machines whirred in the background, he realized it might take him until midnight to replenish his inventory for the next two days.

The pizza arrived a few minutes before Rowan did. And she realized right away that he'd already started the ice cream process. "Aww, I wanted to see how you did that."

"You'll get your chance tonight. I have eight more batches to make plus a few waffle cones for your chocolate chip."

"Wow. You make your own waffle cones? I just assumed you bought them."

"If I bought them premade, they'd get incredibly stale. Have you ever ordered an ice cream cone only to realize the waffle cone was tough and chewy?"

"Lots of times. It's not very tasty at all."

"That's why I choose to make my own fresh every morning. But maybe not after tonight," he said, flipping up the lid on the pizza box and sliding a piece out on a plate. He offered it to her.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of the crazy week we’ve had. I can’t keep up with demand. Maybe I should think about using store-bought.”

“Hey, no need to do that. I’ll help. Really. What part of my offering to help earlier did you miss? What else have I got to do for the next eighteen days?” She glanced around the shop. “Where’s Kiki? She’s not here to help?”

“Off on her grand adventure.” He took a seat at one of the tables. “When you offered to help, I thought maybe you were joking.”

She sat down across from him and studied his face. “What is it with you? You look depressed or something. Everything okay?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m blown away by the success of the shop. But at the same time, if I can’t keep up with production, knowing that scares me a little.”

“Why won’t you be able to keep up with production?”

“It’s a never-ending battle to meet demand. Ever since I opened the doors, I’ve had trouble hiring good help. Teenagers come and go. Kiki is the only one who stayed. She’s great for a seventeen-year-old kid who works part-time. She’s good with customers and pays attention at the cash register. But I need someone a little more mature who can oversee things at night. She doesn’t like working until nine in the evening. She’s young and doesn’t want to get stuck in an ice cream shop forever. Who can blame her? I don’t like leaving her alone in the store at night anyway. I worry.”

“That’s why you let her boyfriend hang around at night, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But how long will that last? I tried paying him to wait on customers, but Kiki told me he eats most of the inventory. Besides, he has a full-time job working as a delivery driver in San Sebastian five days a week. He told me he didn’t need to work at an ice cream shop in his spare time. If I can’t find an assistant manager, I might need to start closing at six or seven in the evenings.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“I suppose not. It could be worse.”

“The conundrums of owning your own business,” Rowan muttered, munching on her pizza. “But that’s not all that’s bothering you, is it?”

Daniel nodded. “My grandmother, Mamie, lives back in Coyote Wells. She turned seventy-two on her last birthday. I worry about her, too. If not for her, I wouldn’t be sitting here in my own shop. She’s the genius behind the ice cream. The woman is flat-out amazing. She retired recently. I think she misses going to work every single day because she loved interacting with the customers.”

“What did she do?”

“She owned an ice cream store. She sold it to a young couple who wanted out of San Francisco.”

“What? You’re kidding? Maybe your grandmother is your perfect assistant manager.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “That’s not a bad idea. I wonder if I could talk her into moving here.”

“I don’t see why not. It’s bound to be a little warmer than Northern California. Could your sisters help persuade her? Or maybe your mother? What about your dad?”

“My mother is not exactly Mamie’s favorite person right now. Family dynamics being what they are. As for Dad, he doesn’t live anywhere near Coyote Wells. He moved to Portland, Oregon about five years ago.”

“You never mentioned that your parents were divorced?”

Daniel shook his head and made a face, twisting up his mouth. “It’s one of those modern relationships that get very complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it for me.”

“My parents don’t live together anymore, not for some time.”

“But they won’t get divorced?”

“It’s crazy, I know. I believe he met someone in Portland, which is why my mother stubbornly refuses to give him a divorce. Hence, the current state of dynamics between Mamie and my mother could best be described as tense. My sisters are taking my mother’s side in all this against Dad. I’m doing everything I can to keep from getting dragged into it all.”

“But your mother is the one who cheated with her brother-in-law—your Uncle Bobby—your dad’s brother, correct?”

“I told you it was complicated.”

“Well, it sounds like your grandmother needs to get out of that situation. It can’t be good for her blood pressure.”

“My grandmother will probably outlive us all. She still acts like she’s fifty.”

“How far is Coyote Wells from here?”

“A seven-hour trip by car. But it’s a beautiful ride up the coast.”

“Yikes. Fourteen hours round trip. What would it take to lure your grandmother here?”

“I’m not sure. Other than a couple of eligible seventy-five-year-old bachelors?”

Rowan hooted with laughter. “I definitely need to meet this woman.”

“She’s a force all on her own. I’d need to find her a place to live. She’s fiercely independent.” He polished off his pizza and leaned over, tilted her mouth up to his, then tenderly kissed her lips. “I wish we didn’t have to spend our evening making ice cream.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It sounds like fun.”

“You say that now. Wait until you’ve spent the next four hours listening to that machine.”

“What about making waffle cones?”

“A few tonight, the rest tomorrow morning. Did you get your sofa delivered?”

“Yep. And it’s worth every penny. I picked up paint samples, but Matty at Ferguson’s Hardware suggested I contact the guys at Tradewinds for an estimate. I think I might do that, especially if you need me to help out here while Kiki’s on vacation.”

“I thought you wanted to do the painting yourself.”

“I did. But the walls need a professional touch, certainly the two doors. What would take me weeks would probably take them days to accomplish a better result. I don’t want the house to look like crap.”

“Then call Tradewinds. You can’t go wrong with any of those guys. They got this place ready in record time.”

“That’s two firsthand recommendations, more than I would get in San Diego.”

When the machines beeped it signaled the cycles had finished. Daniel got to his feet. “Time to switch to more flavors. I’ll let you pick the next two batches.”

“Really? I’m surprised you have to ask.”

“Okay, smartass. Lavender and orange blossom it is. I’ll walk you through the steps. After that, the pressure’s on you to get it right.”



Chapter Thirteen

Over the next week, Rowan worked side by side with Daniel. She was surprisingly good at making waffle cones and even better at whipping up sugar cones using Mamie's old-fashioned recipe. They got into a routine, arriving at the store by eight and working together on various flavors until the store opened.

Daniel had changed the store hours, deciding to open at eleven and close at seven. He felt eight hours allowed the town ample time to grab their ice cream fix. It wasn't that different than serving customers from noon until nine. Except this way, he got to relax in the evening with Rowan.

And since Kiki had decided to stay indefinitely in Big Sur—giving her notice via text message—Daniel had never felt better about locking the doors and heading home come seven o'clock.

Switching between houses, they settled into a nightly ritual where they took turns preparing dinner, alternated listening to each other's music to unwind, made love almost every night, and never seemed to run out of conversation.

Sometimes they spent the evenings going through Lynette Dewhurst's unorganized mess of papers. It took them three nights before they finally discovered anything that threw up a giant red flag.

After working all day, they sat on the floor, cross-legged, sifting through the stacks of files, when Daniel came across a bone-chilling piece of paper. There, in black and white, was an

official death certificate. “Um, Rowan, you’d better take a look at this.”

“What is it?” she asked absently, rummaging through another pile of papers.

He passed the document over to her. “It’s in your name issued November 30th, 1999, three days after a four-year-old female child died from a fall ruled an accidental death by the coroner. Look at where it happened.”

“San Mateo County, not Santa Cruz,” Rowan muttered, reading each line. “Well, that’s weird. The child died in Redwood City, not here in Pelican Pointe. Is this the child in that grave, Daniel? It has to be, right?”

“That would mean there were two Rowan Avery Eatons, born on the same day, in the same year.”

“Right. Because this Rowan is alive and still kicking. It’s surreal staring at a death certificate that says I died when I was four. It gives me the willies.”

“It’s bizarre, to say the least.”

“The home address isn’t even listed as Pelican Pointe,” Rowan pointed out. “The accident occurred at a house.”

“Is that important?”

“All I remember is living in a string of crappy apartments or rundown motels with Gwynn. So, yes, I think it’s significant that the child died inside a house, not Driftwood Cottage. Do you think Gwynn could’ve killed her daughter in Redwood City and her parents helped cover it up?” Rowan asked.

“Anything’s possible.”

“I need to show this death certificate to Brent and Eastlyn. I need those DNA results to show up.”

Daniel shifted his legs and stared over at Rowan. “Did you check the mail today? Because I forgot to check mine.”

“No,” she admitted, sitting up straighter. She got to her feet fast and darted to the front door. After reaching into the mailbox on the left side of the porch, she removed two

handfuls of mail and came back into the living room carrying an armload of junk and advertisements.

“How long has it been since you’ve checked your mailbox?”

Rowan shrugged. “A couple of days. Okay, maybe a week. We’ve been busy.” But she dropped the mail onto the coffee table and sat down on the couch so she could sort through the clutter and pick out the envelopes. She held up one with the lab’s return address on it. “Here. This is it. I’m nervous, Daniel.”

“Just rip into it. If you got yours, mine’s probably at the house, too.”

She glanced up at his face and saw the eagerness written there. “I have an idea. Let’s run and get yours first and open them together.”

Touched by the gesture, he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Let’s do it before I have time to change my mind. I’m getting anxious and apprehensive at the same time.” After scooping up their cell phones and taking the death certificate for safekeeping, they hurried out the backdoor, across the yard, and down the alleyway to Daniel’s place, Rowan following behind him still clutching the envelope from the lab.

But when they got to the patio, Daniel saw an opening in the back door. He held up a finger to his lips and pointed, mouthing the words, *somebody’s inside*.

Rowan’s heart skipped a beat. Her fingers wrapped around Daniel’s arm in a vise grip. They both stood frozen in place for a moment, trying to listen for any movement inside the house.

They heard footsteps getting closer and then backtracked in retreat.

Daniel took advantage of the moment and took a few steps back toward the grassy section of the lawn, tugging her with him while he pulled out his phone to dial 911.

While he spoke in whispers to the police, Rowan could only make out the words break-in and the address before she realized her hands were shaking. She watched Daniel approach the backdoor and reach for the doorknob. Her pulse pounded as Daniel rushed inside. But the intruder dashed out the front door in a blur to get away.

“Who the hell are you?” Daniel shouted as he went after the man, despite Rowan tugging on his arm, trying to prevent a confrontation.

“Don’t,” she cautioned, looking around at the mess the intruder had made in the living room. “This guy seems desperate. He could have a gun. Let the police take care of it.”

But Daniel didn’t listen. Running out the front door, he chased after the man until he lost sight of him leaping over a row of hedges.

Frustrated and out of breath, he kicked the curb where Rowan stood next to the mailbox.

“Why is this happening?” Daniel huffed out, hands on his hips, trying to catch his breath.

“This guy must be connected to our big mystery. I’m sorry you’ve been dragged into this thing, kicking and screaming. Come on, let’s check the mail before the cops get here. Who knows? Maybe you no longer have to wonder about your parentage. It’s time one of us gets some concrete answers.”



Back inside the house, they stood in his living room amid the obvious vandalism and ripped open their envelopes at the same time.

“You go first,” Rowan urged.

Daniel unfolded his letter. “Wow. One hundred percent DNA match to Robert Cardiff.”

“Your uncle was your father,” she acknowledged, restating the results for her own benefit. She watched how Daniel took the news. But he began circling the room, closing drawers, or picking up the couch cushions from the floor and rearranging them on the sofa.

She motioned for him to sit. “You’re taking this well.”

“Because I’m not really surprised. Deep down, I’ve always known something was off. How about you? What does yours say?”

“No DNA match whatsoever to Lynette Dewhurst. It seems I’m not her real granddaughter after all. And there lies the crux of the problem. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why is *this* happening now that I moved back to Pelican Pointe?”

“And what do we do about it?” Daniel added, reading over the lab’s letter. “Did you read this last paragraph? You paid for a genealogy report that’s arriving separately.”

“That’s something, I guess. It would’ve been nice to have that in hand tonight. Maybe then I could see a path forward.”

“Yeah. Look, I’ll need to poke through my stuff and see if that guy stole anything before the police get here.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it? It feels that way from where I’m sitting.”

While he took photos of his possessions scattered throughout the house, Rowan answered the knock at the door only to find Brent and Eastlyn standing there shoulder to shoulder. “We need to talk. Something crazy is happening and I need to know why.”

“You haven’t touched anything, have you?” Brent asked, marching into the house, moving past her like Harry Callahan on a mission.

“I think we may have a lead,” Eastlyn announced. “But we need a couple of details from you to proceed.”

“Sure. But we have news, too. I’ll do what I can to point you in the right direction,” Rowan said, leading the way into Daniel’s kitchen where they could sit around the table and talk. “Take a seat. The house didn’t look like this yesterday. Want anything to drink? I was considering making a fresh pot of coffee. It has the makings for a long evening ahead.”

“I’m fine,” Eastlyn replied. “I’ve already had my limit for the day.”

Brent pulled out a chair. “Not me. If it’s not too much trouble, I could use some caffeine.”

“No trouble at all,” Rowan countered, walking over to the coffeemaker. It took her several minutes to grind the beans and start the brewing cycle. She used that time to gather her thoughts, trying to make a mental note of everything she needed Brent to know.

When Daniel came up behind her, he laid a reassuring hand on her back. “I’ll do this. You sit down with them and lay it all out. Get it over with. You’ll feel better.”

She nodded in half-hearted reluctance and blew out a breath, leaving the task to him. “Before we get started, you should know I got the results back from the DNA I submitted.” She slid her letter from the lab across the table. “There’s no familial match to Lynette Dewhurst. None at all.”

“You must be so disappointed,” Eastlyn consoled.

“More like shocked but not. If you get what I’m saying. I’ve had weeks now to prepare for this moment, knowing that the headstone was a definite red flag. I’ve been learning things about Gran that I never knew before.”

Eastlyn brought out her notepad and took the bait. “Like what?”

“Like the fact that she kept things from me. Not half an hour ago, Daniel found a death certificate in her stack of papers.” Rowan pushed the document toward Brent. “It’s for Rowan Avery Eaton, issued when she was four years old. It says the child died from an accidental fall in Redwood City.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Brent offered, scanning both pieces of paper. He studied the death certificate the longest. “We’ll need copies of these for our files. Is that your social security number at the top?”

Rowan narrowed her eyes, focusing on the numbers. “No. It doesn’t match mine.”

“Okay. This makes for a good lead-up to what we’ve discovered on our end. Your mother—I’m sorry, Gwynn Dewhurst—obviously spent some years living within Santa Mateo County. It’s not that unusual since San Mateo borders Santa Cruz County and Gwynn grew up here. But now we may have cause to think that she obviously knew people, maybe the right kind of people who could get things done.”

“My mother? The drug-addled addict? That’s news to me. Although she did begin her addiction living in San Francisco. Or so Gran claimed. She loved spending time at Half Moon Bay, too,” Rowan pointed out. “She always loved the beach and droned on about living there. I mean, who does that when she grew up here in a beach community? Anyway, I don’t remember hearing her mention Redwood City. Not ever. Which is kind of weird. Don’t you think?”

“I’ll be straight with you. There’s no other reason to play games. From an investigative standpoint—and now based on your DNA findings—I’d say the next step is to find out who’s buried in that grave. Here’s the deal. According to cemetery records, in early December 1999, Jim Dewhurst bought an additional plot at Eternal Gardens. He’d already arranged and paid for his and Lynette’s. But in December of that year, he asked about buying another plot. The only plot closest to theirs available for sale at the time was the one in question, a few rows away. The cemetery logbook shows it was for his granddaughter, who Jim claimed had just passed away. Fairly standard stuff so far. The only problem is Vital Statistics doesn’t show Gwynn Dewhurst ever gave birth, let alone to a daughter named Rowan Avery Dewhurst.”

“Eaton,” Rowan corrected.

Brent shook his head as Daniel brought over a tray with a pot of coffee, two cups, and the cream and sugar. After pouring a cup for Brent, Daniel slid in next to the police chief.

“We think Eaton was a made-up name for your birth certificate,” Brent noted, measuring sugar into his coffee. “Now, you’re handing me a death certificate verified by a funeral director for a four-year-old. Red flags all over that.”

Rowan took back the death certificate to see for herself. “A funeral director? Do they have the authority to do that? What about a child dying under mysterious circumstances? Isn’t that type of death usually scrutinized by the coroner? Deaths of children shouldn’t fly under the radar.”

“Absolutely,” Brent fired back. “It reeks of something sinister.”

“We can’t find an Atticus Eaton anywhere. We checked,” Eastlyn tossed out. “We think your birth certificate is a forgery. And Atticus Eaton never existed. We think Gwynn or maybe Jim and Lynette made up a father’s name when they created your fake birth certificate.”

“What if the death certificate is fake, too?” Daniel voiced. When he got a blank stare from Rowan, he clarified, “Think about it. Nothing else seems real. Why wouldn’t the death certificate be phony since they relied on a funeral director for verification? Can you track down this guy?”

“We’ll certainly give it a shot.”

Rowan shifted in her chair. “But why? Why all the deception?”

“They were covering up something,” Daniel offered and earned a nod from Brent.

“But *what* exactly is the big question,” Brent emphasized. “Which is why I’m moving forward with an exhumation of the grave. I’d already come to that conclusion before Daniel’s call came in tonight and before you produced this death certificate or had knowledge of the DNA not matching. Add in how someone keeps tossing your houses. Chances are, whoever this is keeps looking for something to do with the Dewhurst mess.”

“Dewhurst mess,” Rowan repeated. “That’s a perceptive take, especially considering everything in totality. Like Eastlyn said that day in the conference room, the headstone by itself doesn’t prove much. It’s just a weird coincidence. But add in all the other stuff and you get a giant mystery taking shape. What in the world could’ve made my grandparents take part in such a hare-brained scheme?”

“Parents do dumb things to protect their kids,” Brent pointed out. “Happens all the time.”

“Listen to me. *My grandparents*,” Rowan said. “Force of habit. They’re not even that. I don’t know where I came from or who I belonged to when I was born. What’s my real date of birth? Could I be the little girl from the shipwreck? What was her name again? Hallie Snelling. Maybe that’s me.”

“Your letter does mention that a genealogy report will follow,” Daniel reminded her, thinking about his own situation. Had his mother Valerie been trying to protect him from the truth or just going the extra mile to cover up an affair? But this wasn’t the time to dwell on his own family dynamic. At least now he knew why he’d felt like the odd man out for three decades. He reached across the table and laid a hand on Rowan’s. “Maybe genealogy will provide some answers.”

“That and cracking open a grave,” Brent surmised, sipping from his coffee mug. “Sometimes taking that drastic step is the only way to get at the truth.”

“Are we saying that Gwynn never had a child at all?” Rowan asked, wanting to clear up that theory. “At all? As in no natural children?”

Eastlyn put down her pen. “That’s according to official state records. We’d need to double-check the other forty-nine states to make sure that’s true. She might’ve given birth outside California. Or in a private institution. Even then, it would show up somewhere given the massive background we did. I doubt she ever had a daughter of her own, though.”

“Unless there was something about the birth that Jim and Lynette wanted to keep hidden,” Daniel proffered, trading

looks with Rowan. “There was the loan taken out in November 1999 against the house.”

Rowan nodded, biting her lip. “You’re suggesting they could’ve used that money to pay off someone because a cemetery plot doesn’t cost thirty grand, does it?”

“Okay, it’s possible Gwynn could’ve given birth under some other circumstances,” Eastlyn conceded. “But remember how we talked about the likelihood of Gwynn kidnapping another child? Right now, that seems like the more plausible explanation for why you’re sitting here wondering about where you came from rather than wondering if Gwynn had a daughter of her own.”

“The death certificate says she did, though,” Rowan pointed out. “Do legit funeral directors make a habit of coming up with fake deaths?”

Brent twisted in his seat. “Not usually. We’ll check out the death certificate’s authenticity. If we believe they dummied up your birth certificate, then it’s not a stretch to question it as well.”

“So the prevailing theory moving forward is that Gwynn kidnapped me from someone, somewhere? If that’s true, then why did they need a death certificate?”

“We need to stop speculating at this point,” Brent suggested, growing tired of the guessing game. “It’s not helping. Trying to put together this puzzle without all the pieces is pointless. First thing tomorrow, we’ll dig up the grave, get the body over to the medical examiner’s office, and see where we stand by tomorrow night. Agreed?”

“Sure.”

“I promise that no matter what we find, I’ll keep you informed. Deal?” Brent said.

“Deal.”

“Okay, then,” Brent muttered getting to his feet. “Thanks for the coffee. Eastlyn will take both your statements about the break-in. I’m headed home to my wife and kids. Tomorrow will likely be a very long day.”

After they'd gone, Rowan helped Daniel tidy up. "Let's forget about me for now. That letter from the lab meant you finally got your answer. How do you feel about them lying to you all these years?"

"That's a good way to put it."

"We have that in common."

"We do, yeah. It explains why I always felt closer to Uncle Bobby than I ever was to his brother who pretended to be my dad and did a lousy job of it. No wonder he never wanted to do anything together. He knew from the beginning that I wasn't his. And now, there's no point in confronting anyone because my real dad died already. What good would it do to ask my mother about it? Finding out the truth has to be the end of it."

"Do you think your grandmother knows the truth?"

"Yeah. I do. Maybe that's why she always treated me better than my own mother did."

"And why she doesn't particularly like Valerie," Rowan cited. "You should invite Mamie down here and get everything out in the open."

"You're right," he said, checking his watch. "But it's too late to call her tonight. And I'm exhausted."

"Same here. Your place or mine?"

"Maybe we should head back to your place, make sure the guy who was here didn't make a second stop."

"Great. Are we certain it was a man you saw head out the front door?"

"Not a hundred percent sure. It could've been a tall woman for all I know. All I caught is a blur of someone running, always running."

"Were they taller than me?"

"Yeah. But not by much. Maybe five-eight. I didn't get a good look at the face because they wore a hoodie. Why do all burglars wear hoodies?"

Rowan chuckled at the question. “Hoodies in the States. Balaclavas overseas. Our mystery man doesn’t steal anything. Or hasn’t so far.”

She exchanged a panicked look with Daniel. “When we rushed out earlier, did I lock the back door behind me?”

“I don’t think so. No.”

“Damn. Then we’d better go check the house. With my luck, they messed up my new couch.”



Chapter Fourteen

Rowan's house was exactly as they'd left it—papers scattered on the living room floor in stacks of organized chaos. With her hands on her hips, she stood surveying the mess before stooping down to gather up the stuff, careful to keep each document in the same order. After carrying the papers into the dining room, she began to transfer each one onto the table.

“Is that wise? We could just leave them on the floor, so we'll know where we left off.”

“We're almost done anyway. You know what this tells me, this kook who keeps reappearing?”

“What?”

“That whoever is doing this didn't find what they were looking for the first time, so they moved on to your house and tried there.”

“Well, duh. What gets me is that they have to be spying on us. Otherwise, how would they know I wasn't at home? Besides that, you haven't spent that much time at my house. Why do they think you'd keep anything valuable there?”

“Good point. It occurs to me that we could search online for any death that happened in San Mateo County on November 27th, 1999, that appears out of the ordinary.”

Daniel nodded. “The date of death listed on the headstone and death certificate.”

“Exactly. And then verified three days later by none other than a funeral director, not a medical examiner. Narrows it down, right? That seems to be when all this kicked into high gear—Saturday, November 27th, 1999.”

“Then it has nothing to do with the shipwreck?”

“I didn’t say that. But we could also do a search using that social security number on the death certificate to find out if it matches back to a child, any child born in 1995.”

“That sounds an awful lot like you want to run a parallel investigation alongside Brent’s.”

“I don’t see it that way. What does it matter about a few online searches? I’m just curious about what happened on November 27th, 1999, in or around Redwood City. So will you help me?”

“Sure. As soon as I clean up this mess off the floor.”

She moved over to her laptop and waited for it to boot up. “Since Brent took the death certificate with him, I don’t have the exact social security number. But I think I can remember enough numbers. I can also start digging for deaths on or around that time period.”

Daniel joined her loaded down with an armful of papers, organizing them in an orderly fashion on the table before watching her key in the date. “Anything yet?”

Over the rim of her monitor, she glared at him. “I’ve barely gotten started. Give me a chance before you pass judgment.”

He held up his hands. “I’m just tired. And cranky. And you sound like you’re headed that way.”

Thirty minutes ticked off the clock before Rowan got a hit. “Wait a sec. I think I might’ve found something. What was that time of death again?”

“Uh, I believe it read nine-thirty-two. PM.”

“Shouldn’t a four-year-old have been in bed by then?”

Feeling groggy from lack of sleep, Daniel was beginning to nod off when he grunted in agreement. “Do you have anything or not?”

“I’m suddenly on a roll. The first one comes from the San Mateo County Times. It’s an obituary about a five-year-old girl who died Friday, November 26th, 1999, from leukemia.”

“That’s not exactly a perfect fit, though, is it? The girl’s too old and the date’s wrong. Besides, why would anyone need to cover up a death from cancer?”

Rowan frowned. “But it’s close enough to check out.”

“Still—”

“Okay, how about this one? Authorities found a teenage girl who drowned near the riptide off Pillar Point Harbor at Half Moon Bay on that Saturday afternoon during Thanksgiving weekend.”

“That’s not remotely relevant.”

“You’re a hard man to please. Okay. How about this one? Here’s another newspaper article about a woman drowning in a swimming pool at a fancy party held in Redwood City—San Fran’s entertainment hub on the peninsula— during Thanksgiving weekend. The story mentions how drugs and alcohol flowed for three straight days. The date this woman died was Saturday, November 27th. Bingo. Her name was Tamsin Southwick, carrying a British passport, visiting from Worcester, England. According to this, Tamsin was intoxicated when she jumped into the pool attempting to save a child from drowning.”

Daniel’s head whipped up. “Could you have been that child?”

“See? Weird, huh? Got your attention now. Fancy party with drugs. That sounds like Gwynn’s wheelhouse, her favorite place to be on earth. I’m emailing this article to Brent and Eastlyn for further exploration. Maybe they can track down anyone who was there that night.”

“You send that to Brent, and he’ll know you’ve been sleuthing behind his back. Not to mention, it’s a long shot at

best. Who would come forward about a party held more than twenty years ago where a woman drowned?”

“Too late. I already sent it off to Brent. As for the long shot angle, I’d say it describes what we’re looking for right now, something totally out of the blue. It won’t hurt to check it out. I could even make a few phone calls. But wouldn’t it be better if the calls came from law enforcement?”

“Whatever. Can we go to bed now?”

She tittered with laughter and ran a hand along his arm. “You didn’t need to stay up. You could’ve gone to bed without me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“You want fun. I’ll show you fun.” Rowan leaned in closer, her body brushing against his in the process.

Daniel tried to ignore the electric wave that shot through him, but he couldn’t, especially when she shifted and pressed her lips to his. “There’s a reward for staying up late.”

“It’s almost midnight,” he pointed out as she led him from the dining room into the bedroom. “I stayed up really, really late.”

She grinned and tugged off his belt, then pushed him onto the bed.



Chapter Fifteen

Exhumations were Brent's least favorite part of the job. But he still got up early the next morning to get it done, showing up at Eternal Gardens to greet the county's forensic exhumation team headed by Muriel Strafford, a forty-something forensic pathologist with graying black hair pulled back into a tight bun.

Muriel was a stickler for details. The two had worked together many times during his stint as sheriff in Santa Cruz County and more recent times, like today, when they'd teamed up to do exhumations in Pelican Pointe.

A gray, soupy fog hung in the air as the no-nonsense Muriel shoved a protective hazmat-looking suit into his chest. "At least it's not pouring down rain. Right?"

"There is that," Brent remarked while looking around for a place to put his stainless-steel coffee thermos. He used the base of a bronze statue to set his oversized mug while he slipped on the white suit over his street clothes.

"Seven-day forecast says we're heading for warmer weather soon," Brent noted, zipping up his protective gear.

"I hope so," Muriel murmured. "I have a three-day surfing competition next weekend."

"You're always full of surprises."

"That's me."

He watched her trudge off to instruct her team on how to set up screens around the child's grave in preparation for the

backhoe to start digging. Hoping to ward off curious onlookers, he scanned the horizon. But there was no one around to appreciate the extra precaution. Not at this hour. It meant that the transfer of the casket to the shell used on its way to the medical examiner's lab would remain completely private.

Brent waited—pacing inside the screened-off area and sipping his coffee—for the digging to start. During the runup before excavation, two team members marked off the spot, laid down tarps for the dirt they would remove, and lined up the backhoe before scraping off the top layer of soil to make it easier to break the hard surface.

The process took almost an hour before the digger ever reached the casket. But even before that event, Brent had a sense that something was off, especially when he spotted Scott in the distance, overseeing the operation. No one else seemed to notice a ghostly figure hanging around, certainly not Muriel who seemed focused on the task at hand.

But, spooked by the sight, Brent did his best to ignore the goose bumps that ran up his arms, choosing instead to attribute the chills to the cool June morning.

Maybe catching a glimpse of Scott should've been a warning because it all went wrong from there. When the crane operator lifted the casket out of the ground to make the transfer to the shell, the lid popped open.

“Don't anyone panic,” Muriel called out. “It happens sometimes when people go the cheap route on the casket.”

But when she stepped over to supervise, Muriel went very still. “Chief, you'd better take a look.”

That eerie feeling came back. Brent heard gasps coming from the crew and noticed the empty coffin.

He walked over to get a better look at the vacant casket—still suspended in mid-air by the crane—and glanced down into the hole. As he stood there glaring at the black earth, something stark white poked through the dirt. It was the slim bones of a hand.

“We have remains underneath the casket,” Brent bellowed before raising his voice louder. “Muriel, I need someone down there to dig. Now!”

In response, Muriel bobbed her head toward another team member. “Lower yourself in there carefully. Try not to disturb any of the bones. Looks like we might have an intact skeleton.”

On his knees, the forensic assistant brushed away the soil, revealing more bones that made up a complete arm.

Brent continued to watch in horror as Muriel’s team unearthed more and more bones until they revealed a rib cage. It wasn’t long after that discovery that the top of a skull appeared, then another.

His heart pounded in his chest as he watched Muriel gingerly drop down into the hole to get a closer look. For the longest time, she examined each intricate part of the skull while the rest of the team huddled around the hole, whispering among themselves, their faces grim.

His mind raced as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It soon became clear that it wasn’t just one body but rather two adults mingled together, tossed into one grave like disposable garbage.

As the team continued to sift through the dirt, Muriel confirmed his ever-growing suspicion.

“There’s no child here that I can see,” Muriel said. “So far, we have two adults—one male, one female—placed underneath that small, cheap, wooden coffin on purpose. This is likely a homicide. Otherwise, why would you bury two people and hide them away like this? Any ideas who would do something so devious?”

Brent didn’t need to think about it for long. “Yeah. I have a pretty good idea. Are you sure there’s no sign of a child?”

“Not yet,” Muriel snapped. “There’s always a chance whoever dropped those two bodies in the same grave dumped the child in first. But that’ll take time to dig down further. We are talking about excavating a lot of dirt, sifting it away little

by little in a rather deep hole. So, don't rush me. There are still two bodies here that need complete forensic excavation."

"I wouldn't think about it. Text me when you have an update."

"Where are you going?"

"I have a ghost to interview."



There were times when a good cop needed to think outside the box. This was definitely one of those times.

Brent walked to his cruiser, all the while his eyes kept scanning the cliffs for any sign of Scott Phillips. He got into the driver's seat, started the engine, turned up the heater to get warm, and pretended to have a conversation with someone on his cell phone. He didn't want Muriel or her team to think he was a complete idiot who talked to himself.

"Come on, Scott. This isn't the first time I've needed a face-to-face. I know Rowan Eaton didn't find that grave on her own. Come on, Scott, tell me what you know."

"Why does everyone think I have all the answers?" said a muffled voice from the backseat.

Brent sucked in a breath, trying to stay calm. It wasn't every day that he had a conversation with someone long dead. He did his best to keep his tone casual. "Because you usually do."

"Yeah. There is that."

Brent twisted in the front seat so he could make eye contact with the ghost in the back. "I don't know how you do that."

"I'm resourceful," Scott replied, a sly grin causing his lips to curve. "So, what do you want to know?"

"Tell me everything you know about the people in that grave."

Scott hesitated for a moment, then leaned in close to Brent's ear. "It's better if I tell you about Jim and Lynette. They cared for Gwynn. Those two did everything they could to pull her out of drug addiction. They almost went broke twice, trying to get her the professional help she needed. But it's almost impossible to help a junkie. And that's the demon Gwynn brought to Jim and Lynette's door. It seems maybe now it can finally leave."

"Leave my ass," Brent exclaimed. "As long as Rowan questions who she is, it's never gone. I already know Gwynn was a lost cause. That's why she's spent the last years of her life in a nursing home. Tell me something I don't already know. Who's in that grave? I want names."

"So you want me to do your job for you?" When he got a go-to-hell look from Brent, he tossed out, "Fine. Why don't you start with Rowan's name? Why do you think it's on the headstone?"

"Scott, I'm not in the mood for riddles. I don't have time for games. Lynette Dewhurst wasn't even Rowan's blood relative."

"That couple has been hidden there since December 1999. The only place they'll go is back in the ground. I can tell you this much: they loved each other. They didn't deserve to die like they did. But then I know a little something about how life sucks sometimes."

With that declaration, Scott vanished into the misty morning fog, leaving Brent cursing his bad luck.

"At least explain why her name is on the headstone?" Brent shouted as he looked over and spotted Muriel staring at him from twenty feet away. He held up his cell phone to make the ruse seem real before putting the car in gear and waved as he sped out of the parking lot.



Around two-thirty that afternoon, Rowan was in the middle of serving a slight uptick in customers when she looked up to see Brent walking in the door. “Hey, what can I get you?”

“You should let Daniel manage the line while you and I sit down for a talk.”

Daniel traded looks with Brent. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“Fine,” Rowan said, removing her apron. “Would you rather head out back? It’s kind of noisy in here right now.”

“That’s fine.” He followed her through the store and out the back door where the sound of waves in the distance slapped against the shoreline.

“This is about the exhumation, isn’t it?” Rowan asked. “What did you find? How did the child die?”

“There was no child in the grave. None at all.”

Rowan blinked in disbelief. “What?”

“Yeah.” Brent took her by the arm and escorted her toward a bench overlooking the pier. “Take a seat.”

Eyeing him with concern, she plopped onto the bench. “You’re beginning to scare me.”

“That’s not my intent.” Brent rubbed his chin hard before finally spitting out what he wanted to say. “There was no child in the grave. Okay? What we found was two adults—one male, one female—probably a couple buried underneath the cheap coffin the Dewhursts bought so they could bury a fake grandchild.”

Stunned, Rowan listened as Brent went on, “The headstone was a ruse. Don’t ask me why they put your name on the headstone. Because the answer is ‘I don’t know yet’ but I would imagine it was some sort of mix-up and it was too costly to fix. At that point, they had more pressing issues to worry about like how to get away with murder, burying two bodies, and covering up a double homicide. For now, I believe Jim and Lynette didn’t think anyone would notice.”

Rowan finally found her voice. “So, not only are the Dewhursts *not* my grandparents, but they could be the main suspects in a double murder? How did this couple die?”

“I can’t tell you that with any certainty until the forensics comes back. But I will say they died by unnatural means. They didn’t bury themselves in a grave paid for by Jim and Lynette Dewhurst. We’ll go into this more, later, probably tonight. But right now, I need to contact the nursing home where Gwynn lives and make sure Gwynn is Gwynn. I’ll need DNA from her and your permission to do it since you’re listed as her legal guardian. It cuts through a lot of red tape that way.”

“Sure. Anything to help. She’s in Sage Crossing in San Sebastian. Do I need to sign anything?”

Brent took a piece of paper from his jacket and a pen from his pocket. “This will do for starters.”

She scribbled her signature on the paper without reading it. “By asking for DNA, do you mean Gwynn could’ve killed them and Jim and Lynette helped cover it up?”

“Stop with the second-guessing. Okay? I don’t know yet. But I have a list to check off and each one takes time. Gwynn is a big part of this investigation. I’m also going to need to swab you for DNA in an official capacity. A police officer needs to perform the swab procedure. I’ll send someone around to your house later today. Right now, my priority is to get to the nursing home to do the same thing with Gwynn and send it off to the lab.”

“Okay. I’m happy to call the nursing home now and let them know you’re on your way. I’m on a first-name basis with Gwynn’s caregiver.”

“Do it. I’ll see you tonight when I’ll go into more detail.”

“Sure. Like the fact that this couple could be my parents.” When that got a peculiar look from Brent, she added, “I’m not stupid. I know there’s a good chance they are.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t go counting my chickens just yet. We’ve only just started. You have questions. So do I.”

“I’m afraid there’s a hideous backstory to this somewhere,” Rowan declared.

“Definitely ugly. And I want to find out why it happened.” He turned to go but hesitated. “One more thing. Stop with the online sleuthing. I have enough of those in town already. I don’t need you to conduct your own investigation. Are we clear?”

“Yes. But I just sent you one email, one newspaper article about a woman’s drowning on November 27, 1999. Does that date sound familiar? I know you guys don’t like coincidences. Did you even bother to read it?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. What I couldn’t figure out is how any of it pertained to you?”

“Maybe I was there at the party. Maybe I was the kid Tamsin Southwick tried to save. Maybe it’s the reason I have nightmares about drowning, the reason I have a fear of water.”

“Now you’re reaching.” But his eyes narrowed, realizing she was serious. “You do have a tendency to let your imagination run wild. I’ll ask Eastlyn to look into it.”

“It’s not so much my vivid imagination. During the six years I spent with Gwynn she dragged me to a lot of places that weren’t exactly known for its kid-friendly themes.”

“I get it. I’ll see what I can turn up. In the meantime, make me a list of those places she frequented, anything you can remember that was out of the ordinary.”

“How long should this list be?” she asked as he headed back to his SUV. “You’re doing this to keep me busy and out of your hair, aren’t you?”

“You want to be an investigator? Grunt work is part of it.”



After explaining the two bodies found in the grave to Daniel, he tried to send her home. “Rowan, you don’t need to be here.”

“I want to stay. I need to keep busy.”

Daniel glanced around the now-empty shop. “Crowds come and go. Go home and work on your house.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to get rid of me. Am I not doing a good job?”

“You’re amazing, much better at everything than Kiki was.”

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because she’s seventeen and I think you worry about her traveling with that boyfriend who’s four years older.”

“He’s not right for her. She’s like the little sister I never had.”

“Speaking of family, did you contact your grandmother?”

“I called her a couple of days ago. She’s excited about visiting and seeing the town. She wanted to drive but I suggested she fly. I got her a ticket to come down this weekend.”

“Great. I can make myself scarce.”

“Why?”

“You should spend some quality time with her by yourself.”

“Now who’s trying to get rid of whom?”

“Not me. I have paint to pick out. Troy says it will take three days at most for them to paint the living room, hallway, and dining room, and then resurface the doors. I need to stay busy while Brent does his thing. He asked me to write up a list of places I remember going with Gwynn.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. Making a list might bring back bad memories for you.”

“Could be cathartic. Flipping through my memory, recalling all the places Gwynn dragged me, might give me insight into those two bodies in that grave.”

“About that. Do you really believe one of your grandparents put them there?”

“Who else could’ve done that?”

“Your mother.”

“Come on, not by herself. Gwynn would rather delegate than dig a hole. She’d be too afraid she’d break a nail. Technically, I suppose the cemetery did all the work, readying the gravesite. But she’d need someone to help her dump them in that hole. That’s where Jim and Lynette enter the picture. If—and I stress the word if—they aren’t the ones who killed the couple themselves. At least one of them could be the guilty party. Let’s be clear here. Gwynn is not my real mother. Jim and Lynette are not my real grandparents.”

“I think we’ve established that much. This is where Brent works his magic. I hope he finds the answers soon.”

When a group of tourists came in, the speculation ended. The talk of burying bodies turned to serving up hot fudge sundaes piled high with whipped cream and cherries on top.



Chapter Sixteen

That evening, Rowan sat patiently on her new sofa while Eastlyn swabbed her mouth, then capped the test tube and labeled it with her name.

“All done,” Eastlyn declared. “I’ll get this to the lab first thing in the morning. The Chief should be here any minute. He’s just finished at Sage Crossing.”

“Did you have a chance to check out the circumstances surrounding Tamsin Southwick’s drowning?”

Eastlyn smiled. “Not yet. Del Rio’s been trying to get fingerprints off the empty coffin while Woodsong keeps track of the bones the forensic team lifts out of the burial site. It’s been a hectic day for our little police department. Finding two bodies was not what we expected. None of us have had the time to sit in front of a computer today.”

“Sorry,” Rowan said. “Of course, murder is your priority.”

“Double murder,” Eastlyn corrected. “It’s on my to-do list. Speaking of lists, the Chief mentioned you were creating one from memory about where Gwynn might’ve crossed paths with our two victims. How’s that going?”

“Wow. When you put it like that the pressure is on me,” Rowan realized. “I thought these two were most likely killed around November 27th, 1999. Am I wrong about that?”

“Hmm. I see the problem. You were only four years old then.”

“Bingo. I was too young to remember much until I was six. I remember getting dragged to parties with a lot of loud rock music and drunk adults. I thought Brent wanted me to recall the places Gwynn liked to hang out. You know, like a beach rather than a specific hotel. I’m not sure I can come up with the kind of useful information that would help identify the people buried in the grave.”

Eastlyn nodded in sympathy and patted Rowan on the hand. “Anything you can remember could be helpful.”

“There is this one dream I keep having about drowning. At first, I thought I was splashing around in the ocean or maybe a lake, trying to swim but now I’m convinced that I was in a swimming pool. There was this strong smell and taste of chlorine. It was overwhelming.”

“Ah. That’s why you’re so interested in this Smithwick drowning? You think you were the kid she was trying to save?”

“I thought so after reading about it.”

“I’ll check it out the first chance I get.”

Brent arrived a few minutes later, looking stressed and tired. “Sorry for the delay, ladies. It’s been a long day,” he said, dropping into the chair across from Rowan.

Daniel entered the room and handed him a bottle of water. “You look like you could use something stronger. There’s whiskey or bourbon nearby. Just say the word. Take your pick.”

“Thanks. This’ll have to do for now,” Brent said, twisting off the cap and guzzling down half the bottle. “Look, I took Gwynn’s DNA. But her condition is looking bad. According to her doctor, she’s going downhill by the hour. Which makes this entire mystery feel like the clock is ticking. I had a lengthy conversation with Muriel Strafford on the drive back to town. She tells me the two people in the grave suffered gunshot wounds to the head. She knows that because she found a small bullet hole in each of the skulls. She’s still looking for other bullet wounds.”

“Shot?” Daniel echoed, looking at Rowan. “Is there a gun in the house?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Brent parroted. “Did you ever see Jim or Lynette with a weapon?”

“No. But you might want to check this weird metal locker I discovered in the storage shed last week. It’s hidden from view behind a bunch of crates and boxes. You’ll need to bust the lock on it because I can’t find the key, which is odd. It’s not on Gran’s—I mean Lynette’s—key ring.”

“Show me the shed.”

“It’s not hard to find. It’s at the side of the garage to the right.”

“Okay. I’ll take a look.”

“I’ll tag along,” Daniel offered. “And I’ll grab the hammer to break the lock.”

“You’ll need a flashlight,” Rowan called out. “The shed isn’t wired for electricity.”

The men soon discovered the weathered garden shed held more than shovels and rakes. They managed to crack open the locker using a crowbar.

As Brent pulled on a pair of latex gloves, Daniel shined the light on six different rifles, varying in caliber. “There must be half a dozen weapons in here.”

“Don’t forget the handguns,” Brent said, pointing to two nine-millimeters—a Luger and a Beretta 92—on an upper shelf.

“What’s this?” Tucked away behind the rifles was a smaller pistol—a Walther TP model manufactured in Germany around 1961. “Well, well, well. What have we here? This little gem uses two different types of ammo—.22 caliber for a long rifle and .25 ACP. This could be a winner.”

“ACP?”

“Automatic Colt Pistol, designed for a Browning. This right here is a very versatile little firearm,” Brent detailed,

weighing the weapon in his hand. “Nothing better for up close and personal with a concealed hammer. See? And less than six inches in length makes it a perfect gun for a woman to carry in her purse.”

Daniel surveyed the haul. “This is a lot of firepower for a guy living in a small town. So, you might not be looking at a rifle after all. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m looking for anything that uses .22 caliber ammo,” Brent replied, eyeing the weapons. “Looks like we have three possibilities, including the Marlin and the Mossberg.” He picked up the Marlin Rimfire first and looked for the serial number on the left side of the barrel before hefting the Mossberg. “Interesting. It seems Jim owned two different rifles without serial numbers.”

“Scratched off?”

“No. See these letters on the barrel? AB indicates it was manufactured around 1966, predating the 1968 requirement. Same with the Mossberg. I’d say this is a 351K with a Weaver scope manufactured between 1960 and 1961.”

“You know your guns.”

“I’ve been around a lot of firearms, seen a lot of gun safes owned by a variety of people. Some would scare the crap out of you while others are just plain folks.”

“Who would’ve thought Rowan’s grandfather would have this kind of arsenal? And without serial numbers. I’m surprised.”

“I’m not. It’s obvious to me that Jim and Lynette were keeping a big secret, one they wanted to stay hidden forever. Might have worked, too, except Rowan came back here to live.”

“And Scott showed her the headstone.”

“I’ll ignore that last comment. But from where I stand, it looks like the Dewhursts were prepared to protect their secret at any cost. Lynette could’ve gotten rid of these, cleared out this locker, but she didn’t.”

Rowan stood outside the shed with Eastlyn, listening, jolted by the notion that the man she'd known as her grandfather might've been involved in something as sinister as murder. "If there's an innocent explanation, why would he need all these guns?"

"That's what I aim to find out," Brent said, collecting the weapons and handing them off to Eastlyn. "Get these to the lab. Tonight. If my hunch is right, one of these is our murder weapon. Make sure the ballistic techs know these are connected to the remains at the cemetery. Make sure they know to let Muriel Strafford in on the results as soon as they get them."

"You got it."

Turning to face Rowan, Brent rubbed his forehead. "I need to make sure you understand that when Gwynn slips away, I'll need to order an autopsy on her. I've already left orders with the attending physician and the staff at the nursing home."

Puzzled, Rowan murmured, "Okay. Why?"

"That, I can't say. Not now anyway. Just know that I took her DNA for a reason. After I get the results back, I hope to start piecing together the puzzle and see if it leads me back to this house, back to this shed, and all these weapons. As of now, this shed is off-limits. I'm locking it down as part of the crime scene."

"What about the house?" Daniel asked. "Rowan was getting ready to have the guys at Tradewinds paint in there."

"Don't," Brent cautioned. "Put it off for now until I tell you otherwise. We might have to do an in-depth search of the house at a later date. It could get messy."

Daniel wrapped his arm around Rowan as they made their way back inside the house, the weight of the discovery heavy on their shoulders.

"I feel like I'm in a bad dream," Rowan remarked. "Can you believe my grandfather could be a murderer? And what's

this about Gwynn having an autopsy after she dies? What's that all about?"

"Brent seemed intent on following a hunch."

"He did, didn't he? I'm not sure what he thinks he'll learn from an autopsy. She took an overdose of something, probably heroin or meth."

"But which is it? Heroin would likely have killed her on the spot. Overdoses cover a wide range of things. What type of drugs bring on a massive stroke? Keep in mind your grandfather wasn't around eight years ago when Gwynn had hers. That's the only reason he'd call for an autopsy at this late date."

Just inside the doorway, Rowan came to a stop. "Oh, my God, you're right. It never occurred to me to question it."

"Do you remember the circumstances surrounding the overdose?"

"Not really. I was twenty, at school in San Diego, and got a call from Gran telling me that Gwynn had finally taken something powerful enough to overdose. By the time I arrived in town, the doctors had told Gran that Gwynn was better off at Sage Crossing. She was in a coma, a vegetable basically, and would never recover. Gran apparently had decided to take Gwynn off life support at the hospital. But to everyone's surprise, Gwynn started breathing on her own. Hence, the nursing home. Wow. Now, all this makes me wonder if Lynette Dewhurst knew how to handle a firearm."

Daniel chewed his lip before adding, "And knew exactly what to give Gwynn to send her over the edge."



That night, sitting up in bed, knees hugged to her chest, a restless Rowan racked her brain, trying to dredge up any memories that could be relevant to the case. She took a deep

breath and closed her eyes, trying to focus on the memories buried deep, maybe something she'd suppressed.

She could still hear Gwynn's voice in her head, droning on about how life had cheated her out of certain things. As long as she could remember, Gwynn had wanted nothing more than to escape her small backwater town and explore the world.

"She was never happy," Rowan told Daniel who had stretched out beside her on the bed with his elbow propped up on the pillow. "It seemed she wanted to be anywhere other than Pelican Pointe, doing something other than playing the role of mother. She always talked about a place called the Celestial Planet or something like that."

"Wasn't that an herbal tea?" Daniel piped up.

She swatted his shoulder. "I don't think it had anything to do with tea. The trouble is I don't remember exactly what she was referring to."

"Let's look it up online," Daniel suggested, flopping over and reaching for his laptop on the nightstand. "It could be a nightclub or a bar somewhere in San Mateo County."

As Daniel's fingers flew over the keys, Rowan still tried to focus on the past. "I do have a faint memory of Gwynn getting into a heated argument with a man who slapped her once. But it's just bits and pieces. The man was pissed off at her for some reason."

Rowan shut her eyes again, trying to focus but it was no use. "I can't remember anything specific."

"You were four," Daniel pointed out. "It's a rare thing for a child that young to remember anything in detail that far back. Studies have shown that memory starts between three and four years of age. You were just too young to recall anything significant. Ah. Here we go. Circa 1999, could she have been referring to the Celestial Moon Commune outside Redwood City, a hippie hangout, located thirty minutes west of town near Kings Mountain? Here's an interesting tidbit. The Celestial Moon was located halfway between Redwood City

and Half Moon Bay smack dab in the middle of a redwood forest.”

“Is the commune still there?”

“Apparently not. The land has been snapped up by millionaires. It was an unincorporated area anyway. But this article says the farm was sold off and the commune dissolved around 2004 or 2005. They aren’t sure which. The sheriff’s department went to serve a warrant and found the place abandoned. No one had lived there for ages. Where rustic cabins used to set, now million-dollar homes are owned by some of Silicon Valley’s wealthiest tech giants.”

“Used as second homes no doubt.”

“Or third or fourth.”

“Wait a minute. Where have I heard that name before? It sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Silicon Valley? Everybody refers to the area from San Jose to Redwood City as that.”

“No. I mean *Celestial Moon*. Wasn’t that the ship that went down in the storm during Christmas 1999? The clippings Gran kept.”

“Oh. Yeah. The *Celestial Moon*, the forty-four-foot sailboat. You’re right. That can’t be a coincidence. But what’s the connection? What’s a sailboat got to do with a commune?”

“I don’t know. This whole thing is starting to give me a headache.”

“Or a major pain in the butt.”

Rowan decided she was sick of talking about her drama. “When’s the last time you talked to the guy living in Portland? You know, the one who’s your uncle and not your father.”

Daniel snapped the lid closed on the laptop and set it back on the nightstand. He let his head fall back on the pillow. “At least a year ago.”

“Why that long?”

“Because he’s been involved with his own life. He’s not interested in talking to me.”

“How do you know that?”

“He said so. He didn’t approve of me leaving my high-paying job in the tech industry. He thought it was foolish for me to open up an ice cream store. We haven’t spoken since.”

Rowan let out a sigh. “Will you be able to sleep better tonight knowing the truth?”

“I don’t know. I feel deceived like my whole life has been a lie. Would it have hurt for the adults to tell me the truth when I reached adulthood? Uncle Bobby could’ve come clean at any time before he died. He could’ve told me when he bought me my first car. But he chose not to. Everybody chose to keep the secret. That’s so wrong. Which is why I understand how betrayed you must be feeling right now.”

“You’re probably the only person who does. I’m having trouble calling them my grandparents. I never felt close to Gwynn because it always seemed as though we never made a connection. Now I know why. So many little things make sense. But it hurts my brain to think about Jim and Lynette murdering anyone. They seemed so normal. Granddad always included me in anything he did. I used to follow him around the garden. It might be my first memory. Other than almost drowning.”

“About that. What do you remember most about the incident? What did it feel like?”

“Panic about not being able to see the surface.”

“Were there waves? Was it ocean water or maybe a lake?”

“Good question. I’m not sure. All I know is that I was in way over my head. I kept trying to scream but no one heard me.” Rowan sat up straighter, uncurling her legs. “Concrete. I remember hitting my head on the concrete. I saw blood in the water.”

“And smelled chlorine?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“It sounds like you were in a pool and not on the ocean. Maybe you are the kid the British woman tried to save.”

“I wish I knew. Do you think there’s any way to ever find out for sure?”

“If Eastlyn and Brent don’t find out anything, we’ll take a trip up to Redwood City and ask around, ask about this Celestial Moon Commune while we’re there.”

“Okay. It’s a deal. But I realize that would require closing the shop or hiring someone to take care of things. And don’t suggest your grandmother do it all by herself when she gets here. That’s not fair to her. We can’t jump in the car and leave her alone when she’s here for a nice visit.”

“I could close the shop for a few days,” Daniel offered. “It wouldn’t hurt to close early on a Saturday and reopen on Monday at noon.”

“Let’s not argue about it now. Besides, let’s see what Brent discovers first before we take off on a wild goose chase. It’s been twenty-four years. The answers won’t come easy, especially if the same people are no longer around Redwood City, Half Moon Bay, or this commune. What are the chances we’d find answers at this late date? Jim and Lynette are gone. Gwynn’s knocking on death’s door. How many people would you expect from those days to still be around and willing to talk?”

“That could be a problem. We need to find someone who knows something about the commune. We just need to take a trip up there and ask around, take Gwynn’s picture with us, and see if anyone remembers her around November 1999. It might jog someone’s memory.”

“Or it could be a complete waste of time.”

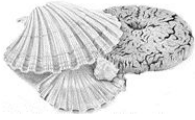
“I think we should do it. Tomorrow. I’ll close the shop and we’ll take a day trip up to the area.”

“But—”

He put his fingers up to her lips. “We need to do this. No point in arguing. We’ll both feel better knowing we did something.”

“We might stumble on information Brent couldn’t.”

“There you go. We’ll leave early. Make a day of it.”



Chapter Seventeen

After a quick bowl of cereal for breakfast, Daniel used his laptop to map a route that took them through Kings Mountain, a short forty-five-minute drive inland from Pelican Pointe. From there, they would begin their search in one of the richest cities in the country—Redwood City.

“Even though it’s practically next door to Stanford University, it hasn’t always been a wealthy place to live,” Daniel pointed out as Rowan packed snacks for their trip and made sandwiches for their lunch.

“You could’ve fooled me,” Rowan said, glancing over his shoulder at the photos of the million-dollar hillside homes, stacked like steps on a ladder surrounded by tall redwoods.

“The town didn’t revitalize its downtown until the early 2000s. Prior to that, some of the locals referred to it as Deadwood City.”

“Deadwood to Redwood. That’s funny. I’d forgotten you used to live in the area. How could you afford it?”

“I lived south of there in San Jose. The company I worked for paid well, but it was not a great way to spend ten hours a day. It isn’t just the tech companies like Oracle that dominate the area. It’s also a gaming mecca. If you love the rat race, love commuting to work every day in noisy traffic congestion, then it’s not a bad place to call home.”

“Stacked on top of one another’s houses, that’s like living in San Diego.”

“Exactly. That’s why I got out at the first opportunity,” Daniel admitted. “We need to get a move on. The more we sit here talking, the less time we’ll have to explore the area.”

“I’m still not sure what good this will do. How do you find anyone from 1999 who wants to talk about living in a commune?”

“Don’t be so negative. Besides, we’ll get a nice drive out of it, see the scenery from here to the other side of California at one of its narrowest points.”

Rowan decided that maybe a drive in the country might be just the thing to lift her spirits. She closed the picnic basket she’d prepared and hauled it out to Daniel’s Crosstrek. “We need to write a sign for the front door of the shop.”

“Already done,” Daniel commented, holding up a piece of white cardboard. “We’ll tape it up on our way out of town.”

The route he picked sent them past towering ancient redwoods, their bark a deep chocolate brown, reaching hundreds of feet into the air before fanning out into a thick canopy of green. They drove past a babbling brook and watched water glistening in the buttery sunlight, gushing over stones and twisted roots.

With the smell of fir and pine behind them, they left the coastal forest. The road ahead snaked and curved through an enchanted landscape of rolling hills, abundant with springtime flowers and green herbs flourishing and twisting toward the sun-kissed sky.

They drove past a private estate that looked like a Mediterranean-style vineyard. From the tender green leaves to the deep purple clusters of ripe grapes dripping with dew, the grounds provided a postcard of colors—deep crimson, burnished chestnut, and golden amber—that swept across the sloping countryside. The air seeped with a fragrant, unmistakable sweetness. Somewhere, hints of citrus mingled with wild sage that fluttered on the wind.

Wild poppies sprang up next to the road in spots, creating a living patchwork of red and green. She could almost reach

out and brush her fingers through the petals.

The gentle whisper of birds flitting from oak to oak, the buzzing bees, and the rustling leaves created a peaceful symphony to nature's music.

"This was a good idea," Rowan admitted.

"I'm glad you think so. The turnoff to the old commune is up ahead. But GPS says it's closed off. It's private land now. See?" Daniel explained as he pointed to the map on the screen.

"The sign says trespassers will be shot."

Daniel chuckled. "Yeah. That would put a damper on the whole trip."

Instead of testing the warning sign, he stepped on the gas and headed toward Redwood City, keeping to the two-lane Kings Mountain Road with its scenic curves where the speed limit at times dropped to ten miles an hour for safety reasons.

When they drove past a picnic area, Daniel asked, "Do you want to stop and eat?"

"It's not even ten-thirty yet," she pointed out.

"Just asking."

Twenty minutes later, they crossed over 280 skirting the area around Woodside and heading northeast.

After crossing into Redwood City, the hub of the county, Daniel turned onto El Camino and drove his Subaru past the Maserati dealership. Rowan twisted in her seat to get a better look at the luxury cars. "We're in another world here."

Downtown's City Square gave off an urban vibe with the main drag offering a row of vintage buildings that housed retail shops, eateries, and coffeehouses.

"I've been thinking," Rowan said glancing out the side window. "Maybe Brent has a point. Maybe Jim and Lynette did know someone with connections here who could fake a death certificate. I've never once heard either one of them mention any relatives. Don't you think that's weird?"

“One weird thing at a time is about all I can manage,” Daniel noted, pulling into a parking space across from City Hall designated as Lot B for the main library. “Our quest for information begins here. After we pay the two bucks for parking, that is.”

While Daniel fed the parking meter, Rowan gathered up her backpack and waited on the sidewalk. She studied the old building, now the public library, which had once housed the original fire station built in 1921. Back then, the architects had made the most of Italian Renaissance design using brick, the color of muted terracotta. It was now a registered landmark that oozed historic charm. She pointed to a sign along the walkway. “This says thousands of honeybees make their home on the roof of the library.”

“I remember. I wouldn’t want to spend my lunch hour around thousands of bees.”

Together, they walked under the classic loggia or portico, through the three arched doorways— where firetrucks once roared past when the alarm sounded—toward the archive room.

“You’ve been in here before,” Rowan noted as he tugged her upstairs to the mezzanine level.

“Three or four times to look up real estate options. This is where I stumbled across the information I needed about Pelican Pointe.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. Libraries are amazing go-to resources when you’re looking to make a move. And this one in particular has a very fine collection of local history. Everything you always wanted to know about this area is available on microfilm.”

“How close was work from here?”

“Ten minutes maybe from Silicon Valley. I’d come here during lunch or after work.”

“So, looking through old newspapers, we should be able to find more than one journalist who covered what happened at the commune.”

“Even the ones that no longer publish are here... somewhere,” Daniel whispered with a laugh.

After browsing through subject material that mentioned cults and communes in northern California, they discovered a treasure trove of articles regarding the Celestial Moon Commune that went back to its founding in 1971 by a man named Dodge Nichols.

Dodge amassed hundreds of followers, some former flower children from Haight-Ashbury. After inheriting his family’s fifty-acre farm near Kings Mountain, he turned it into a bohemian retreat. The group built their houses out of adobe, made their own bricks, planted fields of fruits and vegetables, tended to chickens, cows, and goats, and proclaimed themselves a religious non-profit for tax purposes that lived off the land.

But behind the scenes, Dodge dedicated a portion of the farm to growing marijuana for profit. He slowly began to collect an arsenal of weapons. By 1980, he had become the leading distributor of cocaine, bringing massive amounts of drugs into the area.

For two hours, Daniel and Rowan sat hunched over microfilm, reading articles filled with tales of debauchery, drug use, and sexual experimentation reported within the walls of the Celestial Moon Commune.

Rowan couldn’t help but wonder what kind of people were drawn to such a lifestyle and what sort of things they were capable of doing to protect their secrets. Would that include murder?

Daniel must have noticed her discomfort because he reached over and squeezed her hand. “Are you okay?”

Rowan nodded, but she couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that settled in her stomach. She had always considered herself an open-minded adult, but these stories were pushing the limits of what she could accept.

One article in particular caught their attention. It was an interview with a former member of the commune, a woman

the reporter referred to as “Sparrow” who had left after just a few months. In the interview, Sparrow painted a picture of a tight-knit community passionate about exploring alternative lifestyles and spirituality. Sparrow described the joy and freedom she had felt when she first arrived, and the sense of belonging as she bonded with the other members. But as time went on, Sparrow began to notice disturbing patterns emerging within the group. Some members were openly hostile while others were so drugged out they couldn’t contribute much to the everyday work routines.

Another article mentioned an outbuilding that was always locked. The member recalled hearing strange noises coming from it at night, like chanting or singing. But no one was allowed inside without permission.

But the last article made their blood run cold. It was titled “Disappearances Linked to Commune” and detailed how seven members had vanished from the group over a two-year period and were never seen again.

Rowan made a list of their names and the reporters who had written stories about their disappearances.

They were about to call it a day when a fifty-something woman with a Friends of the Library volunteer nametag that read Barbara Tanner leaned in and peered over their shoulders. “If you want to know about that commune, you need to talk to Phoebe Jamieson, a reporter who kept after that story long after the place disbanded.”

Rowan scribbled the name down on her notepad. “Would she know what happened to Dodge Nichols?”

“Absolutely. She tried to find out where he ended up after he sold the property and absconded with all the drug money. Some say Mexico. Some say he went to live in Aruba. Phoebe thought he went to the Balkans where there’s no extradition treaty with the US. She knows everything there is to know about Dodge Nichols.”

Daniel got to his feet. “Where can we find her?”

“Meet me at the front desk and I’ll give you her cell phone information. You’ll have to take it from there and convince her that you don’t have nefarious intentions.”

They trailed after Barbara to the reception area where she handed them a piece of paper. “Call Phoebe and explain why you’re looking for Dodge Nichol.”

“We’re not actually looking for him per se,” Rowan said, reaching into her backpack for the photos of the Dewhurst family. She shoved the pictures across the desk. “We’re trying to find anyone who might remember these people—Jim, Lynette, or Gwynn Dewhurst.”

After flipping on her reading glasses, Barbara’s eyes widened. She looked up from the photos. “Who are you people?”

“Daniel Cardiff and Rowan Eaton,” Daniel replied. “We’re here for the day from Pelican Pointe trying to learn as much as we can about an incident that happened in November 1999.”

“Right after Thanksgiving,” Rowan inserted. “Saturday the 27th to be exact.”

“What kind of incident?” Barbara wanted to know.

“Some type of accident that might’ve resulted in a death that occurred at a private residence over that weekend. Maybe even out at the commune. We’re grasping at straws here.”

Now seeming to regret her friendliness, Barbara’s tone became frosty. She handed the pictures back to Rowan. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“Okay. Well, um, thanks for Phoebe’s phone number anyway,” Rowan acknowledged, turning to leave.

Outside on the sidewalk, she exchanged looks with Daniel. “Did you see the way she acted after getting one look at the Dewhursts?”

Daniel took out his cell phone to call the reporter. “Are you kidding? She practically iced over right in front of our eyes.”

Rowan felt a tap on the shoulder and whirled around to see the volunteer standing a few feet away. “Oh. Hi. What’s up?”

“I know one of the people in that photograph,” Barbara admitted. “Gwynn Dewhurst. We used to hang out together at the beach in Half Moon Bay. We were kids. Teenagers. She wasn’t always a drug addict.”

“When did you stop hanging out together?” Rowan wanted to know. “When she got involved with Celestial Moon and Dodge Nichols?”

Barbara nodded. “It’s weirder than that I’m afraid. As a teenager, every time she argued with her parents, she’d end up out there with Nichols. I have no idea what the relationship was or how deep it went. But that behavior of hers went back years. If they fought about her breaking curfew, she’d run to Nichols. Then, her parents would always show up and take her back to Pelican Pointe. At times, she acted like a spoiled brat getting shuffled between divorced parents.”

“Huh. Did you ever hear about Gwynn giving birth to a daughter?”

“Not that I know anything about.”

On a whim, Rowan shifted her feet and asked, “Did you ever hear about a boat called the *Celestial Moon* that sunk over Christmas vacation at the end of 1999?”

“Is that the one owned by Nichols? I remember one of his boats sinking.”

Daniel looked confused. “Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying. Dodge Nichols owned the *Celestial Moon*? The sailboat?”

“Of course. At one time he used it in one of his so-called legitimate money-making schemes to sail tourists around Richardson Bay. Rumors said he used the boat to run drugs across the Bay Area. When people started to talk, that’s when Dodge got rid of it, sold it off.”

“How do we check boat records?” Rowan wondered.

Daniel shrugged. “It’s at the bottom of the ocean. But it sounds like Nichols must’ve sold it to Royce Snelling, the uncle. We’ll check it out later. Right now we need to find this reporter and ask about the commune.”



Phoebe Jamieson turned out to be a vivacious brunette in her forties who lived in Redwood Shores with her successful gamer of a husband. A former anchor at one of the local TV stations, she had a mile-wide smile, big brown eyes and a no-nonsense attitude about everything.

She opened the door to her spacious waterfront home and ushered them into a bright, airy study. “I was surprised to get your call. You’re the first people who’ve been interested in Dodge Nichols since 2010. That’s how long it’s been since I last reported a sighting of him in Bulgaria living under the name Boris Petruska.”

While Rowan and Phoebe got comfortable on a long sofa, Daniel continued to stand, anxious to learn more about the Dewhurst connection to Nichols. “Maybe you could explain how a TV anchor became interested in a commune headed by a drug runner as its self-described guru?”

“Technically, Nichols never claimed to be anyone’s guru. Their leader would be more apt. It all started when the TV station fired me for not being blonde enough, and I went to work for the county newspaper. A reporter is always a reporter, right? Whether you’re reading lines from a TV prompter or searching for the hottest local stories, it’s in your blood. One of my first leads came from a source who told me Dodge Nichols had a nice little empire running drugs out of his family’s compound. I checked, but the guy seemed clean as a whistle at first. Then, a second source came forward, then a third. One rumor might stem from someone with an axe to grind, but three? I started digging deeper. It all began to click after that.”

“Let me guess,” Daniel began, “by that time, Nichols had sold his land and fled the country.”

“You get first prize,” Phoebe said with a wink. “I tracked that guy to the final day when he flew as a tourist in business class to Athens, Greece, then crossed over into Bulgaria and disappeared.”

“Did he have any family that you know about?”

“Besides, a common law wife twenty years his junior that he left behind? No. At least none that I ever found. His parents died under mysterious circumstances, though back in 1971 when he inherited their sizable bank account and the land. I always wondered if he had something to do with getting rid of them.”

“How did they die?” Rowan asked.

“They had a very unfortunate accident with carbon monoxide when a heater in the farmhouse stopped working. The coroner ruled both were accidental deaths and Nichols collected about two million dollars in life insurance money. A convenient way to make a fortune for a twenty-year-old guy who always referred to himself as a capitalist instead of a hippie.”

“Carbon monoxide poisoning sounds suspicious,” Daniel remarked. “I’m assuming there were autopsies done.”

“There were questions from the medical examiner at the time, but Nichols claimed he was nowhere near the farm the night it happened. I guess the coroner must’ve believed him.”

Rowan settled deeper into the sofa. “Did you ever meet any of the former members personally to get a better picture of what it was like out there?”

“Sure. I interviewed maybe twenty-five people who left. A lot of those members really believed in the lifestyle. They took names like Saffron or Sage or Marjoram, incredibly corny stuff. But those diehards never lasted for long. Once they discovered what Nichols was really up to, they hightailed it out of there faster than a greased pig at a luau.”

Rowan took out her notes. “What about the people who disappeared? I’ve counted seven in all—five women, two men—between 1999 and 2000.”

“Those are the ones we know about. Most of those families didn’t even report their kids going missing. When I contacted them, they were more like good riddance for running away in the first place.”

“You have their real names?”

“Of course. Somewhere in my notes. I investigated all the disappearances. But the police didn’t have a single body to indicate foul play, so they refused to do anything about it. Adults go missing. They have a right to take off, blah, blah, blah. It was infuriating. I couldn’t convince the sheriff’s office that these poor souls had probably gotten mixed up with a very bad man.”

Daniel rolled the kinks out of his shoulders as he paced in front of a bay window. “Nichols wouldn’t be the first cult leader to send his naïve flock out to kill off anyone who threatened to go to the police and tell them what he was doing.”

“Like the guru in Oregon in the 1980s,” Phoebe replied with a smile. “I did my share of research on cults. From Jonestown to Manson, I’m sure Nichols employed whatever means at his disposal to save his drug empire.”

“When did anyone start investigating Nichols?”

“It wasn’t the local police I can tell you that much. Nothing much happened until Nichols got sloppy. He started making mistakes even before the DEA tracked a sizable cocaine shipment from Toronto to Kings Mountain. After the feds became interested, that was the beginning of the end. But someone must’ve tipped off Nichols long before the DEA got involved because he cleared out, sold the land to a developer and here we are almost twenty years later.”

“When you were deep in your investigation, did the name Dewhurst ever come up?”

“Again, I’d need to check my notes. And when I say notes, I’m talking about bookbinders full of typed pages. You know, it’s worth mentioning the rumors. They say that Nichols kept the local officials—city councilmen and the like, the zoning commission, and various state politicians—in his back pocket.”

“But you couldn’t prove anything,” Rowan prompted.

“Not a thing. Nobody was talking. And then there were the occasional anonymous sources that said Nichols used extortion to keep these politicians in line by taking videos of them doing drugs or using escorts. One of the rumors even mentioned a dustup after a woman died at one of Nichols’ parties. A drowning, I think.”

“Tamsin Southwick,” Daniel provided.

Phoebe snapped her fingers. “That’s the one. I am a bit rusty. Tamsin tried to save a little girl from drowning inside one of Nichols’ houses. At least, that was the story put out to the public.”

Rowan narrowed her eyes. “So, this drowning happened outside the commune? I thought Nichols lived at the farm.”

“Goodness no,” Phoebe said with a laugh. “Celestial Moon was just a front for his weed-growing operation and the hokey vegetable stand his followers ran. The farm was far too unsophisticated for Dodge Nichols. He preferred living at his posh house overlooking the lagoon, which I believe he bought for cash back in the 1970s after his parents passed away. His former house is actually around the corner, still standing. It’s probably three times the size of ours. After all, in his heyday, Nichols ran a very proficient drug smuggling operation.”

Rowan’s pulse quickened. “Did his house have an indoor swimming pool by any chance?”

“Yes. And an outdoor one with a cabana. I’ll write down the address for you,” Phoebe offered, grabbing a notepad from the coffee table. She tore off a page and handed Rowan the piece of paper. “Here you go. Why don’t we keep in touch?”

That way if you find out anything about Nichols' whereabouts you can call me."

"Absolutely. And if you find the name Dewhurst in your notes, you'll do the same."

Phoebe smiled. "It's a deal. I can't wait to go through those binders. It's been years since I've had any interest. But hearing that name again has lit a fire in me."

"We have that in common," Rowan said, getting to her feet.

"What will you do now?" Phoebe asked.

"Head back to Pelican Pointe and lay out everything we've learned to the police chief. Hopefully, it will help him solve a double homicide."

Before Phoebe walked them to the front door, Daniel stopped. "This dustup after Tamsin died, what was it about?"

"According to witnesses, one of Dodge's handlers suggested they call someone who could remove the body before anyone found out and take care of it as they had done in the past. Whatever that means. I'll leave it to you to form your own judgment about what they meant by that statement."

"Why didn't Nichols do that before anyone called the police?" Daniel pressed.

Phoebe narrowed her eyes. "Because one of the guests was the chief of police. Rumor has it that he was there in the company of a woman who wasn't his wife. It seems Dodge wasn't just a drug dealer extraordinaire. He apparently could use extortion with the best of them."



Chapter Eighteen

Rowan and Daniel wasted no time getting back to town. They went straight to Brent with what they had discovered about the Celestial Moon and its leader, Dodge Nichol.

Sitting at the conference table inside the police station, Rowan looked around at the faces. Eastlyn was there because she was involved in the case. But she couldn't figure out why Brent had included Colt Del Rio and Theo Woodsong. She wanted to ask but decided to stick to the reason they were there. "Look, Jim, Lynette, and Gwynn all had ties to this guy. We found a witness who said so. Gwynn would argue with her parents and storm out of the house. She'd end up at the Celestial Moon compound with Nichols. Jim and Lynette would go out there and drag her home. This went on for years. The same person who told us about Gwynn told us that Dodge Nichols owned the boat, *Celestial Moon*, and used it for running drugs in and out of San Francisco."

"You have been busy today amateur sleuthing," Brent uttered. "And when I specifically told you to leave the investigation to us."

"We had a hunch and followed it," Daniel contributed, his voice edgy with frustration. "After Rowan remembered Gwynn talking about the Celestial Moon Commune, we made the connection to the boat. You can't sit there and deny we had a productive day while we were there. We're convinced the commune is the key to this whole thing. Dodge Nichols was a drug runner. Ask the DEA. That's who raided the farm in 2004 and found he'd left the country. But not before he sold all of

his properties. Before heading back, we made a stop at the tax office in San Mateo.” Daniel shoved a list toward Brent. “That’s right. He owned several other houses in addition to the farm. Plus, the huge house with a view of the lagoon.”

“You’re the one who mentioned that Jim and Lynette knew people,” Rowan brought up. “I think you’re right. They did. They had connections to this cult leader Nichols. It’s up to you to find out how deep the link goes. If you suspect that Jim killed the couple out at Eternal Gardens, then who’s to say they weren’t also involved in other criminal things as well? Why else would they need a phony death certificate for a fake child? And why did they need a fake birth certificate for me? Ask yourself, who did they go to and who provided the documents? Somebody in Nichols’ orbit must’ve known how to make that stuff look real. Then ask yourself why? Why go to that kind of trouble? And why did they need to kill that couple they hid away under a wooden coffin? Daniel and I discovered seven people went missing from that commune under Nichols’ leadership over a two-year period. It can’t be a coincidence that you have a double murder practically in Jim and Lynette’s backyard.”

Theo Woodsong tapped his pen against the table. “Ties to a drug-laden commune give this case an added layer. Any time drugs are involved, they’re likely to take extreme measures to cover up something more sinister, like murder. Back in Seattle we once had a commune that swore up and down their money came from growing fruits and vegetables and organic honey. Turns out, their revered leader owned ten houses in one of the trendiest neighborhoods in town, and they were selling more than apple juice.”

Knowing Brent wasn’t happy with the turn of events, Colt took a different approach. “We often ask for the public’s help in solving cold cases.”

Rowan traded disbelieving looks with Daniel before confronting Brent. “Are you telling me you’re upset because we’ve provided critical information relevant to your investigation? Why does it matter where the information comes from as long as it leads us closer to the truth? Those

people tossed into that grave deserve better. They deserve justice. If you don't believe us, then talk to Phoebe Jamieson. Call her. She's a wealth of information about this guy. And she knew about Tamsin Southwick dying at his house. Yeah. You heard right. Tamsin Southwick drowned at a party given by Dodge Nichols at the lagoon house with an indoor pool. Not only that, one of his handlers suggested they remove the body before anyone else found out. But it seems they couldn't because the chief of police was just down the hallway at the same party with someone who wasn't his wife."

"Are you saying this Dodge Nichols made up the drowning story to cover up the drug use?" Eastlyn asked.

"I don't know," Rowan seethed, getting to her feet. "Did Tamsin die of a drug overdose, or did she drown? That's what you should find out. Was she there alone or was she a member of the commune? Was she there with Gwynn Dewhurst? Or maybe Jim and Lynette stopped by to pick up their drug-addicted daughter and pay homage to the drug lord of the manor. Whatever happened that weekend is the catalyst for killing our mystery couple."

Brent huffed out a breath. "Okay, that's enough. You've made your point. Between the four of us, we'll tackle these ties to the drug dealer and this commune. I appreciate the information. I just don't like regular citizens going off on their own, asking questions that might draw attention from the wrong people. If this Nichols guy is behind a string of criminal activity that goes back decades, just because he's out of the country doesn't mean he isn't capable of striking back. You've already had two break-ins where you live. It indicates there's at least one individual out there who finds this all very interesting."

"So stay on alert," Colt cautioned. "Call us if you have the slightest hint someone's keeping tabs on your movements."



They left the conference room in a baffled state and walked out into the crisp June air. The smell of Italian spices and New York pizza from down the street wafted on the night breeze.

Rowan watched a few people coming out of the movie theater next door and longed to do that again without the past dragging her back to when she was a kid. “I thought Brent would be pleased. I had no idea he’d react like that.”

“Cops are funny creatures. They’re very territorial. They don’t like people sticking their noses into their cases.”

“Even a double murder?” Rowan said as she pulled her seatbelt across and snapped it closed. “So, I shouldn’t go looking into my own past? How else am I going to get answers about where I came from if I don’t make inquiries outside Pelican Pointe? I didn’t just drop out of the sky and land here. The Dewhursts brought me here. The question is which one? And why? I’m not convinced it was Gwynn who wanted a child. Knowing her as I do, that part doesn’t make sense to me. So where did I come from? Who were my real parents? I have a right to know.”

Daniel’s hands went up in a defensive posture. “I’m all for finding out. No need to take it out on me.”

“Sorry. I just thought Brent would be more accepting of the information.”

“He promised to look into it. I’m sure he’ll keep his word.”

Rowan’s cell phone rang. When she dug it out of her bag and looked at the screen, she frowned. “It’s the nursing home. Hello? Oh. Okay. I see. When? Oh. Is there anything I need to do? I see. What are the next steps after that?”

Daniel listened to the one-sided conversation but recognized the signs of stress moving across Rowan’s face.

She ended the call. “That was the nursing home. Gwynn passed away in her sleep earlier tonight a little before eight o’clock. The horrible thing is I don’t feel anything for her,

Daniel. I'm trying. But the truth is I haven't focused on her for a very long time. She wasn't much of a mother."

"I know."

"Will you go back inside and tell Brent in case the nursing home doesn't call him? I can't talk to him right now."

"Sure. Are you okay?"

She stared into his eyes. "I don't know how I feel. Right now, I'm just numb. Processing all this is hard."

He squeezed her hand. "You stay here. I'll be right back. Maybe you should take a couple of days off."

"No way. I need to stay busy. Otherwise, I might just go stark raving mad."



Going crazy wasn't an option, Rowan realized after getting back home. While Daniel started dinner, she checked the mailbox, looking for her genealogy report. When she spotted the envelope with the lab's return address, she tossed everything else on the dining table and ripped open the results in anticipation, only to receive another gut punch.

Daniel came around the corner to catch the look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"This can't be right."

"What?"

"This stupid genealogy report that I paid a fortune for says I have no immediate matches. They checked multiple generations, but all they got was a partial DNA match, which translates to nothing but distant cousins. Very distant. This means that I have no living relatives. How can that be? How often are these things wrong?"

"We'll try another lab, find one with access to other databases."

“This says they tried several of the most popular ones. See?”

Daniel scanned the sparse details. “It just takes one database, Rowan, one result that comes from a relative somewhere in the world uploading a sample that matches back to you. Patience is the keyword here. You can’t give up.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Why does everything have to be so hard?”

He took her shoulders. “Don’t look at it like that. Your circumstances might be unusual, but it doesn’t mean you won’t get answers. Look at how much we discovered today.”

“The same day Gwynn died,” she muttered. “It’s just that I expected more out of this lab. I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.”

“We’ll get there. I promise you. After the kind of day we’ve had, you look exhausted. You need to eat something and get some rest. I made some potato soup. Comfort food.”

“From scratch?”

Daniel wrapped his arm around her and steered her toward the kitchen. “I’m a handy guy to have around.”

She touched his cheek. “I’m noticing that. I keep waiting for your dark side to surface.”

He chuckled. “I’m afraid my dark side only comes out during a full moon. Apart from risk-taking and rash decisions every now and again, you’ll have to work harder for it to pop out.”

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs. “I don’t want to bring out your dark side. I like this side just fine.”

“Then don’t let my soup get cold.”

When they reached the kitchen, he pulled out a chair for her before heading to the stove where a pot simmered on the burner.

She caught a whiff of the soup, making her stomach growl in response. She couldn’t remember the last time she had

eaten. “That smells amazing. It doesn’t look lumpy like my potato soup. That’s a compliment by the way.”

“An old southern family recipe,” Daniel said, dropping a ladle in the pot and scooping up the contents into her bowl.

“What other kind of southern dishes do you have in your arsenal?”

“Ask my grandmother. She’ll be here in less than eighteen hours. And she loves to cook.”



Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, putting aside her own issues, Rowan waited on customers inside the Vanilla Bean Machine while Daniel drove to the airport to collect his grandmother. There was no way she intended to let her own troubles ruin Daniel's visit with Mamie.

She was in the process of preparing a giant banana split for three teenage girls to share when a man in his thirties, wearing a black hoodie walked into the shop from the rear entrance and stood a few feet away from the counter.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Rowan called to the man, who looked out of sorts and nervous. She finished topping the banana split with whipped cream and rang up the kids' tab, all the while trying to keep an eye on "hoodie man." It ran through her mind that he might be getting ready to rob the place.

Then it hit her. Was this the guy Daniel had seen in his house, the one who'd trashed both of their houses and vanished out the front door?

As the teenage girls took their order to one of the tables, the agitated hoodie man glared at her from across the counter. "Do you know who I am?"

Frightened now, Rowan moved closer to the wall phone and stammered, "Um, no, no, not at all. Should I?"

"There's a rumor going around town that you don't have any clue who you are. Is that true?"

Rowan sent him a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

The man shoved the hoodie back from his face and rolled his eyes. “Word has it around town that you’re adopted or something. Is it true?”

“Adopted? No. I wasn’t adopted,” she bluffed. “Not that I know of anyway. What business is it of yours? Who are you?”

“My name’s Will Snelling. William. When I was seven, I was on a boat that capsized north of here. I got separated from my sister. I’ve been trying to find her ever since.”

“And you think I might be Hallie?”

A cautious look crossed Will’s face. “I never mentioned her name.”

“Let’s back up a minute, shall we?” Rowan suggested, taking a step toward the man. “You could be onto something. Because you’re right. I don’t actually know who I am or where I came from. I’ve been looking into it for weeks now.”

“Are you for real?”

“Hey, you’re the one who showed up here asking questions. You’re the guy who broke into my house. And Daniel’s.”

“I had to find out if you were Hallie.”

“And just because I had a bunch of junk and newspaper articles scattered all over the floor you thought I was Hallie?”

Will went on the defensive. “Let’s be clear. I didn’t take anything out of your house. Okay? I just went through stuff. Same with your boyfriend. You’d already made a good-sized mess and left it in the middle of the floor. Don’t go telling the cops I stole stuff.”

“You also made a mess at Daniel’s,” Rowan countered. “Look, I’m not telling the police anything. Could we at least sit down and have a civil conversation? I found those newspaper clippings about your family’s boat sinking in a safe deposit box that I opened trying to find clues about where I came from.”

When he simply stood there, staring at her, she motioned toward one of the tables furthest away from the girls. “Well? Say something. Do you want to hear all of it or not?”

After Will took a seat, she sat down across from him and went on, “My life’s been a mess since I moved back here. I found clippings about your shipwreck—the *Celestial Moon*—in my grandmother’s safe deposit box. Only it turns out my grandmother wasn’t really my blood relative. I started reading the articles. They all said the same thing. Everyone onboard your uncle’s boat drowned. I won’t lie. For a few days there I thought that I might be Hallie Snelling, a little girl who’d risen from the dead. But since she drowned—”

“The newspapers got it wrong early on,” Will corrected. “The Coast Guard did find my dad’s body and my uncle’s, but they never found Hallie. Obviously, I’m still here, so I was rescued, picked up by a fisherman near San Gregorio State Beach.”

“Interesting.” Rowan crossed her arms over her chest. “But how do I know that you’re William Snelling? How do you know it’s true? How do you know that’s your real name?”

Will rolled his eyes again. “Because after the accident I went to live with my dad’s cousin in Oregon. I’ve always known my name. It wasn’t bad there. I had a good life. My cousins accepted me well enough. But eight years ago, on my twenty-fifth birthday, I took the next step and uploaded my DNA to a website for genealogy purposes. I’ve waited around for years for a hit. But nothing happened. I came back here a few months ago, to this town because this place seems to be the epicenter where all the questions start and end.”

“Here? I’d hardly call Pelican Pointe an epicenter.”

“It’s the epicenter because it’s smack in the middle of where the boat went down.”

“How do you figure?”

“Pelican Pointe is the midway point between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz. I’d planned to ask you to take a DNA test.”

“Why me? Why didn’t you just knock on the door then?”

“Because when I saw you that Saturday morning unloading your van, I lost my nerve. Plus, there’s another more significant reason. Are you a natural redhead? Because Hallie didn’t have red hair. That’s one detail I’m absolutely sure about.”

“I see. Natural redhead here, freckles and all. Tell me something, Will. I’m curious. What brought you to me? Why were you hanging around Driftwood Cottage? Why were you watching me unload my van? Is there something special about that house in particular?”

“In addition to looking for Hallie using traditional methods, I run a blog. But when I’m not blogging, I pay the bills as a reporter for the *Oregonian*. Keeping the blog is a way for me to tell my story. It started out as therapy. If you go back to the beginning of the blog to one of my first journal entries, I asked people to contact me if they had any information about Hallie. Two weeks ago toward the end of May, I received an anonymous tip through the blog. I traced the IP address back to Pelican Pointe. That’s when I decided to take a leave of absence from my job. This anonymous source told me to look at you—Rowan Avery Eaton. They said you could be my sister Hallie.”

Rowan dropped her head into her hands. “I have no idea why anyone would do that. They probably pranked you. And if you knew my hair didn’t match Hallie’s then why did you feel the need to break in anyway?”

“For the record, you left the back door open. Once I saw you at your boyfriend’s house, I decided to tick all the boxes before leaving town. Make sure for my own benefit. Understand?”

“No stone left unturned,” Rowan uttered with a nod. “I get it. But you’re still here.”

“Because I got another anonymous tip on the blog from the same person. I don’t think it’s a prank. Someone around here thinks you’re Hallie. And for a reporter, it’s too tempting not to stick around and find out what’s going on.”

“I’d ask you to come to dinner tonight, but Daniel has his grandmother coming into town for a few days. Where are you staying?”

“I’m at the B&B, north of town.”

On a whim, she made a snap decision. “Oh, hell. You don’t seem *that* dangerous. Come for supper anyway. Your being there will make a great icebreaker and conversation starter. Then again, Daniel could boot you to the curb. Or me. But I need to know the significance of the midway point. What’s Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz got to do with anything?”



The smell of sizzling peppers and fajita spices filled Daniel’s kitchen as Rowan threw together a stir-fry. She steamed rice, tossed together a salad, put out warm flour tortillas, and had dinner waiting when he walked in the door with his grandmother.

Maureen Albritton Cardiff was a delightful woman, tall and refined, with a faint Louisiana accent, who insisted Rowan call her Mamie. She wore a pale pink jogging suit and tennis shoes for comfort.

Rowan greeted her with a smile and introduced Will, explaining the break-ins and why he was there. “This guy could be our missing ingredient to the mystery.”

“A man who thinks you’re his long-lost sister is our missing ingredient?” Daniel cracked as he dropped Mamie’s bag in the entryway.

Mamie moved further into the foyer. “Don’t be rude, Daniel. I don’t mind sharing a meal with this young man. In fact, I find his story fascinating.” Sending a glance toward Rowan, she added, “Daniel caught me up on your situation on the drive from the airport. You and Will have such intriguing childhood mysteries. I can’t wait to hear if they’re connected. And to think I considered Daniel’s circumstances unusual.”

Daniel patted his grandmother's shoulder and pointed to the table already set. "Shall we eat? Not everyone needs to know about the Cardiff family drama."

"Hush, dear, I'm from Louisiana we don't air our dirty laundry. We either bury it in the backyard or sweep it under the carpet."

Rowan sputtered with laughter. "What difference does it make? We're all friends here. If not for my red hair, I could be sitting next to my brother."

Will chuckled and lifted his wine glass to Rowan. "We decided to join forces. I think it's wonderful because I could use all the help I can get to find Hallie."

"We'll all join forces," Mamie suggested, sauntering into the dining room. "It's the only way to get the job done satisfactorily. After all, in my day family stuck together. Not so much anymore, especially on the Cardiff side. But that's for another discussion."

"What if you don't have family?" Rowan prompted.

A slow smile crossed Mamie's face. She cast her eyes around the room. "But you do. You've found a like-minded, close-knit bunch right here. Family doesn't have to share blood. You make the most of people willing to go into battle with you. That's a rare, precious gift these days." She pointed her finger at Will first, then Rowan. "Combining forces isn't enough. Action speaks louder than words."

"Which brings me back to Will, who was about to share the significance of Pelican Pointe and the shipwreck," Rowan prodded. "Were you not? Pelican Pointe is midway between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz."

Will took in Daniel's dismissive demeanor. "I can see you're not sure about me yet. I don't blame you. I just want to find my sister. The *Celestial Moon* went down somewhere between the two cities. Debris from the boat washed up as far north as Half Moon Bay and as far south as Santa Cruz. It's that simple. I'm not here for any sinister reason. All I want is

to find my sister. I'm convinced someone in this town knows something about Hallie."

Daniel held out his hand. "And all Rowan wants is to find out where she came from. We could help each other."

"That's what I'm hoping for," Will said.

Mamie plopped into a chair. "Now that that's settled, it brings up a touchy subject. Daniel told me to leave it be, but I find it fascinating. What's this I hear about a ghost in Pelican Pointe?"

Daniel looked embarrassed. "I mentioned Scott Phillips."

"Who's Scott?" Will asked. "And why would you think he's a ghost?"

Rowan brought over the main course, dishing out a portion on everyone's plate before placing the platter in the middle of the table. "Scott is the only reason I know about the gravestone. He's ruined everything I ever thought I knew about Jim and Lynette."

Will looked confused. "Don't tell me you believe crap like that."

Mamie laid a hand on Will's arm. "Au contraire, my darling. Where I come from, they say you have no soul until you've seen a ghost. As a child, I walked the streets of Natchitoches where I grew up. Ghosts there were an everyday part of the lore. We thought when we saw a ghost that we were ever-so special. From what Daniel tells me, Scott does the reverse. He chooses the people he wants to help, the people he wants to see him."

"To have Scott get involved in your life is sort of like a ring of honor around here," Rowan explained with a laugh. "Only your life has to be a real mess if you're chosen. And here I am."

"Ghosts are so predictable like that," Mamie deadpanned. "I hate it when they act all superior as if they held the key to all life's little mysteries."

Daniel tried to hide a grin. “I hate to tell you, Will, but Scott Phillips is a legend around here. You can’t throw a rock without hitting someone who’s seen him.”

“Fascinating stuff,” Will said, as he picked up his fork. “Maybe there’s something in the water.”

“Or maybe you need to sit back and wait for him to find you,” Mamie teased. “The food smells delicious. Now, on to another matter, something I need to get off my chest, then I’ll leave it.”

Rowan lifted her glass. “You’re among friends. No need to hold back. Whatever you have to say, I can take it.”

Mamie’s lips curved in a devilish smile. “Don’t judge the people you thought were your grandparents too harshly.”

“Jim and Lynette,” Rowan supplied.

“Yes. Those two. Whatever they did, they probably did it out of love,” Mamie pointed out.

“We’re talking about murder,” Daniel stressed, dishing more meat and vegetables onto his plate.

“You don’t know that yet,” Mamie returned. “Wait for all the facts to come together before you send them into oblivion and disavow them for good. That’s all I’m saying.”

Rowan let out a sigh. “I could never obliterate them from my past. They were my grandparents in every way possible. But surely you understand how confusing this is for me. There are two people dead in a grave they paid for. Something isn’t right about that. It’s not looking good for either one of them.”

“Of course, Daniel explained all that. I’m simply saying don’t jump to conclusions. Keep an open mind until you find out otherwise.”

“Then what?” Rowan pressed. “If Brent is the slightest bit successful in uncovering what happened, I’m about to discover things about my past that are bound to get ugly and messy.”

“It’s not your past that’s ugly. It’s theirs,” Mamie stressed. “If they created this mess, it belongs to them, not you. Just as

Daniel isn't responsible for his mother or father's decisions, neither are you. Then there's Will. He's not responsible for that boat going down in a storm. Life is messy. Trust me, whatever comes along, you'll deal with it."

As the meal progressed, Rowan mulled that over. But she mostly listened as Mamie regaled them with stories from her childhood. She had grown up with old money in Natchitoches Parish during a time when change hadn't come easy. But her parents had instilled in her a deep sense of social responsibility, sending her off to Tulane University in New Orleans to broaden her horizons. There, she majored in law, earning her degree in 1976.

"The day of my birth, my father—Daniel's great-grandfather—sat down and wrote out a complete history of our family's heritage. I have no idea why he took the time to do that. Maybe after their firstborn died, a boy from diphtheria back in 1949, he was so overjoyed at having a child that he poured his heart out to me in his journal. Whatever the reason, I'm forever grateful he wrote down everything he ever wanted me to achieve. All his hopes and dreams that he had for me came pouring out. He wanted more than anything for me to follow him into law. I worked my tail end off every day to make him happy. Two years after I passed the bar, on the Fourth of July, Daddy dropped dead of a heart attack, standing in the middle of Church Street Bridge gawking at the fireworks, like he'd done as a boy. Three days later, we laid him to rest under an old dogwood tree at the cemetery on 2nd Street. Not two weeks after that day, I decided I didn't want to be a lawyer, not in the slightest. Sure, I was smart enough and tough enough to do the job, but it didn't suit me. I wanted to see new places, do new things, and experience life to its fullest. I wanted to see somewhere else other than Louisiana. And you know what I did?"

"What?" Will asked, drawn into her story.

"I packed my bags and got on a plane, flew across the country to start over in Sacramento, California, of all places, where I worked as a paralegal in a law firm until I passed the bar there. Three weeks after I found a job, I met my husband.

The love of my life walked through the door, a man sixteen years older than me and full of surprises. John Cardiff had the kindest heart. I loved every minute of our life together. The day John asked me to marry him, I was over the moon. I was not a naïve child bride. Remember I was twenty-five when I passed the bar for the first time. Some would've considered me a spinster at the ripe old age of twenty-seven. But somehow, I managed to have two babies within two years. Life opened up for me like it hadn't back in Natchitoches. By the time the boys were in kindergarten, we'd moved to Pasadena, where John opened up his own practice. We took the kids on weekend trips to Disneyland, enjoyed riding the roller coaster at Space Mountain, and went to the beach every chance we got. I can safely say that we made the most of our time together."

"That's why you were so open to Daniel leaving his job at the tech company," Rowan assessed.

"Life is far too short to spend it doing something you hate. I loved my family, but I had to spread my wings, in my own way. I haven't forgotten a thing about growing up in Natchitoches. I wouldn't trade my time there for anything. I still remember picking pecans at the Melrose, sliding down the hill on 4th Street on an old garbage can lid, walking through the azaleas in the springtime, eating meat pies with my best friends, and hanging out at the old Dairy Queen when I was a teenager, flirting with all the boys. But you can't sit still in life. Change is inevitable. And here Rowan has made a huge change in her life already."

Rowan glanced up at Daniel. "I'm a little older than twenty-five but the decision already has its benefits. I met your grandson last December. I couldn't stop thinking about him. He's worth moving to Pelican Pointe for, even if I have to come to terms with the darker side of Jim and Lynette."

Daniel reached to take her hand and placed a kiss on the palm. "She makes delicious lavender ice cream, too."

Mamie's eyes twinkled with tears. "Seeing him happy means everything to me."

Over coffee, Will prompted Mamie for more stories that left them all grateful for her warmth and humor. As the night wore on, Rowan realized that she had completely forgotten about her problems.

“Thank you for that,” she told Mamie as she cleaned up the mess she’d made in the kitchen.

“For what?”

“For making me forget about all this stuff, even for a few hours, helped.”

Mamie laid a hand over hers. “I want you to know that I’m here for you. No matter what the outcome. Whatever you need, I’m willing to help.” She leaned in and whispered, “Don’t tell anyone but Daniel is my favorite grandchild.”

Rowan roared with laughter. “Your secret is safe with me.”



After getting Mamie settled in his guest bedroom, Daniel insisted on walking Rowan home. As they took their time walking down the alleyway, the night air felt cool against their skin. The only sound was their footsteps echoing on the pavement.

“Business always picks up once summer starts,” Daniel blurted out, breaking the silence. “Lines out the door.”

“Are you thinking of hiring more people?”

“That depends. Are you planning to serve ice cream to the masses or try to pick up more clients?”

She frowned. “You’re suggesting I should be spending this time trying to grow my business.”

“That’s what I’d do. I feel like I’m taking advantage of you.”

Rowan lifted her shoulders. “So what if I get a kick out of making ice cream and serving it to the masses? It makes me

happy. And to be honest, with everything that's happening, I'm not in any mood to pursue new clients. Don't you like the job I'm doing?"

"No complaints out of me. You do seem to be having fun. It's probably because you're outgoing and personable."

"I'm a people-person. This sounds like my two-week review. So, could you verify that I'm doing a good job?"

"What's not to like? You make going to work every day more enjoyable. And tonight you even hit it off with my grandmother. You seem fond of her."

"She's wonderful. I can see how the Cardiff and Albritton genes came together to get you. She's a very good storyteller. And she adores you."

Daniel chuckled. "It's because she sees a lot of John, my grandfather in me. They were quite the pair back in their day, a love story for the ages."

"What happened to him?"

"Ten years ago, he suffered a massive heart attack while they were touring Southern France. He died before they could get him to the hospital. He was seventy-eight. She was sixty-two. She's felt guilty ever since because she was the one who had persuaded him to take the trip, to travel, to see something of the world other than California. She hasn't been anywhere since. Getting her here tonight was a very big deal."

"That's why you didn't think she'd come."

From one of the neighboring houses, they heard music coming from an open window—Elvis Presley's baritone crying out about falling in love, his soulful voice capturing the night.

"Mrs. Catz is a big fan of romantic tunes," Daniel pointed out. "She likes to turn the volume up on her record player this time of night and crank up the oldies. You'll get used to her routine." On impulse, he reached out to take her hand. "Dance with me."

"Here? Now?"

“Why not? Make the most of a full moon and a starry night. How can you hear that voice and those lyrics and not want to fall in love?”

Rowan smiled and turned in his arms. Swaying to the music, her thoughts kept drifting to the way his body felt pressed against hers. She felt the heat rising in her cheeks. She tried to keep her mind focused on the song, but the way Daniel’s hand felt in hers seemed more powerful than the rhythm of the music. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck. His touch seemed electric. A rush of emotions kicked in.

Rowan’s breath hitched as she looked up at him. She could see the desire in his eyes, and it made her feel wanted. “It’s obvious we have this thing happening between us.”

“I know.”

“Just listen for a minute, okay? I need to say this. I had a great time tonight because I enjoy being around you. I think I might be falling for you, Daniel, seriously falling.”

Daniel’s blue eyes sparkled as he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. “I’m pretty sure I’m already there,” he murmured against her cheek. “The question is what are we going to do about it.”

The song changed to a more upbeat tune, but it was Elvis still crooning about love. Daniel kept his arms locked around her as he whispered, “Let me stay tonight.”

“I’d like that. But what about your grandmother?”

“We’ll surprise her in the morning, the two of us making her breakfast. How does that sound?”

Rowan grinned. “That sounds perfect.”



Chapter Twenty

Daniel flipped pancakes in between tending to the sizzling bacon while Rowan scrambled the eggs.

As the utensils clanked metal against metal, and the aroma of breakfast filled the air, Mamie stepped into the kitchen to see the couple working together in perfect harmony. She smiled as she watched them, feeling grateful Daniel had finally found someone like Rowan. But she couldn't resist teasing them a bit. "What's this? It looks like you're cooking for an army. I can't eat all that food. But then I'm not the one who worked up an appetite last night, am I? I recognize that look on the both of you."

While Rowan's cheeks blushed bright pink Daniel was unbothered. "You need a good breakfast to start the day, something more than a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. I know you."

Drawn to the strong aroma of freshly brewed coffee, Mamie poured herself a cup and leaned against the kitchen counter. "Nonsense. You'll make me fat as a butterball."

"You could use some meat on those old bones," Daniel teased as he handed her a plate. "Sit. Enjoy."

Rowan came over and poured her a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice before taking the seat next to her.

"Any updates from the police?" Mamie asked, pouring syrup over her pancakes.

Rowan twisted in her chair. “Not from Brent. But Phoebe Jamieson sent me an email this morning with attachments. She has these binders full of notes on the commune. She found entries suggesting Celestial Moon made money on illegal adoptions. Rumors mostly. No one wanted to go on record.”

Mamie glanced at Rowan over the rim of her mug. “Oh my. Adoptions mean the babies could end up scattered all over the state.”

“Well, Phoebe attached a list of the commune’s members over the years. We’ll need to track down each one and see if they either gave up their children or adopted children.”

“I doubt that list is complete, though,” Daniel emphasized, joining them at the table. “Communes aren’t the best at record keeping.”

“It’s a starting point. We’ll need to ask the people who admit to being part of it for the names of anyone else they can remember.”

“Will needs to know about the list,” Daniel said.

“I’ll contact him after breakfast. Maybe tonight we could meet and the three of us could sort through this list, catch a few people at home in the evening, try to narrow down all the children that lived there. Hallie might be among them.”

“I can make calls,” Mamie pointed out. “I’m not helpless. After all, I’m here to help. I’ve told you, Daniel, that I’m happy to do whatever you need in the shop if you and Rowan need to take care of other things. It sounds to me like you both have quite a lot on your plates.”

“We don’t want you exerting yourself,” Daniel said, covering her hand with his. “You’re here to enjoy yourself, not work.”

Rowan caught the disappointment on the woman’s face. “But if you could mind the store whenever we get the results from Brent that would be great.”

Mamie smiled. “I’d be delighted. The best way to get to meet the people in town is to serve them ice cream, one cone

at a time.” She tossed down her napkin. “In fact, there’s no time like the present. I’ll start with putting a little makeup on.”

After his grandmother had disappeared down the hallway, Daniel shifted in his chair. “Do you think that was wise?”

“Daniel, she’s not an invalid or disabled. You can’t treat her like she is. How long has it been since she closed her own shop?”

“Six months now.”

“She misses it. Don’t try to keep her from doing things, Daniel. As long as you’re not taking advantage—which you’re not—she’ll be fine staying busy.”

“But we don’t actually need her this morning. The inventory is up to date. It means I’m available to wait on customers.”

“Then put her to work making the fresh cones,” Rowan suggested.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Start going through the list of cult members and make phone calls. I thought I could use that tiny space in the back you refer to as storage. You don’t mind, do you? That way, I can help out if it gets busy.”

“No, that’ll work.”



Will Snelling walked into the shop around one-thirty to help Rowan with the phone banking and headed to the back of the store at Daniel’s direction. He looked around at the claustrophobic space where she sat using the top of a large box for a desk, crossing out names as she went.

“Why are you back here? Why don’t we go out front?” Will prompted.

“Because I don’t want this getting back to Brent Cody that I’m calling people from the commune. You have no idea how

fast gossip travels in a small town. You should've heard him blast me for going to Redwood City."

"I see. But couldn't we do this from your house?"

"If the shop gets busy, I can always help out. I can't do that if I'm sitting at my dining table."

"Okay. How's it going so far?" Will asked, getting rid of his jacket.

Stuffed into the postage-sized storage, Rowan handed off her sheet of notes. "Those are the ones I could get hold of, but I still have all these to get to. We could split up the rest and make it go faster."

Will scanned the list. "Did you get all these people to talk to you?"

"At first, most were embarrassed to admit they were part of it. But once I got them that far, they opened up. It's sad that so many got taken in by Dodge's false promises. They really did think they'd found Utopia."

"The cult mentality baffles me. The subject might make for a good book."

She smacked Will's arm. "Unless you want the cult topic to focus on debauchery, drugs, and sex, I'd pass on it and focus on the journey to find Hallie. That seems far more fascinating than following a nutcase drug dealer who manipulates people."

Will rubbed his upper arm. "That hurt. You're bossy, just like my sister used to get when she wanted her way."

"Oh, stop complaining and get to work," Rowan directed as she keyed in another number. "We'll never get anywhere unless you start using your investigation skills."

Will got to work on his cell phone. Their calls didn't yield much about the commune's specific adoption practices. But they learned Nichols kept his businesses separate from the drug operation. Rumors suggested that he let someone else oversee the vast amount of paperwork involved in making an adoption look and feel legit. They did gather more names to

research—people who might have the legal expertise to conduct a successful adoption ring.

“It sounds like Nichols handed off the forgery part to another party with legal experience,” Rowan gleaned. “A case in point. Me. My birth certificate looks genuine. Who would a drug dealer have trusted enough to do that? A lawyer in town he knew could get the job done without throwing up red flags.”

“Had to be someone close to him,” Will assessed. “He wouldn’t let just anyone manage the legal stuff unless he knew they wouldn’t screw it up and leave a trail that led right back to him. That means it has to be someone at the top. We just need to find that person. Did anyone ever drag Nichols into court? Because whoever represented him early on must’ve partnered with him later in the adoption racket. Think about it. To produce the right adoption papers and birth certificates requires a person with a specialized background.”

“That’s a great idea. We should check that out.” Rowan looked up from her cell phone to see Eastlyn standing several feet away.

“What are you guys doing?” Eastlyn wanted to know.

“I could lie and make something up,” Rowan said, getting to her feet. “But I doubt you’d believe me. We’re calling the names on the list Phoebe sent me.”

Eastlyn glared at Will. “Who are you?”

“Will Snelling. I’m looking for my sister Hallie.”

Eastlyn traded looks with Rowan. “The newspapers said the whole Snelling family—”

Rowan lifted her chin and didn’t let her finish. “The newspapers were wrong. The whole family didn’t die. Will’s here and we think Hallie survived, too. We think she somehow ended up at the Celestial Moon Commune. We’re making these calls hoping to track her down.”

“That’s an extreme long shot if I ever heard one,” Eastlyn reasoned.

“We know. But long shots sometimes have a way of paying off. Will and I decided to partner up on this. If he finds Hallie, then there’s a chance I can also track down my parents. Did you find anything out about Tamsin Southwick?”

“That’s why I’m here. I can’t find any connection between Tamsin and Gwynn Dewhurst?”

“You’re sure about that?”

“I suppose Gwynn could’ve been at the same party,” Eastlyn conceded. “But her name doesn’t show up on the official list of witnesses. According to the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Department, there were approximately seventy guests who wandered in and out of that beach house near the lagoon. Tamsin Southwick was one of those guests. She was twenty-one at the time of her death. She’d been drinking heavily—as had all the guests—because the party had been going on for three days over Thanksgiving weekend.”

“And drugs,” Rowan prompted.

“I’m sure there were plenty of those, too. I managed to track down some of the witnesses who gave statements that Saturday night, the night Tamsin died. They were more forthcoming twenty-four years later than they had been when it happened. They remembered Tamsin because she was British. A few people claim she showed up Thursday morning with a kid, a little girl in tow, but they weren’t positive about either detail. No one could agree on whether she actually had a child with her or when she arrived. They did remember the host passing out ecstasy and cocaine as party favors. With drugs and booze flowing, no one could remember the exact time Tamsin went into the pool or under what circumstances. But at some point, someone realized she’d jumped into the pool supposedly after the child. It’s more likely in her drug-induced state that she fell in and couldn’t get out. And before you say anything else, there is no mention of a little girl in the official report. The owners of the house found Tamsin dead the next morning, floating in the pool.”

“What do you mean the owners? I told you Dodge Nichols owned that house,” Rowan insisted. “We already

checked the county tax records.”

“Yes, well, that information wasn’t mentioned in the incident report either. The report simply referred to them as the owners.”

“That’s convenient,” Rowan muttered. “This whole thing sounds like a cover-up.”

“Probably. But I can’t change the official report twenty-four years after the fact. As I was saying, somehow the press got wind of the party, thrown by an influential member of the community and someone invented the story about Tamsin saving the little girl from drowning. I seriously doubt that it’s true.”

“But what if I could describe this beach house? It had a huge indoor swimming pool, didn’t it? Tamsin drowned in a pool inside a huge aquatic room,” Rowan declared.

“She did. And that information was in the story you sent me. I looked up the address of the house online,” Eastlyn offered. “It’s one of those mansions with a three-sixty view of the beach. The property search yielded seventy-odd photos over the years each time the house hit the market. Images of the indoor pool were part of a January 2000 real estate listing. Anyone could’ve viewed the photos online at any time.”

“But I haven’t looked up the house or the photos,” Rowan proclaimed. “You told me to try and remember certain specifics about my childhood. I’ve been thinking back to those days. Gwynn was always taking me to parties. Some of them were in really nice houses. I vaguely remember running around in one with a spa-type room that had a big pool. In one corner was a fountain. On the opposite end was a hot tub. What if these witnesses didn’t make up the story about the little girl falling into the pool? What if it’s true? What if Tamsin really did jump into that pool thinking she could save a child from drowning? The little girl apparently couldn’t swim. Maybe someone made these witnesses change their story *after* the newspaper article came out.”

“That’s a lot of ifs and maybes,” Eastlyn pointed out. “I need facts.”

Rowan made a grunting noise from her throat. “Maybe if someone could hypnotize me or something I’d remember more. It would scare any child if they fell into a huge pool like that and couldn’t swim. It would explain why I’ve been dreaming about falling into water in a backyard pool at a fancy house, sinking, and screaming for help. Or trying to scream. But no one comes to save me. I have this memory of the strong odor and chemical taste of chlorine. Does that mean I remember falling into a large swimming pool into the deep end?”

“It would explain your phobia about water,” Daniel provided from the doorway.

Eastlyn shifted her feet to glare at Daniel. “Look, her memory is obviously faulty. We don’t even know she was this child. We don’t even know for sure if there was a child present at Tamsin’s drowning. And if she didn’t fall into a backyard pool, she would’ve fallen into a room with a huge glass ceiling.”

“Okay, maybe I got the facts wrong. I was four,” Rowan snapped. When Daniel made a move toward her, she realized how crazy it all sounded. “I’ll never know the truth, will I?”

“We could ask Marley Lennox to recommend someone to help you try and remember,” Daniel suggested, snaking his arm around her waist. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“You did mention Marley a while back.”

Eastlyn lifted a shoulder. “Look, I don’t have a degree in psychology. But my guess would be that your mind blanked out this traumatic event, whatever it was, and you pushed it out of your subconscious until now. You want to remember. You really do. Something about living here again has triggered that recessed memory about drowning. Maybe you’ve known all along that you really weren’t Rowan Eaton. And this drowning theory is a way to help you cope.”

“But is there any way to find out if Gwynn was at the same party? That would be the connection. I could live with knowing there’s a connection between Tamsin’s drowning and Gwynn being there. That would mean that my near-drowning

was real. And that something else happened at that party. Why? Because the date on that headstone is significant. Who goes to the trouble of burying a phony child? You can't possibly ignore the two events occurring on the same day."

"If there's a link, I haven't found it yet," Eastlyn admitted. "As for the rest, we're still digging."

"My memory of the water is too vivid not to be real," Rowan pushed, refusing to give an inch. "Just because you can't find the link between those two women doesn't mean Gwynn wasn't a guest at the Nichols' party. It doesn't mean I wasn't there to fall into the pool." Getting nowhere with Eastlyn, she decided to switch gears. "Have they finished the autopsy on Gwynn yet? Because I need to plan a funeral. It just so happens there's already an empty grave waiting for her at Eternal Gardens."



After Eastlyn had gone, Daniel held a summit meeting inside the shop's dining area. "Just because the cops can't find a link doesn't mean there isn't one."

"Then you believe I'm the child in the story?" Rowan repeated. "You aren't just saying that?"

"I think you're afraid of water because of something that happened at that party. Yes. It's not a coincidence that the date on the headstone was November 27th. I think something else happened at that party that ended up in the couple getting murdered. It doesn't have to be a drowning that triggered your trauma."

Will nodded. "But it's hard to prove a negative. I know what I'm talking about. Nobody believed me when I said I wanted to find Hallie. They all thought I was nuts. Everyone told me she had probably been swept out to sea and that's why her body hadn't washed up on the shoreline. We were in the same cabin on the boat until it broke apart. How could I survive and Hallie not? Even if it takes me the rest of my life,

I'll keep looking. Why? Because until I get a definitive answer, I'll believe she survived. So, I understand what you're going through. I understand why you need to know what happened. The problem is that the scope of this thing means the people you trusted were likely involved in a string of sinister crimes."

"If what we think is true," Mamie began, sitting at one of the little tables munching on an ice cream cone, "then we're talking about human trafficking, taking babies from their parents and passing them off as available children to adopt. That takes a horrible kind of individual. A double homicide is only part of this. And yet, I stood behind Daniel earlier and listened to the female officer try to put the pieces together. I don't think the police have a clue what really happened at this party. How are they going to solve a double murder if the facts are wrong in the reports?"

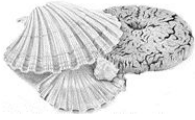
"If Eastlyn can track down the people at the party, then so can we," Daniel urged. "Maybe they'd be more likely to speak to us versus law enforcement."

"I'll send an email to Phoebe asking if she has anything on the influential people who used to hang out with Nichols." Rowan leaned back in her chair, considering another possibility. "Maybe we're thinking about this all wrong. We need to stick to the people we know were the main players."

Daniel sat up straighter. "We're approaching this all wrong, asking the wrong questions. Jim and Lynette are the obvious people we've overlooked. They had both a connection to Redwood City and the commune. They're the main suspects in the double murders of a couple. We need to start over and talk to the people on that list *about* Jim and Lynette. Instead of asking about Gwynn, we need to know if Jim and Lynette were at that party on the 27th."

After agreeing on the questions they should ask, they got to work, splitting up the list into four parts. It took almost four hours of phone banking before Will found anyone willing to talk. That person led them to yet another untapped group who knew Jim and Lynette better than most.

And the picture they painted was far from the rosy, cheery couple Rowan had grown to love.



Chapter Twenty-One

Will managed to dig deeper into Jim and Lynette's background and uncover facts no one else had tapped into, let alone, were willing to reveal. It helped to have a reporter with savvy research skills on their side who could verify information from at least ten different sources.

After waiting two more agonizing days for Brent to summon them into his office, Rowan and Daniel showed up, carrying a thick folder with facts and figures they were sure would blow the case wide open.

But getting answers about the mysterious couple in the grave was another matter. Brent revealed that DNA had yet to be extracted from the bones. Nothing had come back from the crime lab.

"DNA could take weeks," Brent explained sitting inside his office. "I'm told that getting anything forensically from bones takes longer. Muriel's looking for something called forensic-grade genome to create full profiles."

"I wish I could help you," Rowan offered, knowing she needed to make things better between her and the police. "I finally received a genealogy report back from the lab in San Sebastian. Well, it was more like a letter than a report. It said that I have no living relatives."

"That just means that a relative connected to you hasn't uploaded their DNA into one of those websites yet," Brent explained. "You'll need to keep checking and show some patience."

“That’s what I told her,” Daniel confirmed.

“When Muriel is able to obtain what she needs for a profile, she’ll compare the DNA to yours,” Brent said. “Fingers crossed she gets enough DNA from the bones.”

“I hadn’t even considered that it would take so long,” Rowan admitted. “It isn’t like it is on those detective shows where they get the results back after the last commercial break.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you see on TV,” Brent grumbled, glancing over at Eastlyn. “See? People really do believe that sort of crap.”

“Things move a lot slower in our world,” Eastlyn noted. “It took Muriel and her team sixteen hours of sifting through that dirt to find the other bullet fragment, which delayed the ballistics.”

Brent shoved a report across the desk for Rowan to see. “The good news is that those fragments remained in the bodies. When they decomposed, they left behind pieces of the bullets.”

Rowan made a face before handing the report off to Daniel. “I realize that’s important, but I didn’t actually need to hear the details.”

Brent shuffled through a stack of files on his desk and pulled out a separate piece of paper. “The bullet fragments remained in the bodies during decomposition within the walls of the burial plot. That small plot contained those fragments that lodged beneath the bones. We were lucky. Ballistics found they were a perfect match to the guns owned by Jim Dewhurst.”

“Wait a second,” Daniel muttered. “It sounds like you’re saying the victims were shot with two different weapons.”

“That’s because they were. Surprising, huh? I know it shocked me. The male victim suffered a gunshot wound at close range to the head and chest with the Marlin rifle. The female suffered multiple shots from the smaller Walther pistol. My theory is this. While holding the Marlin rifle, Jim shot the

male while Lynette fired the smaller pistol into the back of the female's head at close range. Both victims probably died instantly. But the gunshot wounds would have created a messy, bloody scene that somebody had to clean up."

Rowan traded looks with Daniel before turning to Brent. "So you're saying you don't actually know the location where the couple was killed?"

Brent nodded, still going through his folders. "Not yet. This is a complicated case."

It was Eastlyn who added, "The fingerprints on the empty coffin belonged to Jim and Lynette, though. Not an earth-shattering result since those two were the obvious ones who touched the coffin before burial. Ask any of us on the team and we all agree. Those two were directly involved in the murders and the cover-up."

"We know definitively that it took two people to murder the victims," Brent pointed out. "But that's not all we discovered. Gwynn's autopsy revealed that she suffered a stroke brought on by a massive dose of cocaine. Even after so many years in a coma, the toxicology report shows that she was still receiving cocaine into her system on a regular basis. The only routine visitor she had was Lynette Dewhurst. You do the math."

"But Gwynn was in a coma. How could she be getting cocaine?"

"When was the last time you saw her at the nursing home?" Brent asked. Without waiting for a reply, he went on, "She'd been going downhill for months. Her hands were black and blue in terrible shape from all the injections she'd received. The doctor explained to me about primary toxic encephalopathy and secondary cerebral blood flow along with a host of other serious medical problems. I believe all Lynette had to do was fill up a syringe, smuggle it past the staff, and keep injecting Gwynn with liquified cocaine every time she visited."

"And you think that Gwynn's original overdose wasn't an accident?" Rowan prompted.

“I think eight years ago, Gwynn, in one of her more lucid moments, threatened to come clean about the double murders. Lynette didn’t like the idea of that surfacing after so long. So, she took care of her daughter, who wasn’t really her daughter, by the way. Giving Gwynn a massive cocaine overdose to get her out of the way solved a lot of her problems.”

“Lynette didn’t count on Gwynn surviving, though,” Eastlyn proffered. “That threw a wrench in the whole thing.”

“The doctors were shocked Gwynn lasted as long as she did,” Brent added, pushing the folder with the autopsy results toward Rowan. “How come you don’t seem surprised that Gwynn’s DNA didn’t match up with Lynette’s?”

“Don’t get mad at us,” Rowan stated. “We uncovered quite a bit of evidence suggesting Jim and Lynette were involved from the start with Dodge Nichols, long before 1971 when he started Celestial Moon. But after the deaths of his parents, when Nichols began the commune, Jim Dewhurst became his head of security. Through a series of sources that pointed us to state records—and Will Snelling verified—we discovered Lynette was Dodge’s older sister by seven years.”

“The guy who’s still on the run from the feds and was last seen crossing into Bulgaria using a fake passport,” Daniel added.

“You have my full attention,” Brent declared as he stopped sifting through the files and exchanged looks with Rowan. “What else?”

“The questions are simple. Did Lynette and Jim help him leave the country? Why was Lynette still loyal to Nichols when her parents cut her out of the will but left Dodge everything? It seems odd. After her parents died at the farmhouse from carbon monoxide poisoning, why was she still so loyal to her little brother, her very rich little brother? Unless the two siblings had an agreement in place before they died. What if Lynette and Jim got rid of her parents? Maybe Nichols agreed to toss them a few bucks after probate was over. People will do almost anything for financial gain.”

“To be fair,” Daniel began, “Will Snelling is still sorting through the mess that makes up the Nichols family. He’s trying to score a few details about Lynette leaving the family farm. The thing is she disappeared off the radar when she was sixteen. It’s almost ten years before she returns to the area. Likely due to a falling out with the parents. Maybe the parents thought she died so they didn’t include her in the will. But there’s a reason they left everything to Nichols.”

“Could’ve been a teenage pregnancy that upset them,” Rowan tossed out. “We’ll probably never know for certain. Although we haven’t been able to pinpoint where she spent all of her time, Will found hospital records from 1968 in Tucson, after she got involved in a brawl with a motorcycle gang and ended up needing surgery. Anyway, when she re-enters the picture, she brings Jim back with her to California. By this time, her brother had managed to convince people he was some kind of spiritual leader who could provide them with a place to live and plenty of food to eat if they worked the farm that later became Celestial Moon Commune.”

“And I thought I held the bombshell of the day about Gwynn. How did you find out all this?”

“We reconnected with the list of members at the commune and asked them different questions,” Daniel provided. “In turn, they pointed us to an entirely different group of people. We reached out to them. Turns out, they were at the party that November weekend. After a little persuasion, they started talking.”

Rowan put her hands on Brent’s desk. “It needs to be said that several people we spoke with thought that it was Lynette’s idea to start selling babies from the commune and refer to them as legitimate adoptions. We even tracked down the man who signed most of the paperwork, including birth certificates, and probably signed the fake child’s death certificate.”

Daniel slid a piece of paper across the desk to Brent. “We think that couple you found—who could be Rowan’s real birth parents—is one of these seven missing people who started disappearing from the commune in late 1999.”

Brent scanned the list of hippie names. “These can’t be real—Shiloh, Journey, Meadow, Bear—how am I supposed to use these for identification purposes?”

“It was a commune. People took names that embodied peace, love, and nature,” Rowan explained. “Phoebe is still digging through her notes, trying to come up with their real names. But it isn’t like the commune kept archives with pristine records.”

“Why didn’t anyone come forward back in 1999? Why did they wait until now?”

“They didn’t exactly come forward. We had to prod the information out of them. People who were friends with Nichols knew about his reputation. They wanted their names kept out of the public eye because of the violence that went down that November night.”

Brent’s eyes widened. “Violence? What sort of violence?”

“According to witnesses, that weekend, Nichols exhibited extreme mood swings. He got into several altercations with guests.”

“So their reluctance to come forward had nothing to do with Tamsin Southwick’s drowning?”

“Not from our understanding. If they’re telling the truth about the incidents there was a small revolt within the compound that weekend, starting on Wednesday night. Several children had gone missing the week before. Worried parents started showing up in town asking retail shops if they could put up flyers. And because there wasn’t enough food to go around—remember it was Thanksgiving—things got tense. When members found out Nichols was living an opulent lifestyle while they were working the fields every day to put food on the table, people became upset.”

Brent steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. “I’ll want a list of the people willing to go on record about this.”

Prepared for his request, Daniel removed another list from his folder. “We also have a handful of witnesses who saw a

young couple in their twenties show up at the party on Saturday afternoon to confront a man and a woman who fit the description of Jim and Lynette. It seems they were upset because Lynette hadn't returned their four-year-old daughter to them after claiming to take her shopping the week before Thanksgiving."

"These eyewitnesses claim the hippie couple accused them of stealing their daughter," Rowan supplied. "Not just their child but their little girl. The confrontation escalates when the man's attitude ticks off Jim. Lynette jumps in to defend her man. So much so that she gets in the younger woman's face. There's a big yelling and screaming match. That's when Jim goes into another room and comes back carrying a rifle. Lynette gets aggressive. Now, they're both trying to get the young couple to leave. But these parents refuse to go anywhere without their daughter. Jim and Lynette force them out of the house at gunpoint. And that's the last time anyone sees the young couple. Unfortunately, no one could remember their names. They were just two more misguided souls who'd joined the commune hoping they'd found paradise."

"But you think they're on this list of hippie names?" Brent clarified.

"They disappeared because Jim and Lynette buried them in a grave," Rowan pointed out. "But someone could've reported them missing. We could look into that if you want—"

Brent got to his feet, ending the meeting. "We'll take it from here. How about letting us handle the interviewing going forward."

"Okay," Rowan muttered. "But there's something else you should know. Someone's been sending Will Snelling anonymous messages that claim I'm Hallie Snelling. It's what brought him here. Will knows it isn't true. I know I'm not Hallie. But someone in this town wants us to think that. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yeah," Brent decided. "There's someone still living here who was privy to what Jim and Lynette were up to all those

years ago with Nichols. But why would they think you're Hallie? Have you compared your DNA to Will's?"

"Will didn't show up in my genealogy letter. We're not related. The only relatives I have are from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, sixty-nine to one hundred markers back. I mentioned that right up front when we sat down. Remember? No, I believe it's because the Snelling's boat went down roughly a month later—around Christmas. Maybe sometime during that period, I showed up at the Dewhurst house before the end of the year under suspicious circumstances. Whoever is sending these messages to Will's blog believes the two events are connected."

"There was a lot going on with Jim and Lynette," Daniel reminded them. "The big event might've been double murder, but they did bury a fake child to cover it up. When you think about it, the fake burial is kind of brilliant."

"Interesting," Brent muttered, turning to Eastlyn. "Did you get all that down?"

"Every word."

"Then get Colt up to Redwood City. I want these witnesses interviewed as soon as possible before they decide to lawyer up. I want a three-day timeline of that party covering everyone's movements. If necessary, I'll request county deputies help with canvassing."



Chapter Twenty-Two

Brent assembled his team in the conference room for a formal briefing. He used Eastlyn's notes from the meeting and transferred the information to a whiteboard to make his points. "Colt, I want you to contact the current owner of the Nichols' mansion near the lagoon and ask how many times the place has been painted or renovated over the years. If there's any chance we can get trace evidence out of the house, we'll need to get a warrant to go in there. In the meantime, Eastlyn will contact Muriel to see if the forensic team found any jewelry, or tattered clothing, or anything else found inside the hole where they were buried that might give us a lead. Also, ask her about facial reconstruction. Get a timeframe for how long that would take. If we successfully ID this couple, I doubt it comes from the hippie names they took at the commune."

"If we could get facial reconstruction," Theo pointed out, "we could check other communes that existed back in 1999 from Vancouver down to Southern California to see if they recognize this couple. A lot of times, these people move from commune to commune."

"That's a good point," Brent said, adding that step to the board. "While we're interviewing the witnesses at the party, get details we can verify. Make sure their statements line up with the facts as we know them. Jim allegedly produced a firearm during an ongoing argument. I want verification, and if possible, try to find out what kind of vehicle they were driving at the time of the altercation back in 1999."

Eastlyn's head whipped up. "Chief, Rowan bought Jim's old pickup, a Dodge Ram Prospector, from Wally. It's sitting in her driveway. If they used that to transport the bodies, that truck could yield trace evidence somewhere inside it."

"It's worth a shot. Get the lab on it," Brent instructed. "I doubt there's anything in the bed after all this time that'll help, but the upholstery inside the pickup is another matter. It could give up traces of blood."

He angled toward Theo. "I want you to use your expertise and go through every missing persons' report on file from November 1999 to the beginning of 2000, including British Columbia."

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "British Columbia?"

"You're the one who mentioned Vancouver," Brent fired back.

"You do realize we're talking possibly thousands of people who disappeared during that time period."

"Not if you narrow it down to couples. Start with couples first. That should cull the herd quite a bit. Any more questions?" When no one said anything, Brent motioned them all out the door. "Then get out of here and get to work. Keep me updated by the hour."



Back at Daniel's house, Rowan paced one side of the kitchen in front of Mamie and Will. "If I was the child Tamsin Southwick tried to save, it would prove I was at the party."

"If the story's true, it would prove that the kid was on the premises when the young couple showed up trying to get their little girl back," Daniel provided. "What kind of monsters hijack someone else's kid?" He glanced over at Rowan, realizing what he'd said. "Sorry. But that's low in anyone's book."

“No, it’s okay. Little things are beginning to click with me about Gran or rather Lynette. And to find out that Gwynn was a victim, too, is unsettling. How did I miss that? Why didn’t I suspect anything?”

“You had a preconceived opinion about Gwynn’s parenting skills from your earliest childhood memories,” Mamie proffered. “Think about it. She wasn’t the best role model for a mother. You felt deep down that there was no connection. Therefore, when Lynette decided on this solution—the overdose—it seemed the natural progression a drug user might take. Lynette must’ve put some thought into her decision. Unfortunately, an overdose isn’t uncommon. You trusted the woman you thought always looked out for you to tell you the truth. That’s also very normal. At the time, you had no reason to question her motives.”

Rowan stopped pacing. “But it brings up an entirely separate set of questions. Where did Jim and Lynette get Gwynn? The obvious answer would be from someone at the commune back in the earliest days.”

“There’s no birth record with Gwynn’s date of birth that ties James or Jim Dewhurst to ever being named as a father,” Will provided. “At least not in California or Arizona where we think Lynette met Jim. I could try hunting down that name in more states.”

Daniel nodded. “Maybe we should. But is that the critical piece of information we need right now? Isn’t it better to try and track down who’s been sending Will the messages? After all, they might hold key information. It has to be a neighbor, right?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Who else would be peeking through their curtains in the middle of the night to catch something happening at the house that didn’t look right back in 1999?”

“Or was never explained to their satisfaction?” Rowan countered.

“Exactly. Who still lives in the neighborhood?”

“Mrs. Dimsdale and Mr. Kercher, both are next-door neighbors,” Rowan answered. “Both have lived here since I was a kid. Well, Mrs. Dimsdale has. Mr. Kercher moved in around 2002. But neither one owns a computer.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, no. But I remember back in December when I was here Mrs. Dimsdale asked if I could recommend a desktop brand. I told her that I use a Mac but there were less expensive options out there. And I mentioned how the library has three PCs to use for free. I don’t even think Enid Dimsdale or Alvin Kercher own a cell phone.”

“We should probably go talk to both of them.”

“And ask what? Have they been sending messages anonymously to a blog?”

Daniel scratched his chin. “Yeah. Pretty much. It’s time to be direct. Unless you have a better idea.”

Mamie went to the freezer and pulled out two cartons of ice cream, handed them off to Daniel. “Offer one a pint of chocolate chip, and the other a pint of strawberry. Start off by telling them you’d like to have their opinion about the quality. Keep in mind, that it’s possible there’s nothing sinister going on. Doing it this way, they won’t feel like it’s an interrogation and should be more willing to talk.”

“She has a point,” Rowan said. “I’ve known them both since I was a kid. I can’t imagine either of them cruising the internet and landing on a blog to send messages. But hey, they’ll appreciate the ice cream.”

Enid Dimsdale loved her flower gardens, her two cats—Chewy and Tabby—and chocolate chip ice cream. But she didn’t know anything about sending emails, text messages, or computers in general.

“I only asked that question back at Christmas because my niece moved overseas and wanted me to email her. I decided on my budget that I should go back to writing letters like in the old days.”

“Did you ever notice anything odd going on next door?” Daniel asked her.

Enid had taken her time to think. “Other than Jim staying up late? No. There’s nothing that comes to mind. I’ve missed Lynette. She and I used to swap recipes and vegetables. She’d grow cucumbers that I could pickle, and I’d grow the tastiest tomatoes. I’ll have a basketful to share before June’s out. You wait and see.”

“Thanks,” Rowan said. “I’d like that. Give me a chance next year and I’ll try my hand at the cucumbers.”

At Alvin Kercher’s place, he appreciated the strawberry ice cream but swore up and down that he didn’t know anything about a blog.

“That online stuff isn’t for me. I keep things simple and read my newspaper, still delivered to my door for twenty years.”

Daniel believed him.

“What now?” Rowan prompted, standing in the middle of Alvin’s front lawn.

He scanned up and down the street, then focused his gaze on one house in particular. “Who lives across the street?”

“Um, let me think. Tansy Perkins. Tansy had a minor stroke before Christmas—if there is such a thing—and her daughter came up from Orange County to get her to physical therapy twice a week. Julie, I think that’s the daughter’s name. I met her briefly back in December. She’s been living here with her mother ever since.”

“Well, Tansy or Julie has the perfect angle for spying on the Dewhurst house. Check out the sight line.”

Rowan tracked Daniel’s eyes to a well-kept ranch-style bungalow. “Look at that. Someone’s peeking out behind the shades now.”

“Perfect time to knock on the door. We know they’re home,” Daniel reasoned, sauntering across the street.

She trailed after him empty-handed. “We’re out of ice cream.”

But Daniel had already bounded up the steps to ring the bell. When Julie answered, he went into his pitch. “Hi. My name’s Daniel Cardiff. My house is on the next street over. But you probably already know Rowan Eaton from across the street. She’s Lynette Dewhurst’s granddaughter. We’re looking into a message sent to a blog about Hallie Snelling, a little girl who supposedly drowned back in 1999 in a boating accident. Would you or your mother happen to know anything about a message sent to Will Snelling?”

Julie let out a sigh. “I told my mom it was a mistake, that someone would eventually take her seriously and come knocking. But she wouldn’t listen. You might as well come in. This could take a while.”

Julie motioned for them to take a seat on the couch. “Do you want anything to drink? Water? Coffee?”

“Not for me, thanks,” Rowan said, glancing around the room. “Is your mother the one who called the police on Gran for not mowing her grass two years ago? I’m pretty sure Gran mentioned your mother’s name when she told me what happened.”

“In my mother’s defense, she hadn’t seen your gran for a couple of days and thought she’d died or something. Look, I know my mom has always liked to butt into other people’s business. She’s one of those nosy neighbors who drive people nuts. But she means well. She looks out for everyone on the street. Since her mini stroke she’s been like a dog with a bone. She gets an idea in her head, and she won’t let it go. She nagged me about emailing that guy’s blog for weeks, but I wouldn’t do it. Then she made me show her how to log in and sign up so she could.”

“But why?” Rowan asked.

“Mom never really liked your grandmother.”

“Really? Why not?”

“It goes back years. Mom said the way she felt stemmed from something that happened a long time ago, something your grandparents did.”

“To her?”

“She won’t tell me that.”

“Then can I ask her?”

“You’re not planning on letting this go, are you?” Julie asked.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.”

“Fine. Let me see if she’s awake.” Julie left them alone while she went down the hall and knocked lightly on the bedroom door.

A few minutes later, she came back. “Mom says she’ll see you both. But don’t get her overly excited.”

When they entered the room, Tansy sat in a comfy-looking upholstered chair with a blanket over her lap. She wore her white hair pulled back into a neat bun. Her eyes followed Rowan into the room.

“Hi, Mrs. Perkins, I’m Rowan Eaton. Remember me from across the street? The Dewhurst family.”

“You’re not Rowan Eaton. You’re Hallie Snelling.”

Rowan looked around for a place to sit and decided she’d kneel down in front of Tansy to make eye contact. “That’s just it. I’m not Hallie. I wanted to tell you that myself. But then I’m not really Lynette’s granddaughter either.”

“You’re lying,” Tansy charged.

“Mom!” Julie scolded. “For once, just listen to what she has to say.”

Rowan leaned in closer. “Why are you so sure that I’m Hallie?”

“Because right after that boat accident hit the news, you showed up in the middle of the night. After that, they told everyone that you were their granddaughter, Gwynn’s

daughter. They repeated that story to anyone who would listen. But I never believed a word of it. Gwynn never had a daughter before that night. And then there was Jim. He was always a sneaky bastard bringing unsavory people into his house. Drugs. That's how Gwynn became addicted. They kept a steady stream of people picking up drugs. I almost packed up and moved because of it. I had Julie to think about. She was an impressionable teenager back then. I didn't want her around those kinds of lowlifes, coming and going at all hours of the day and night."

"I don't blame you. But you didn't move. What happened to make you reconsider?" Rowan prompted.

"After you came on the scene, things quieted down. The ruckus stopped. People quit showing up at all hours. That boat went down north of here and those two decided to keep the little girl. That was Hallie. That's all there is to it. Even when Gwynn took you off on her wayward adventures, Jim and Lynette never acted the same after that. They changed. Their whole demeanor was different. Even their attitude toward Gwynn seemed different. They tried to get her off the drugs."

Rowan took Tansy's hand in hers. "I appreciate you sending those messages. Will appreciates you contacting him. That's how cases like this get solved—help from the public—neighbors like you. Daniel and I plan to help Will find the real Hallie. We think she's still out there somewhere. But it isn't me."

"Are you certain?"

"I'm positive. For one thing, I have natural red hair. Hallie's hair was light brown. Remember seeing Hallie's photos on Will's blog taken when she was little? Her hair is a different color than mine. Her eyes are a different color. I'm not Hallie, Mrs. Perkins, because my DNA doesn't match up with Will Snelling's. We both took DNA tests. They don't match. I'd tell you if I were Hallie. I promise I would."

"Listen to her, Mom," Julie said. "She's trying to tell you the truth."

“What did you mean you weren’t Lynette’s real granddaughter? I got that part right, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. I took a DNA test and discovered I didn’t belong to Gwynn or Lynette. I’m still trying to find out where I came from. When I find out, I’ll give Julie a heads-up. How does that sound?”

Tansy nodded. “I didn’t like Jim and Lynette in the early days. No need to lie at my age.”

Rowan got to her feet. “I understand why. No one wants a drug dealer for a neighbor. You don’t need to worry about that from me.”

“I can see that,” Tansy said with a smile. “You’re different from Lynette. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”



After saying goodbye to Julie, they stepped outside Tansy’s home and stood on the lawn. But Tansy’s words kept ringing in Rowan’s ears. “It’s weird how I latched onto Lynette after she let me move in here.”

“She was your lifeline. No matter what she’d done, she was the only reliable person you had in your life at the time,” Daniel interjected, looking across the street at the commotion taking place in Rowan’s driveway. Eastlyn stood next to the pickup, waiting for the tow truck driver to hook up the Dodge Ram. “Something’s going on.”

Rowan called out to Eastlyn. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Sorry, Rowan, I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I’m here to collect Jim’s old truck. We’re towing it to the lab for forensic examination.”

By this time, Rowan and Daniel had joined Eastlyn on the pavement. “Really? You think that old thing could yield a clue after all this time?”

“You never know. It’s possible. It looks like it still has the original upholstery. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said that already. It isn’t necessary. I get it. Do you need the keys? They might come in handy down at the lab.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Rowan said, reaching into her jeans pocket and pulling out the key. “Will you take it apart?”

“I’m not sure what they’ll do. I won’t lie, they might.”

“Okay. Well, let me know if you find anything useful.”

“Of course. The Chief has us all scrambling with assignments. For the next forty-eight hours, we’re treating this like it happened two hours ago.”

“I hope he wasn’t too mad about us talking to the former members of the commune.”

“I can tell you he wasn’t overjoyed. But what concerned him the most was learning about the people at the party, especially getting to them before they hire a lawyer. Colt’s touching base with them now with the help of deputies from the county. Look, I need to get going. I have a to-do list a mile long. That means I’ll need to check in soon after dropping the pickup off at the lab.”

“I understand. I’ll talk to you later.” Rowan stood in the driveway next to Daniel and watched Eastlyn follow the tow truck down the street and disappear around the corner. “That’s what happens when you make an impulse purchase. You do something stupid like buy an old truck because you’re feeling sentimental.”

Daniel bumped her shoulder. “Stop beating yourself up. It might be that Wally saved valuable evidence.”

“Let’s hope. When did we ever get that lucky, though? I’ve been thinking. If Brent does look into the hippie names we gave him, how will he ever be able to make a connection to their real names? It’s impossible. No wonder he thinks we’re ridiculous and doesn’t take us seriously.”

“I didn’t expect Brent to take your truck. That’s an indication he’s making every effort to solve this.”

“That’s what Eastlyn said. But let’s face it, we’ll need a miracle to identify that couple. I have this gut feeling that those people are my parents. And I grew up living with their killers, calling them Granddad and Gran.” She made a face. “Thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach, Daniel.”

“Understandable, but not your fault.”

“But they tried to get me back and butted heads with two crazy people who murdered them.”

“Let’s just see what happens. Okay? I hate to bring this up now, but Mamie asked me if I’d take her out on the boat tonight after supper. We shouldn’t be gone for more than an hour or so.”

“Take all the time you need. You should go and enjoy yourselves. Forget about all this stuff for a couple of hours.”

“I don’t suppose I could persuade you to join us?”

She shook her head and saw his disappointment. “Sorry. But there’s no reason you shouldn’t enjoy your boat.”

“What will you do?”

“I promised Will I’d spend some time helping him track down Hallie. It’s the least I can do after everything he’s done to help me.” She looped her arm through his. “Wouldn’t it be something if we could actually find her?”

“Do you think Jim and Lynette were somehow involved with Hallie disappearing?”

“Unfortunately, after talking to Tansy, it’s a distinct possibility. What I can’t figure though is how Hallie would’ve ended up at the commune. Although Jim and Lynette wouldn’t let an opportunity like that pass them by.”

“That sounds creepy,” Daniel noted with a shudder.

“And you think my standing here isn’t? If what we think is even half true, they killed that couple. I won’t lie. I’m having a hard time accepting that the two people I knew were the same ones who were capable of murder. It doesn’t add up. It’s as though they became different people overnight. How is that possible? Even Tansy noticed how they changed, that the

activity around the house lessened. It had to be the double homicide, right?”

“I suppose committing murder would drastically change your perspective. Maybe Nichols is the one who actually pulled the trigger, and they helped him cover it up.”

“That would be a very difficult selling point for me,” Rowan noted. “The guns were here, locked away in this house. Records at the cemetery show that Jim and Lynette bought the headstone. They’re the ones witnesses described arguing with the couple. Jim pulled a gun at the party. They were the last to see them alive. They passed off a child as their granddaughter. As much as I’d like to believe that Nichols did it, I don’t. Now, Hallie’s disappearance comes into play. They were bad people, Daniel. There’s no other way to look at it. And I need to figure out a way to come to terms with it. Fast. Because I need to put this behind me and focus on what’s ahead. And what’s ahead is finding out who I am.”



Chapter Twenty-Three

The house owned by Nichols near the lagoon had been redesigned and redecorated so many times that Brent decided it wasn't worth the effort to get a search warrant, especially since he didn't believe it was where the murders had taken place.

More than anything his gut told him Jim and Lynette had probably driven the couple back to the commune. If that was the case, though, how did the bodies end up at Eternal Gardens? To get answers, he called the caretaker in to turn over all his records.

He stared across the desk at Jasper Willis, a man in his late sixties who'd brought in ten years' worth of records in logbooks the size of journals. Jasper had gone to work as the caretaker at eighteen, helping his father keep the grounds in tip-top shape. Having worked there for almost fifty years, no one knew better than Jasper who was buried where.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Jasper declared as he sat fidgeting with his hat. "I didn't know what was in that grave. I swear it. I watched them unload a casket back then, a cheap one if you ask me, and thought things were a little odd. But I had nothing to do with any of it, sure as hell not the mistake on that headstone. That was between Jim Dewhurst and Milton Schmidt."

"What mistake?" Brent asked, scrutinizing the logbook Willis had brought with him, jotting down notes about the December 8th, 1999, funeral and burial of a child. "When did you catch it?"

“It wasn’t me. Sometime in January when the headstone was delivered Jim threw a hissy fit once he saw it. I remember he kicked up such a fuss about the name engraved on it that I thought I’d have to call the cops. Jim blamed Lynette. Those two went at it, screaming at each other, had a shouting match about it right outside my front door. Jim was so mad that he called old Schmidt himself at Schmidt’s Monuments to bitch about it. That’s who did the work, you see. Jim demanded a new one, accusing Milton of making a mistake. Old Milton told him he had the order in front of him and swore up and down that he’d carved the name and date Lynette had given him. That ended that. Milton wouldn’t budge an inch. I later found out that Milton had told Jim that it would cost him an additional grand to make a new headstone. That’s when Jim backed down and decided to leave it like it was. I didn’t know there were extra bodies in that grave. I swear it.”

“How does something like that happen?”

“I told you that burial stands out because the circumstances were strange. I’ll give you that much,” Jasper muttered, scrubbing the stubble on his chin. “But everything that’s in the logbook is the way it happened. I wrote it down like I saw it. The day of the service, the casket arrived from out of town.”

“Redwood City,” Brent supplied.

“That’s right. But it didn’t get there the usual way inside a hearse. No sir.”

“How did it arrive?”

“Somebody drove up in an old ambulance. Looked like something right out of the movies.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. Then there was the service. It was a simple outdoor thing, no church, no Reverend Whitcomb officiating, no nothing, a handful of people at most on hand. Mighty strange if you ask me for a little baby girl that’s died.”

“Now you know why. But explain to me how they got the two adult bodies in there when you weren’t looking.”

“I don’t supervise every damn funeral,” Jasper snapped. “Ever heard of giving the family their privacy? But I’ve been thinking some on that very thing since you dug up those bodies. I think Jim and that other guy with the family must’ve slipped the gravediggers extra cash to stand by until dark. I don’t remember actually seeing the casket lowered into the ground, though. I’m sure of that.”

“What guy? If I showed you a photo of someone we think might’ve been involved, would you be able to recognize him?”

“Yeah. I think I could.”

Brent slid two photos of Dodge Nichols—one with a beard and one without—both circulated by the FBI in 2005 across the desk. “Is that him?”

Jasper studied the pictures, rubbed his chin, and then said, “That’s the guy without the beard.”

“Who were the gravediggers? Where would I find those names in the logbook?”

Jasper gave him an exasperated look. “Hand over that thing and I’ll show you. Every gravedigger we ever used is listed in the back with the days they worked.”

Brent thumbed through the logbook until he reached the back, then studied the year 1999. “You used six gravediggers that year. But only two in December—Roberto and Luis Diaz. Brothers?”

“No, I remember them. Father and son. Those were the two men killed out by the Taggart farm in that accident—the hit and run—nobody ever found out who did it.”

Brent looked perplexed and turned to the desk computer where he typed in the names. The results came back within minutes. “Interesting. This accident happened on January 10th, 2000, barely a month after the fake burial.”

Colt Del Rio knocked on Brent’s office door. “Sorry to interrupt, but we turned up something you should hear.”

Brent bobbed his head toward Jasper. “Thanks for coming in. You can go now. But I’m holding onto the logbooks for

1999 and 2000. I'll get them back to you after we make copies."

"Sure. So, I'm not in any trouble?"

"No. But if anything like this happens in the future, you pick up the phone and call me directly. Got it?"

"Got it," Jasper said, giving the police chief a salute before hurrying past Colt.

With Jasper out of earshot, Brent asked him, "What did you find?"

Colt held up his phone. "I took a statement from the former police chief confirming Rowan and Daniel's information. He backed up what other witnesses stated. There was definitely a confrontation between the older couple and a younger man and woman. The older couple forced the younger couple outside."

"I need to hear his verification."

Colt hit play on his phone. An older man's voice, hesitant and faltering at times, filled the room in a gravelly tone that made it sound like the former police chief was trying to make excuses. But in the end, he admitted to the scene he had witnessed firsthand.

"You wanted verification," Colt added as the recording ended.

"I did. Great work. Do me a favor though. I need an evidence bag and file pulled from county records about a hit and run that occurred in January 2000." He scribbled down the details on a yellow notepad before ripping off the page. "Roberto and Luis Diaz were working the roadside fruit stand at the end of the road leading to Taggert Farms when a car veered off the highway and struck both of them, killing father and son. I want photos of the crime scene and all the notes in the file."

Colt frowned. "I thought we were working on IDing the couple and pinning their murders on Jim and Lynette."

“We are. I think the hit and run might be related,” Brent muttered, already adding the request into the computer system. “Just get me the files and plan to work late tonight.”

“You got it.”

Eastlyn stepped into Brent’s office from the hallway, holding up several small evidence bags. “You wanted to know if Muriel’s team found jewelry. They did. Mostly cheap costume stuff like earrings and rings with flowers on them, but they did uncover a very nice woman’s necklace in sterling silver and two gold wedding bands. Not expensive stuff, mind you, but good enough that the metal survived all that time in the ground.”

“Any markings on the gold bands or necklace that could be traced back to a manufacturer? If the jewelry is distinctive enough, it might be something a relative would recognize that belonged to our victims.”

“I’m already working on it checking the origins. The bands were engraved with the initials HAE and OAE. And the necklace looks like a handmade, genuine Native piece, a little on the pricey side.”

“Great. What about DNA?”

“All the pieces were swabbed as soon as they took them out of the grave.”

“Even better. Let me know if anything pops.”

“Will do. Are we working late tonight?”

“As late as it takes.” Brent glanced up to see Theo Woodsong standing in the doorway. “What have you got for me?”

Theo grinned. “I’m pretty sure I found the right Atticus Eaton. You know, the guy named on Rowan’s birth certificate. And you won’t believe what else I discovered.”



While Brent's team made headway, Rowan and Will sat around her dining table discussing the pros and cons of focusing on the commune as it pertained to Hallie.

“How would she have ended up there?” Rowan asked, sipping from a mojito Will had thrown together. “Unless the *Celestial Moon* broke apart near Half Moon Bay and Hallie washed up on the beach there. After all, Phoebe Jamieson mentions a dozen times or more in her research that the members of the commune routinely hung out on that stretch of beach. I know Gwynn loved it there.”

“The newspaper articles weren't specific about where the ship went down. Despite my years of attempting to pinpoint the exact location, I found it impossible to narrow it down. Many said that pieces of the boat washed up as far south as Santa Cruz and as far north as Half Moon Bay. Remember when I mentioned Pelican Pointe was the epicenter?”

“Like an earthquake,” Rowan murmured.

“Yeah. Sort of. I reached out to several weather experts to get tidal information for December 20th. The results confirm the storm was so powerful that it could've scattered debris in a fifty-mile radius up and down the coastline.”

“Okay, so if that fisherman rescued you near San Gregorio, it's not that much of a stretch to think Hallie might've ended up somewhere near Half Moon Bay. Let's say a member of the commune happened along after the storm and saw a young girl lying on the beach. They take her back to the farmhouse, where, at some point, Lynette decides to adopt her out to another family. What do you say we dig through everything Phoebe sent us? I mean really dig, separate the Nichols' personal stuff, and focus on adoption records. There has to be a paper trail, right?”

“You'd think but I doubt phony paperwork will help us locate Hallie.”

“You never know,” Rowan said as she started combing through Phoebe Jamieson's sometimes confusing files. It was an array of correspondence, invoices, medical records, tax

returns, and legal documents that Phoebe had obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.

With a mass of papers before them, the two culled out those that didn't seem relevant and concentrated on the forged adoption papers. Some were difficult to spot. But others stood out from the rest because of sloppy details that raised red flags. During a time period that covered August 1999 through April 2000, they found the same couple listed on eight different birth certificates who had supposedly given up eight babies in one year. According to state records, the couple didn't exist.

"None of these papers are real," Rowan declared, sliding them toward Will to inspect.

"There's no driver's license or social security number prior to 1999 for that couple," Will asserted. "Talk about lucking out. It seems no one bothered to check whether these adoptions were legit. Hallie could be here somewhere in the adoptions that happened between January 2000 and April 2000."

"We should concentrate on ages, four to five and up. We don't know how long she spent at the commune, but it probably wasn't for long. Here are two more that fit the timeframe. Different mothers are listed on the birth records. Could she have been adopted out as a five-year-old?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Because I'm holding paperwork referring to a Judge Silverton signing off on the adoption of a five-year-old girl named Callie. Callie Shelby."

Will's head whipped up from the stack of papers he'd been perusing. "It's gotta be Hallie. Callie / Hallie. Our next step should be hunting down the court records."

"I'm not sure that would do any good, Will. Have you noticed what all of these adoptions have in common?"

"No. What?"

"This Judge Silverton sealed all the records. They're not available to the public. That piece of paper I showed you

simply refers to Nichols giving his okay for ‘Callie’ to go into the adoption queue. It’s almost as if they were clearing out the farmhouse of children they’d been housing up to the time of the murders. We could get Phoebe to check out this judge though or go up there ourselves and confront him.”

“My vote is to confront him face to face.”

Rowan let out a sigh after keying the name into a search engine. “Not possible. Judge Silverton died in 2010.”

Will slammed his palms down on the table in frustration. “Every time I get close, this is what happens. I hit another dead end.”

Rowan reached out her hand and laid it on Will’s arm. “It’s not a dead end if we have her name and phony date of birth that we can trace. Once she entered the school system under Callie Shelby, there has to be a paper trail.”



From the information Brent’s team accumulated they had more questions than answers So many that Eastlyn tried to prioritize the list. They sat around the conference table long into the night doing their best to piece together answers to what they’d found so far. Over pizza and spaghetti, the four of them dissected each piece of the puzzle.

“We need to understand this case so we can explain it to Rowan,” Brent began. “I’ll let Theo start us off by detailing what he found about Atticus Eaton.”

“*Henry Atticus Eaton,*” Theo corrected. “He went by Henry. My approach was simple really. I ran the name Atticus Eaton into the US missing persons database that we got off Rowan’s birth certificate. I found nothing. When I expanded into Canada, though, I got a hit on a Henry Atticus Eaton from Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. I did a deep dive into the name and boom, there he was. I discovered that Henry Eaton never renewed his Canadian driver’s license after 1999. Nor did he ever obtain a driver’s license in the US. It

took me awhile to find current phone numbers for the Eaton family that worked but I eventually talked to his older brother, Holden. Their parents are no longer alive. But Holden took me through the story about Henry's life prior to 1999. The Eaton family ran a fishing boat business, very big in the area, very well-known. At nineteen, Henry married his childhood sweetheart, Olive Anne Avery. They had a daughter born on August 31st, 1995, in Port Alberni's only hospital. I found birth records for a baby girl they named Rowan Avery Eaton."

"Wow," Colt exclaimed, giving Theo a high-five. "Nice work."

"Thanks. But it really was Brent's suggestion to include Canada in the search."

"Avery being the mother's maiden name," Eastlyn muttered. "Initials on the wedding rings line up with HAE and OAE. What else did you learn?"

"That the two families lived around the corner from one another in this idyllic little coastal town. These kids grew up together."

"If it was so idyllic then why did they leave?" Brent wanted to know.

"That's the kicker. Sometime during July of 1999, Henry became disillusioned with fishing. He'd been a fisherman since he was a kid. I guess by that summer, he wanted to spread his wings and try something new. So this twenty-three-year-old father and husband decided to make a change. According to the brother, Henry packed up his SUV and took his wife and daughter on what they described as a vacation getaway to California. They planned to camp out along the way to make their money last longer."

Eastlyn scowled down at her pasta. "A vacation that lasts four months? Sounds like there's more to the story than that."

"Not if they crossed paths with Jim and Lynette or Dodge Nichols," Theo suggested. "Holden said that at first, Henry and Olive stayed in touch with people back home. They sent postcards and letters, even photos of Rowan. But then the

families stopped hearing from either of them after November 1999. Communications stopped altogether. They never heard from Henry or Olive after that. When they didn't show up back in Canada for Christmas, both sets of parents filed missing persons reports."

"But if they knew they were headed to California, why didn't they contact the authorities here?" Brent asked.

"The last letter they received was from Half Moon Bay. Holden says he tried to contact the county sheriff's office several times but couldn't get anyone to take him seriously," Theo explained. "The brother claims he even made two trips down to that area after Christmas. This would've been several months after the murders. He wasn't sure what to do at that time, so he alerted the Canadian authorities. But they misunderstood and sent out an alert for British Columbia only, pre-9/11. If you ask me, it was a sad series of screw-ups. This couple literally fell off the radar and their case fell through the cracks."

Theo paused long enough to sip his soda. "There is one thing that bothers me, though. Why would Jim and Lynette let Rowan keep her name? That part doesn't make sense to me."

"You don't have kids, do you?" Colt countered. "Kids are stubborn little creatures. Maybe this particular four-year-old refused to budge off her name." He glanced around the table until his eyes landed on Brent. "You and I are the only ones here with kids. You know how immovable they are at that age. Maybe they had to fit everything to Rowan after the fact."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Brent said. "My four-year-old once spent an entire summer insisting we call him Mason. But Theo does have a point. The mistake on the headstone is problematic."

"After hearing what Jasper described as the big blow up, to me, it sounds like Lynette was shaken by the murders," Eastlyn proffered. "So much that she inadvertently ordered a headstone with the girl's birth name on it."

Colt shook his head. "Or maybe Lynette ordered the headstone thinking that they would eventually change

Rowan's name to something else down the road. The girl no one knew would be dead according to that headstone. But Jim and Lynette didn't count on one thing—the girl wasn't having it. Kids aren't pushovers. I'm telling you this stubborn four-year-old probably dug in her heels and refused to answer to any other name they tried. Now, the Dewhursts are looking at a thousand dollars to replace the headstone. So they take the cheapest, easiest way out and leave it the way it is. Six years later, Jim drops dead of a heart attack. At that point, Lynette doesn't see the need to change anything because nobody's noticed. They've gotten away with a double murder. They've passed off Rowan as their granddaughter. No one seems to care about details like the fact that the kid is running around town with a headstone that bears her own name.”

Theo nodded. “When you put it like that it actually makes sense. The kid won't cooperate with a name change, so Lynette and Jim have to improvise. In addition to that, I tracked down the funeral director who verified the death certificate. He claims he doesn't remember a four-year-old coming into his mortuary back in November 1999. Of course, he wouldn't because they faked the girl's death. But Jim and Lynette needed a death certificate to arrange the fake funeral. This guy let me make copies of his records from that time period. There's no mention of a kid at all. I think Jim or Lynette used the funeral director's name to forge the death certificate.”

“Nothing would surprise me at this point,” Brent asserted. “Did you find anything unusual about the jewelry in the grave? We could email pictures to Holden Eaton and see if he recognizes any of the items.”

“I traced that sterling silver necklace back to a First Nations' artist in Canada, which makes sense if Olive was from British Columbia,” Eastlyn noted. “Muriel says she should have the DNA results back by the end of the week. But if what Theo turned up checks out, we may not need to wait that long before updating Rowan.”

“No one's saying anything to Rowan until the DNA comes back for confirmation,” Brent ordered. “That means

you follow up with Holden Eaton anyway. Get the local RCMP there to swab his mouth, then verify if any of these items belonged to his sister-in-law or his brother.” Brent checked that off his list. “Anything on the Roberto and Luis Diaz hit and run?”

Colt put down his pizza and got to his feet. He brought over a box containing the files and removed the lid. “After going through the evidence, I’d reclassify this as a double murder. It wasn’t a hit and run because the car involved ran over these two men multiple times. They died at the scene from massive head trauma. A little too convenient for just a hit and run. Mind telling me what this has to do with Henry and Olive’s murder?”

Brent grinned. “On the day of the fake funeral for the child, two men stayed late to close up the grave after everyone else had gone home. Those two men, according to Jasper’s logbook, were Roberto and Luis Diaz, who just happen to be manning the fruit stand one day and get mowed down by a wayward car. How many witness statements are in that file?”

“Three. From three workers picking avocados in a nearby field.”

“And what kind of vehicle did they describe?” Brent prompted.

“The three people identified a four-door white SUV as the car that hit the two men.”

“What happens to your stuff when you join a cult or a commune?” Brent asked the group. When no one replied, he let out a groan. “Come on, guys. Keep up. It’s a simple question. Your stuff becomes public property. As a community at large your stuff is no longer yours. It’s shared by everyone else inside the commune. Everyone has access to the vehicle you were driving or anything else you brought with you. What make and model SUV did Henry own when he left Port Alberni that summer?”

Theo flipped through his notes. “I’ll be damned. They drove a 1996 white Ford SUV with British Columbia license plates.”

Brent leaned back in the chair, locked his fingers behind his head. “And by the time of the Diaz murders, we know for a fact that Henry and Olive were already dead and buried in Eternal Gardens in a grave with their daughter’s name on the headstone.”

Eastlyn picked at the food on her plate, her appetite gone. “It’s chilling when you think about it.”

“Yeah. But we’re not nearly done yet, guys,” Brent emphasized. “We have seven other missing people unaccounted for from Celestial Moon Commune. Seven. Think about that when you go home tonight. We’re not stopping until we learn what happened to each one of them.”

Theo got up to toss his containers in the trash. “Any chance Interpol will ever capture Dodge Nichols?”

“Interpol never gives up and neither we will,” Eastlyn tossed out.

Brent glanced around the room, studying each face. “News flash. My gut tells me that we won’t need Interpol to nab Nichols. I think he’s a lot closer than anyone thinks.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

By the time Rowan heard from Brent, June had turned to July, a month that saw temperatures rise to a balmy eighty degrees. She'd met with her one and only client, a book publisher start-up located in Los Angeles with a talented list of twenty-five authors that promised to keep her busy through the end of the year.

The new job meant she needed to hit the ground running. She spent her days trying to impress the editors, the authors, and the agents, wowing them with her creativity and sassy book cover ideas.

That first week of July, with no air conditioning in the house, she couldn't have been more bored with the entire process.

She missed working alongside Daniel at the ice cream shop, interacting with the customers, dishing up bizarre concoctions, experimenting with different fruits to create exotic flavors. She had gotten to know the town's residents through their weird orders. She knew who liked their banana splits with pineapple and orange sherbet and a glob of chocolate fudge in the middle. She knew which ones preferred their chocolate sundaes dripping in butterscotch sauce, and recognized the staunch advocates who believed plain old strawberry was the answer to everything. She'd met the funny tourists who cracked jokes and the grumpy ones who came in to complain about the weather.

She missed the local vibe and the touristy atmosphere. No two days were alike, depending on the stream of customers

who made the job challenging, yet fulfilling.

She missed the kids the most, the rush of scooping up ice cream and the satisfaction of watching a child's face light up when they tasted her latest creation. She missed the overall sense of community that came with feeling part of something she couldn't name.

"I should be grateful for the one client," Rowan had told Daniel one night after dinner. But it seemed he already understood her predicament.

"The place isn't the same without you," Daniel had replied. "People keep asking me where you are. I keep telling them you'll be back. But it's not that cut and dried, is it?"

"I feel out of sorts, as though I'm faking my enthusiasm, which I guess is true. I can't keep my mind on my work. I keep thinking about what flavors to make. When I worked at the shop, it kept me so busy that I didn't have time to dwell on everything that's happened. But now, all I do is think about how I spent my formative years in this house with Lynette. I know now that I never really knew the woman."

"Jim dying must've changed her. Something did. We may never know. She didn't have to fetch you that night from Gwynn. But she did."

"I find it strange that as long as Jim was alive, he never suggested I come live with them. But almost from the minute he died, Lynette took more of an interest in my situation. It's like she knew Gwynn was never going to change. When I called her that rainy night and told her Gwynn had passed out, she showed up and got me out of there. It changed my life. Who knows what might've happened if she'd left me with Gwynn."

"But she didn't."

"No. But she also took away my chance to have parents. It's a vicious circle. Seeing the good in Lynette in my head. All the great times we spent together—grandmother and granddaughter moments—making doll clothes in her sewing room, mixing up cake batter from scratch, and then watching

reruns on TV. Accepting her dark side might be the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. On top of all that, I feel that somehow, I've let Will down."

"It's not your fault we couldn't find Hallie. Did you turn everything you found in the safe deposit box over to Brent?"

"Every scrap of paper in there. He had Theo pick that stuff up a week ago. But the weirdest thing was when Eastlyn brought cadaver dogs into the house. It creeped me out."

"But the dogs didn't get a hit," Daniel reminded her.

"Thankfully, no. I hate this waiting game, Daniel. Eastlyn was as closed mouth as ever. I still don't understand how Jim and Lynette led such double lives."

"I know it's been hard waiting. But Brent promised answers. You need to believe the system will work."

It was all a bit too much for Will Snelling. The past weeks had been a disappointment, yielding dead end after dead end.

It wasn't all a failure. One good thing had come out of it. In trying to help Will find Hallie, the three of them had bonded as thick as any friends they'd had since high school. Will didn't seem to want to leave Pelican Pointe and go back to his apartment in downtown Portland.

"You could stay here and write your book," Rowan had prompted. "I'll design the cover for it."

"I need an ending," Will had pointed out. "It should be about the journey to find Hallie. No other ending works. Besides, I'd need to find an affordable place to live."

"You could move into Driftwood Cottage after Rowan moves in with me," Daniel had suggested with a grin. "Stay here and meet your own woman."

"There is this one very attractive brunette who works at the animal clinic. Her name's Jessica. I met her at The Perky Pelican after Chloe mixed up our coffee orders."

"Listen to you, talking like a local already. Pretty soon you'll know everybody in town."

Will had shifted his feet. “I think I saw your ghost last night at the B&B. He wore the same outfit you guys described. After watching him out in the courtyard from the second-floor balcony, I saw him vanish into the fog. But then again, it could’ve been the two mojitos I drank before bedtime.”

“I doubt two mojitos would cause you to see Scott. Promise Cove is his old homestead. His daughter still lives there. Word has it that he looks out for her and his wife, Jordan, who’s married to his best friend.”

Will’s forehead wrinkled in total fascination. “This just keeps getting more intriguing by the minute. And another reason to stick around. Maybe I’ll mention Scott in my book. Or better still, I could just write about this weird, little town.”

Daniel traded looks with Rowan. They both knew the real reason Will wanted to stay nearby and it had everything to do with finding Hallie. He still believed his sister lived somewhere within a fifty-mile radius.

All their speculation had come to an abrupt halt with the middle-of-the-week phone call from Brent. The phone call that changed everything.



Inside the police station, seven people crowded around the conference table. Rowan knew everyone except for the San Mateo deputy sheriff who stood next to the door. While everyone else waited for Brent to address the long-awaited results of the DNA, as the only reporter allowed in the room, Will took out his notepad and remarked, “This has a press conference feel to it.”

Rowan agreed and tried to pry information out of Eastlyn, who sat next to her. In a soft whisper, she leaned in near the other woman’s ear to nudge out an answer. “What is all this? We’ve had other meetings with Brent but nothing as elaborate. I just want to know if my DNA matches the couple in the grave. Have you ID’d them yet? Were they my parents?”

Eastlyn's lips curved as she looked across the table at her colleagues—Colt and Theo. “The Chief will fire any of us on the spot if we so much as hint at the results. Since we love our jobs, we're following orders and keeping our mouths shut.”

“Be patient. The wait is almost over,” Colt cautioned.

Disappointed, Rowan muttered, “I've heard that before. Fine. Don't tell me. I'll be surprised along with a roomful of cops.”

Daniel slipped his hand into hers for support. “Most of these people are also our friends and neighbors.”

She was about to come back with a pithy reply when Brent entered the room. She kept her eyes on him as he stood at the head of the table and cleared his throat. He looked over at her. His face told her this was the big moment.

A current ran through the room as Brent began to speak. “I appreciate your patience. But once we cracked open that grave at Eternal Gardens, we knew we had a long road ahead of us. Thanks to the lab putting a rush on the testing, though, I can tell you with one-hundred percent certainty that we have a match for you, Rowan. Your parents were Henry Atticus Eaton and Olive Anne Avery—two twenty-three-year-olds, high school sweethearts—from Port Alberni, British Columbia. Henry's brother, a man by the name of Holden Eaton had pretty much given up ever seeing you again. But you have aunts and uncles, you have cousins—on both sides of the family—family that can't wait to meet you back on Vancouver Island.”

Rowan blinked at Daniel and squeezed his hand. “I have family.”

“I don't think she was prepared for that,” Daniel commented.

“That's okay,” Brent noted. “We have a lot more to dive into before we hold our official press conference this afternoon. We may not know the exact circumstances of how Henry and Olive met their fate, but we do know several key facts. We know who did it. Fingerprints, ballistics, and

witnesses who saw a confrontation that night all point to Jim and Lynette as the perpetrators. Jim fired the Marlin rifle at Henry, shooting him twice. Standing a few feet away, Lynette took down Olive with the pistol, also shooting her twice. We know where Henry and Olive ended up—in a cemetery plot paid for by Jim Dewhurst, complete with a headstone under a false name—buried in a devious manner to hide the crime. After all these years, the lab discovered microscopic traces of Henry and Olive’s blood weaved into the old upholstery inside Jim’s Ram Prospector, probably transfer from when he and Lynette shot them and got back in the truck. I’ll get into more of the specifics of the actual crime in a few minutes.”

Rowan cleared her throat and raised her hand. “There’s no chance that it was Gwynn who wielded the handgun that killed the woman?”

“I’m afraid not. We tracked Gwynn Dewhurst’s movements on that Thanksgiving weekend. We found witnesses who corroborated that Gwynn left the party with a man named Peter Grinley right after Tamsin Southwick’s body was discovered early Saturday morning on the west side of the house at the outdoor pool.”

Rowan frowned. “Wait. Not Saturday night?”

“No, not Saturday night. We found Peter Grinley and talked to him about what he remembered. He confirmed he left the party with Gwynn sometime before ten o’clock Saturday morning. They spent the rest of the weekend in San Francisco.”

“So Gwynn wasn’t there when my parents—that sounds so strange saying my parents—were murdered?”

“No. She wasn’t. Not only that, we were able to dig deeper into Tamsin Southwick’s drowning. Eastlyn busted the myth that Tamsin drowned in the indoor pool. She did not. When law enforcement arrived on scene, they discovered Tamsin’s body lying inches away from the outdoor pool, specifically the hot tub. She was found lying on the concrete on the west side of the house. We discovered Southwick’s official autopsy report. The newspaper articles said it was

always unclear when Tamsin actually drowned. That's probably the only thing they got right. But after reading her autopsy, the medical examiner concluded she'd been in the outdoor hot tub for approximately eight hours before anyone pulled her out. The condition of her skin, the dilation of her blood vessels, proved she drowned in the hot tub and spent hours in the heated water. Drugs, alcohol, and a hot tub are a deadly mix, especially when the other guests were in no shape to help her or hear her call out for help. We'll never know the exact circumstances. But if Tamsin's body was left outside for that long, there's a possibility no one noticed her until it was way too late. Her toxicology revealed she had enough Seconal in her system to kill five people. Her blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. And there's more. We contacted guests who were willing to talk to us. After drilling down during their interviews, they were almost certain that during the drug and alcohol haze of that weekend, Tamsin Southwick showed up at the party on Thursday night by herself. She never had a child with her. But several young children were spotted on the premises sometime during the wild weekend. Four of the witnesses confirmed that they remembered a little girl falling into the indoor pool and almost drowning. They believe this near drowning occurred late Saturday afternoon at the indoor pool area. The child was saved, but not by Tamsin Southwick, who had by this time already drowned, and her body had already been transported to the morgue."

"Then who saved the little girl?" Rowan prompted.

"Witnesses identified that person as a younger Lynette."

"That seems apt since I probably shouldn't have been there in the first place," Rowan snarled.

"That's one way to look at," Brent replied. "Now we get into what happened that evening. According to witnesses we spoke with, a few hours after the police left the house, the confrontation took place between Henry Eaton and Jim Dewhurst in the grand entryway. This is where Olive jumps in, the angry mom who wants her daughter back. She and Lynette exchange words. Olive is screaming about not leaving without her daughter. The couple keep begging for their daughter. This

goes on for several minutes until a shoving match between the men ensues. Henry lands a punch to Jim's face, specifically his nose. That's when Jim leaves the area and comes back pointing the Marlin rifle at Henry and Olive. But here's the kicker. Witnesses say they heard a child screaming. The screams coming from somewhere downstairs on the first floor."

"You think the little girl saw this confrontation?" Rowan wondered in horror.

Brent nodded. "If the witnesses are correct, yes, I do. After Jim forces the couple out the front door at gunpoint, no one knows for certain what happens after that."

Brent held up a hand in Rowan's direction. "Don't go getting upset. I'm not finished. Speculation is all we have at this point, but it's detailed speculation. We don't think Jim and Lynette drove the couple back to the commune. Maybe the child is with them, maybe not. My guess is the kid comes running into the foyer during the confrontation when she sees or hears her mommy and daddy's voice and causes a colossal scene."

"It's what tips the scale," Rowan mumbled before tears trickled down her cheeks. "That's the real trauma she witnessed, not the near drowning but seeing the argument escalate, seeing the gun, seeing the adults fighting. It scared the little girl."

"Most definitely. Remember the winding road getting to the commune?" Brent asked. "My team and I spent a week up there trying to re-create what likely happened that Saturday night after Jim and Lynette left the party with Henry and Olive and maybe the child."

"The winding road," Daniel muttered. "It would take a long time to make that drive in the dark, especially with two adults ready to fight for their kid at any moment."

"Not to mention the little girl screaming her head off," Rowan added. "You don't think they tied them up, do you? Or stuffed rags in their mouths to keep them quiet?"

The questions broke Brent's stoic demeanor as he visibly swallowed hard and paused. When he was able to recover, he chose his words carefully. "The forensic team recovered as much tattered fabric as they could from the earth. Some remnants were from obvious clothing like jeans, part of a sweater, and one deformed male tennis shoe." He cleared his throat before going on. "The rest found in the dirt was probably from towels used as gags around their mouths and ligatures to bind their hands behind their backs."

Rowan made a gasping sound and covered her mouth so she wouldn't scream. On her right, Daniel put his arm around her shoulders while Eastlyn did so from the left.

"I'm sorry," Brent managed. "I know hearing these kinds of details is difficult."

"I want to know what happened," Rowan whispered. "I want to hear all of it."

"Okay. If you're sure, here goes. During our version of events we asked a forensic psychologist to participate. Here's what we believe went down. After leaving the party house, Lynette is probably behind the wheel of the pickup while Jim sits in the bed holding the rifle on the couple. By this time they've been bound and gagged. Jim directs his wife to head for the commune. They start out on the winding, bumpy road heading west out of Redwood City. But before long Jim realizes the situation is not gonna work. It will take too long to reach the farm and Henry keeps looking like he could attack him at any moment. Even tied up, Henry is not in a cooperative mood. That's when Jim sees the first set of deep woods to his right. Afraid the situation could escalate at any moment, Jim decides to end it there. He yells for Lynette to pull over. She follows the truck's headlights until she comes to a dirt road where she spots a clearing."

"You actually found the spot where this happened?" Rowan questioned, her voice rough and raw.

"Yes. Colt and I searched the area until we stumbled across a remote dirt road in the middle of nowhere."

“We decided—the three of us including the psychologist—that this was as good a spot as any for a double homicide,” Colt put in. “Jim needed a location where if anyone heard gunshots, they might assume it came from a hunter in the area and wouldn’t arouse suspicion. It’s remote, pitch black except for the headlights on the pickup, and damn spooky.”

Rowan wiped away her tears. “That’s cold and calculating.”

“Double murder usually is,” Colt said. “We walked through a re-enactment. Jim was the first to fire the rifle into Henry’s chest. It was the biggest target in the dark. We think Lynette pulled out the small pistol from her handbag and shot Olive immediately after Jim’s first shot. Jim probably stood over Henry’s body, shooting him in the head. Lynette followed his lead and did the same thing to Olive. It happened quick, within seconds they were both dead. Now, Jim and Lynette need to handle the bodies. They couldn’t very well leave them out there for hunters to find. They devised a plan that included storing the bodies somewhere until they could transport them to the cemetery. We think that location was probably on the grounds of the commune, maybe in a working freezer or refrigerated unit.”

Theo twisted in his chair. “The commune did own such appliances in their commercial-grade kitchen where they made jam and canned all kinds of vegetables. The process of how the commune made money wasn’t a secret. Rowan provided news articles from that reporter saying as much. And one article mentioned a barn that no one entered without permission. This would’ve been an ideal place to put the bodies until Jim and Lynette could come up with their next step.”

Brent chewed his jaw, his eyes scanning the room. “Without getting too gory there was probably a massive amount of blood. And while trying to conceal what they’d done, some of the blood got on their clothing, which in turn, rubbed off into the vehicle’s fabric seats. We all know there’s no longer a farmhouse or any trace of the commune left on the property once owned by Dodge Nichols. But when you

capture a fugitive who's been on the run for almost twenty years because of the drug enterprise he ran, he might want to talk instead of facing a charge of accessory to commit first-degree murder."

"You found Dodge Nichols?" Daniel asked in awe.

"We did. Thanks to those deeds Rowan gave us a few weeks back, we did a property records search, then executed a warrant last night at a remote residence east of here in the rolling hills near Scott's Valley. Nichols admitted that he'd been living there since 2007 under another name, at a house his sister bought for him in 2005."

That information rocked Rowan to the core. "Lynette bought him a house?"

"According to him they shared access to an offshore account worth about twenty million dollars."

"Where is Nichols now?" Rowan asked.

"The sheriff's office transferred him to county lockup in a holding facility while awaiting the feds. He's their problem now. But he did provide details to some of our questions."

"In other words, he knew that Jim and Lynette had murdered my parents," Rowan blurted out.

"Nichols knew about it after the fact or so he claims. He certainly helped them with the burial details at Eternal Gardens. He knew about the mix-up with the headstone and suggested that nobody would care about what name was on the marker. His exact words were: 'No one ever reads those names or pays attention to who's buried there.' When Lynette ordered the headstone, it was right after the murders. She assumed that she would change your name down the road. According to Nichols, you refused to answer to any other name they threw at you. You were Rowan Eaton. Whenever Lynette tried to get you to write out your name, you'd print in bold letters R-O-W-A-N no matter what name they gave you. Jim was so furious he wanted to ship you off as soon as possible somewhere else. But Nichols and Lynette told him how that would be a mistake. That if you ever started to remember things, they all

might be in serious trouble. It was better to keep you close so they could keep an eye on you.”

“So they pawned me off on Gwynn.”

Brent nodded. “They hoped Gwynn would eventually straighten herself out. Later, Gwynn became the one who threatened to take them all down.”

“And Lynette had to overdose her own daughter to keep the woman quiet,” Daniel finished.

“That about sums it up. If you’re ever in doubt about anything,” Brent began, finally taking a seat in a chair. “Your family in Port Alberni took DNA tests. Familial matches all around. The DNA extracted from Henry and Olive prove you are their daughter.”

Brent paused and narrowed his gaze on Rowan. “There’s a two hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of Dodge Nichols. Because you provided the information that led to his arrest, I’ve made the FBI aware that it’s you who should receive that money.”

Theo got to his feet. “You should know we’re trying to track down all the children who were illegally adopted from the commune.”

“We’ve been trying to do that already,” Will said. “We haven’t found a single person because the records were all sealed. The Freedom of Information Act doesn’t seem to matter. We can’t find anyone willing to let us see those records.”

Theo smiled. “But law enforcement has tools that private individuals don’t have.” He stepped out into the hallway and motioned for a woman about Rowan’s age to enter the conference room.

The woman had a wide smile and sparkling eyes that scanned the room until she found her brother. “Willie! Oh, my God, Willie!”

“Hallie,” Will called out scrambling out of his chair and skirting the table. He wrapped his arms around his sister, who

by now had tears streaming down her face. “I’ve waited for this day for so long.”

“I thought you were dead. They told me you were dead.”

“I never gave up hope of seeing you again. Even though everyone told me I was ridiculous for thinking like that, I knew you were alive.”

“How did you do that?” Rowan asked Theo in wonder.

Theo shrugged. “Brent assigned me the task of tracking her down. With a little persuasion, I found a judge who unsealed all the adoption records that looked fishy. Hallie’s had all the earmarks of forged signatures and phony paperwork. Will’s persistence didn’t hurt, either. Or yours, Rowan.”

“Thank you,” Rowan said, giving Theo a hug. “I hope you realize you’ve made Will’s year.”

Daniel stuck out his hand to shake Theo’s. “If it’s any consolation my start here wasn’t without its rocky road. No pun intended. I should’ve mentioned that earlier.”

“It’s okay. I’m settling in, beginning to like the town a lot. How about you, Rowan, are you sticking around?”

“Absolutely.” She looped an arm through Daniel’s. “Believe it or not, I love it here. I’m glad I made the move, even though it seems like I’ve turned my world upside down.” She laid her head on Daniel’s shoulder. “As a bonus, I found this guy. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find the happiness you seek right here.”

“If you’re talking about what I think you’re talking about, I’m done with relationships,” Theo declared. “I’m off all that. Never again.”

“You’ve jinxed it now,” Daniel cracked. “Never say never. Life has a way of laughing at that sentiment and shoving it in your face.”

Eastlyn came up next to Rowan. “What will you do with the reward money?”

“That’s easy,” Rowan said glancing over at the Will and Hallie reunion. “The look on their faces when they saw each other is worth tracking down the rest of the kids who were adopted and reuniting them with their families. The worst thing Lynette did wasn’t running an illegal adoption racket. Murdering my parents puts her at rock bottom. But I can try to make it up to the rest of the kids by helping them find their birth parents. Let’s hope it isn’t too late.”

“We’ll make sure they get the chance to have their own reunion,” Daniel whispered, taking her hand. “Let’s get out of here. I’ll buy you an ice cream cone.”



Epilogue

Two weeks later

Smuggler's Bay

At the height of summer, on a Sunday afternoon, Daniel found Rowan standing near the pier looking out over the shimmering water in the bay. She wore a tiered summer dress in bold green and white. She'd left her red-gold hair loose around her shoulders. In her hands, she held two large-sized disposable cups from The Perky Pelican.

"You look like you're a million miles away," Daniel commented, eyeing the coffee. "Is one of those for me? Or are you looking for a major caffeine rush?"

She grinned and handed off one of the cups. "No. Just doing some serious soul-searching. I've decided to keep Driftwood Cottage."

"I didn't realize you were thinking of letting it go."

"Will offered to buy it. And Eastlyn assured me the cadaver dogs she brought to the house that day didn't pick up the scent of any dead bodies. So there's that. I mean, I still have good memories of living there with a lady who could be very sweet when she wanted to be. Lynette hid her dark side very well. I think back to what Tansy Perkins told us. Remember? She said she feared something wasn't right about that place. Seems like she had Lynette pegged all along. But in the end, Driftwood Cottage is just a house, not sinister or otherwise. So, I'm keeping it and fixing it up the way I want. Despite what Lynette did, she was good to me. How was I

supposed to know she had this dark past that included murder, a drug empire, and hoarding insane amounts of cash in an overseas account?”

Daniel took a sip from his coffee and leaned his elbows against the railing. “I can’t believe she tried to kill Gwynn. Of course, we didn’t see any of this coming when we started down this road.”

“For me, I have big questions about Gwynn. Under what circumstances did Lynette steal her? And from where exactly? Is Gwynn from Arizona, from the time Lynette spent with Jim?”

“We’ll never know.”

“Maybe not but Will and Hallie offered to help me track down Gwynn’s relatives, if there are any, along with the other adoptees.”

“What happened to Jim’s Dodge Prospector? I haven’t seen it since Theo brought it back from the lab.”

“Yeah, well, Jim’s pickup had to go. Wally found a buyer for it in Redding. So I won’t have to look at it again. I couldn’t keep it around knowing they used it to dispose of the bodies, could I?” She held up her new set of car keys and pointed toward Ocean Street. “I bought something a little more appropriate for living at the beach.”

Daniel angled behind him where a sweet little blue 1969 Ford Mustang convertible sat parked at the curb. “Nice. So that’s what you were doing after you left the house this morning?”

“Using his connections in the world of muscle cars, Wally located it in San Diego. One owner. Kept in the garage for the last twenty years or so. It has some serious scratches and the paint’s chipped in places, but he assures me the engine and transmission are sound. I don’t mind a few dings. And I can always get it repainted.”

“Most people prefer perfection.”

“Not me. What were you and Logan talking about this morning before I left?”

“He came to tell me that the bait shop owner died two days ago. He thought I might be interested in keeping the bait business going or using the space to expand the shop.”

Rowan tilted her head, her eyes wandering along his body. “I don’t see you surrounded by bait. Are you interested in expanding?”

“It would solve the fishy smell that seems to swirl around the bait shop and waft through the door at all the wrong times.”

Rowan tittered with laughter. “There is that. I won’t miss that smell. But what will the fishermen in town do without their bait? I talked to Holden Eaton yesterday for almost an hour. I can’t imagine another fisherman not having access to whatever bait they need. You could relocate the bait shop next to the Marine Mammal Center. That seems a fitting place. Would that work?”

“I don’t know why not. I’ll talk to Logan about it, see what he thinks. Are you ditching your book design business?”

“Not right away. I can do it part-time from home until the end of the year. That frees up a few days a week to spend as your assistant manager at Vanilla Bean Machine, especially on the weekends. If you want me, that is.”

He nudged his body closer to hers, snaked an arm around her waist. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Mamie’s decided to stay put for now.”

“I don’t mind being your second choice,” she said, draping her arms around his neck, nibbling on his ear. “Mamie sent me this email that said she didn’t want to be a third wheel. Something about couples needing their space. You know what?”

“What?”

“I asked Hallie if she was afraid of the water after almost drowning in that shipwreck. You know what she said?”

“What?”

“Hallie admitted that she avoids boats and ferries. But her adoptive parents insisted she learn how to swim so she wouldn’t be afraid of the water.” She angled toward him and stared into those blue eyes of his. “I’ve decided to take a page out of Hallie’s book and learn to swim. I booked lessons for the rest of the summer at the Y in downtown San Sebastian. I figured it’s time to put the past behind me for good. Want to have lunch on the *Avalon*?”

“Lunch? You want to actually set foot on the boat? I don’t know how to respond to that. I don’t want to see you faint dead away again. Do you really want to board a boat? Are you sure about this?”

“It’s part of my soul-searching. Look, I don’t want you to take me on a cruise any time soon or out in the ocean—that’s off limits. At least not until I learn to swim. But hey, I figured a picnic lunch on your boat might be a small step to getting over my fear, so I packed us a lunch. What do you say? The picnic basket is in the car.”

“I’m suddenly hungry.” He ran his fingers along her cheek. “If you’re really adventurous we could christen the *Avalon*, you and me, make it our boat.”

“As tempting as that sounds let’s see how lunch goes first. If I don’t barf, we’ll take it from there. I’ll go grab the picnic basket.” She pivoted to where she’d left the Mustang parked, feeling a sense of freedom at her tiny step toward conquering her fear.

She caught a glimpse of Scott further down the pier and like any good neighbor sent him a friendly wave. She’d never felt more at home than she did at that moment. The weight of the world no longer seemed as though she carried it all by herself.

Later, when the two of them boarded the *Avalon*, Daniel made sure she had settled comfortably on one of the cushioned seats. “You okay? You’re not going to pass out, are you?”

“I’m fine. That’ll be a story we tell our grandchildren. How I fainted at the sight of your boat. But for now, let it go,”

she insisted with a lift of her chin, letting the wind scatter her hair off her neck.

“Got it. No problem. I’ll tuck that away to share with our six grandchildren.”

“Six? That sounds industrious.”

He set the picnic basket on the deck and started pawing his way through the goodies. “What did you bring to eat? I’m suddenly starving. The sea air always makes me hungry.”

She shook her head. “We haven’t left port yet. I brought ham and cheese subs with lettuce and mayo. Fresh apples for dessert. I figured you could provide the ice cream afterward.”

She looked out into the bay. “I’ve lived near the coast for most of my life, and yet, I’ve never ventured too close to the ocean. I thought maybe we could change that together.”

“Absolutely. Who knows? You might be the adventurous type and not even know it.”

Rowan took a deep breath, feeling a sense of excitement in the exercise. “I haven’t had nightmares for almost a month.”

Even though he could feel anxiety building within her, he could also sense her fighting it off. He hoped this wasn’t a mistake. “It’s just lunch for now. Pretend we’re sitting back at the kitchen table at home.”

She closed her eyes, took a series of deep breaths to calm down before opening them again. She caught him staring at her and frowned. “What are you looking at?”

“Just admiring the view from where I’m sitting,” Daniel replied, handing her a sandwich. He spotted the plain white envelope at the bottom of the basket with Rowan’s name scrawled on it. “What’s this?”

“No idea. You open it.”

“Me? It’s addressed to you.”

Rowan ripped open the envelope to find a handwritten note that read: *At this stage of your life, I could throw a dozen cliches at you. Life is what you make of it. You aren’t*

responsible for what others did. Don't let the past rule the future. But you're already moving on from your past, so you don't need me pointing out the obvious. Just remember this. When all the adults around you tried to make you into someone else, you refused to let them. You stayed Rowan. Even at four years old you knew who you were. Start your life with that sentiment and you won't go wrong. Allow your children to be themselves. Henry and Olive would want you to be happy. ~ Scott



Cast of Characters

Promise Cove - Book One

Jordan Phillips—The widow of Scott Phillips living on the outskirts of Pelican Pointe in a huge Victorian with her baby daughter. She's trying to fix the house up to open as a bed and breakfast.

Nick Harris—A former member of the California Guard who served with Scott in Iraq. Nick suffers from PTSD. He tries to adjust back to civilian life after Iraq but finds that he can't ignore a promise he made during the heat of battle.

Scott Phillips—Died in Iraq while serving with the California Guard. In life, Scott was best friends with Nick Harris. Scott doesn't let death stop him from returning to his wife and child and the town he loves. He appears throughout the series as a benevolent ghost helping new arrivals settle in and overcome their problems.

Patrick Murphy—The mayor who owns the only market in town.

Lilly Seybold—Another newcomer with two children living alone on the other side of town, isolated and struggling to get by. Lilly is recently out of an abusive marriage. Lilly and Jordan form a bond.

Wally Pierce—Owner of the gas station and the best mechanic around. He's instantly attracted to Lilly. Their relationship blossoms throughout the series.

Carla Vargas—County social worker and Murphy's long-time girlfriend.

Flynn McCready—Owner of McCready's, a mix between an Irish Pub and a pool hall.

Sissy Carr—Spoiled daughter of the town's banker. Sissy is having an ongoing affair with local developer and shady con artist Kent Springer. Sissy went to school with Scott and gives Jordan a hard time every chance she gets.

Kent Springer—Local developer and sleaze, always working on his next scam. He wants the property owned by Jordan Phillips and will do whatever it takes to get it.

Joe Ferguson—Owner of Ferguson's Hardware. Grouch. Complainer.

Jack "Doc" Prescott—Former ER surgeon from San Francisco. Retired. But since moving to the area, he's actively providing medical care for residents.

Belle Prescott—Doc's wife who wants him to retire for good.

Reverend Whitcomb—Pastor of the Community Church. His wife's name is Dottie.

[Hidden Moon Bay - Book Two](#)

Emile Reed/Hayden Ryan—Arrives in Pelican Pointe during a storm, stranded at the side of the road. She's on the run from a mobster who has defrauded people out of millions of dollars.

Ethan Cody—Native American. Works as a deputy sheriff but longs to be a writer.

Brent Cody—Sheriff of Santa Cruz County and Ethan's older brother.

Marcus Cody—Father of Ethan and Brent. Marcus possesses psychic ability.

Lindeen Cody—Mother to Ethan and Brent.

Margie Rosterman—Owner of the Hilltop Diner, a 1950s throwback to a malt shop.

Max Bingham—Cook at the Hilltop Diner and Margie's boyfriend.

Julianne Dickinson—A first-grade teacher who lives in Santa Cruz in the same neighborhood as Marcus and Lindeen Cody. Lindeen often invites Julianne to supper, hoping Brent will take an interest in her.

Janie Pointer—Owner and stylist at the Snip N Curl and best friend to Sissy Carr.

Abby Pointer—Janie's younger sister. Her boyfriend Paul Bonner is serving in Afghanistan.

Wade Hawkins—Retired history professor

[Dancing Tides - Book Three](#)

Keegan Fanning—Marine biologist running the Fanning Marine Rescue Center her grandparents founded.

Cord Bennett—Former army soldier and California guardsman who served with Nick and Scott in Iraq. Because Cord feels guilty about his fiancée dying in a spree shooting, he wants to end it all.

Pete Alden—Keegan's right-hand man at the Fanning Rescue Center.

Drea Jennings—Owner of the flower shop. Her family owns The Plant Habitat, a landscape nursery in town.

Abby Anderson—Works at the Fanning Rescue Center.

Ricky Oden—Founder and lead singer of the local band, Blue Skies. Married to Donna Oden.

Bran Sullivan—Veterinarian, owner of Pelican Pointe Animal Clinic.

Joy Sullivan—Receptionist at the animal clinic and wife of Bran.

[Lighthouse Reef - Book Four](#)

Kinsey Wyatt—An up-and-coming lawyer who comes to Pelican Pointe to prove she's the real deal.

Logan Donnelly—Sculptor and artist who relocates to Pelican Pointe with an agenda.

Perry Altman—A five-star chef from Los Angeles who opened The Pointe, the fanciest place in town to eat.

Troy Dayton—A young carpenter who works hard at surviving everything life's thrown at him.

Mona Bingham—Max's daughter from Texas.

Carl Knudsen—Owns the pharmacy in town he inherited from his family. Married, but not happy. In his younger days ran with Kent Springer.

Jolene Sanders—Hostess at The Pointe. Works part-time as a clerk at Knudsen's Pharmacy.

Megan Donnelly—Logan's sister.

Starlight Dunes - Book Five

River Amandez—Thirty-three-year-old archaeologist who arrives in Pelican Pointe harboring a secret. She's in town to excavate the Chumash encampment uncovered during a mudslide.

Brent Cody—Forty-year-old sheriff of Santa Cruz County with a bad marriage under his belt and a not-so-stellar dating record. Brent has someone in his past who wants him dead.

Zach Dennison—Picks up odd jobs around town, trying to make ends meet. Zach lives with his sister, Bree Dennison.

Bree Dennison—Goes to community college in San Sebastian and works as a waitress at McCready's.

Ryder McLachlan—Cord's buddy from the army. New in Pelican Pointe from Philadelphia and looking to make a fresh start.

Ross Campbell—Pharmacist from Portland, relocates and buys the local pharmacy. Renames it Coastal Pharmacy.

Jill Campbell—Ross's wife.

Last Chance Harbor - Book Six

Julianne Dickinson—First-grade teacher, slated to be the principal of the newly renovated Pelican Pointe Elementary.

Ryder McLachlan—Cord's buddy from the Army. New in Pelican Pointe from Philadelphia and looking to make a fresh start.

John Dickinson—Julianne's dad.

Bree Dennison—Goes to community college in San Sebastian and works as a waitress at McCready's.

Malachi Rafferty—Owner of the T-Shirt Shop and single father with two teen girls, Sonnet and Sonoma.

Cleef Atkins—Lives south of town in an old farmhouse. His barn is stuffed with things he's collected over the years.

Drea Jennings—Cooper's sister.

Caleb Jennings—Cooper's brother.

Landon Jennings—Cooper's uncle and adopted father.

Shelby Jennings—Cooper's aunt and adopted mother.

Layne Richmond—Father of Cooper, Caleb, and Drea.

Eleanor Jennings Richmond—Mother of Cooper, Caleb, and Drea. In prison for murdering Layne Richmond and Brooke Caldwell.

Archer Gates—Son of Prissie Gates.

Sea Glass Cottage - Book Seven

Isabella Rialto—Known as Izzy, Logan’s mysterious renter who shows up in town and starts people talking about her past.

Thane Delacourt—Ex NFL linebacker who comes back to Pelican Pointe to raise his son.

Jonah Delacourt—Thane’s six-year-old son.

Fischer Robbins—Thane’s best friend from New York and a chef who helps Thane open Longboard Pizza.

Tommy Gates—Jonah’s best friend and Archer’s son.

Bobby Prather—Jonah’s bully at school

Greg Prather—Bobby’s dad. Works odd jobs to make ends meet.

Sydney Reed—An ER nurse in St. Louis and Hayden Cody’s sister. Sydney relocates to become Doc’s nurse.

Lavender Beach - Book Eight

Eastlyn Parker—Ex-army helicopter pilot, crashed her chopper in Iraq and lost the bottom part of her leg. She hasn’t adjusted to civilian life very well.

Cooper Jennings Richmond—Son of Layne Richmond and Eleanor Jennings. Photographer who traveled the world but now owns Layne’s Trains.

Drea Jennings—Cooper’s sister.

Caleb Jennings—Cooper’s brother.

Landon Jennings—Cooper’s uncle and adopted father.

Shelby Jennings—Cooper’s aunt and adopted mother.

Eleanor Jennings Richmond—Mother of Cooper, Caleb, and Drea.

Jonathan Matthews—Eleanor’s son.

Sandcastles Under the Christmas Moon - Book Nine

Quentin Blackwood—Doctor replacing Jack Prescott.

Sydney Reed—Sister of Hayden and Jack Prescott's nurse.

Beckham Dowling—Teenage boy, resourceful, savvy, and smart, worried about his grandmother's health.

Charlotte Dowling—Beckham's grandmother who's lived in town for years.

Faye DeMarco—Beckham's girlfriend.

Andy DeMarco—Faye's older brother, who takes care of her after their parents die in a car crash.

Winona Blackwood—Quentin's grandmother, also known as Nonnie.

Stone Graylander—Miwok tribal medicine man. Boyfriend of Quentin's grandmother, Nonnie.

Douglas Bradford—Former professor, moved to Pelican Pointe and became its mayor before Murphy. Owner of Bradford House.

John David Whitcomb—Pastor at the Community Church.

Dottie Whitcomb—John's wife.

Beneath Winter Sand – Book Ten

Caleb Jennings—Brother of Cooper and Drea. Works at The Plant Habitat with his parents, Landon and Shelby.

Hannah Summers—Owns a cleaning service. Picks up extra money on the weekends working as a waitress at The Shipwreck.

Micah Lambert—Hannah's little brother.

Cora Bigelow—Postmistress.

Lilly Pierce—Wally's wife who helps him run the gas station and auto repair shop.

Jessica St. John—Works for Cord at the animal clinic.

Jonathan Matthews—Eleanor's son.

Tahoe Jones—Caretaker of the Jennings' cabin.

Delbert Delashaw—Boyfriend of Eleanor Richmond.

Barton Pearson—Funeral director.

Geniece Darrow—Jill Campbell's little sister.

Ruthie May Porter—Neighbor to Tandy.

Tandy Gilliam—Neighbor to Ruthie May.

Durke Pedasco—Friend of Eastlyn from Bakersfield and owner of The Shipwreck.

Keeping Cape Summer – Book Eleven

Simon Bremmer—Ex-Army Ranger. Sniper. Twelve years in the military.

Amelia Langston—A woman Simon met on Cape Cod.

Gilly Grant—Nurse at Charlotte Dowling Memorial Hospital.

Delaney Bremmer—Simon's daughter.

Jayden Grant—Gilly's son.

Connie Grant—Gilly's mother.

Gretchen Bremmer—Simon's mother.

John Dickinson—Julianne's dad.

Gideon Nighthawk—The new surgeon from Chicago.

Ophelia Moore—Daycare director at the Community Church.

Aubree Wright—Nurse who works the day shift at the hospital.

Sheena Howser—Nurse at the hospital who fills in for everyone else.

Seth Larrabee—New minister at the Community Church.

Brad Radcliff—Owns a used car lot.

A Pelican Pointe Christmas – Book Twelve

Naomi Townsend—Vice-president at the bank.

Colton Del Rio—Ex-Army Ranger. Sniper. Eighteen years in the military.

Tabitha Porter, nicknamed Tibby—Foster child.

Madison Lee, Maddie for short—Foster child, whose mother has died.

The Coast Road Home – Book Thirteen

Marley Lennox—A newcomer to town from Wisconsin, she's stuck in town after a car accident damages her vehicle.

Gideon Nighthawk—Surgeon from Chicago

Shiloh Jones—Tahoe Jones's granddaughter who's moved to town and now works at The Plant Habitat.

Keva Riverton—Julianne's friend from Modesto who works at Reclaimed Treasures.

Bodie Jardine —Waitress at the Hilltop Diner.

Hollis Crow—A mild-mannered garbage man in love with Ellie Woodside.

Ellie Woodside—Part-time dogwalker and groomer. Works at the animal clinic with Cord. Part-time house cleaner. Works

with Hannah Summers cleaning houses.

Bette Magnuson—A woman whose husband left her who Marley befriends.

Lorelei “Lolly” Acoma—Gideon’s aunt who adopted him.

The Boathouse – Book Fourteen

Tucker Ferguson—Runs the hardware store after his father retired.

Bodie Jardine—Waitress at the Hilltop Diner.

Ellie Woodside—Part-time dogwalker and groomer. Works at the animal clinic with Cord. Part-time house cleaner. Works with Hannah Summers cleaning houses.

Hollis Crow—A mild-mannered garbage man in love with Ellie Woodside.

Keva Riverton—Bodie’s friend from Modesto who works at Reclaimed Treasures.

Oliver Tremaine—A troubled kid.

Kris Mallick—Oliver’s uncle.

Lucien Sutter—Artisan and local furniture maker, an all-around handyman.

Adam Harkness—Lawyer, visiting from San Sebastian.

Owen Kessler—Part-time worker at the hardware store.

Matty Cruz—Part-time worker at the hardware store.

Novah Hensley—Part-time worker at the hardware store.

Arthur Gaylord—Neighbor to Tucker. Birdwatcher.

Astor Gaylord—Married to Arthur. Birdwatcher.

Clive Ogilvie—Retired Army man who works the saw at the lumberyard.

Vernon Jackdaw—Junkyard owner.

[The Beachcomber – Book Fifteen](#)

Brogan Cole—CEO of Brinell Steel. Daughter of Rory Rossum Cole legendary rock star.

Lucien Sutter—Artisan and local furniture maker, an all-around handyman.

Rory Rossum Cole—Brogan’s rock star father, singer for the band Indigo. Rory was murdered in his studio while he worked on new material.

Graeme Sutter—Father of Lucien, lead guitarist for the band Indigo.

Kate Ashcroft—Lucien’s mother.

Nigel Brighton—Drummer for the band Indigo.

Gordon Mayer—Keyboard player for the band Indigo.

Maeve Calico—Rory’s long-time housekeeper and Brogan’s surrogate mother.

Sloane Cole—Rory’s fifth wife. Brogan’s stepmother.

Milo Lomax—Sloane’s son from a previous marriage. Brogan’s stepbrother.

Felicia Watts—Graeme’s Irish cook. Lucien’s surrogate mother and Maeve’s younger sister.

Angus Eden—College friend of Lucien’s and an actor.

Big Jack Milliken—Head of security for Rory Rossum Cole.

[Sandpiper Marsh – Book Sixteen](#)

Beckett Callahan—Ex-Navy SEAL, half owner of Terra Search & Recovery.

Colleen “Kelly” Ecklund—Professor of biology at Redwood State University, in town for research and to reforest the area’s

kelp beds.

Birch “Birk” Callahan—Ex-Navy SEAL, brother to Beckett, half owner of Terra Search & Recovery.

Tess Knightley—New hairstylist at the Snip N Curl.

Cassidy Kennison—Jordan’s new chef at the B&B.

Paula Bretton—Owner of The Perky Pelican, a coffee shop next door to the bookstore.

Chloe Bretton—Paula’s daughter.

Jade Weingarten—A true-crime blogger, websleuth, and resident of Santa Cruz trying to find out what happened to Brigid Callahan.

Debra Rattlin—Head of the Coastal Canine Search Unit.

Betty Callahan—Mother to Birk, Beckett, and Brigid.

Craig Callahan—Father to Birk, Beckett, and Brigid.

Brigid Callahan—Sister to Birk and Beckett. She disappeared five and a half years ago after drinking at a bar in Santa Cruz.

Echoes at Driftwood Cottage – Book Seventeen

Rowan Eaton—Graphic designer from San Diego, who inherited her grandmother’s house.

Daniel Cardiff—Owner of the Vanilla Bean Machine, an ice cream shop.

Theo Woodsong—New officer from Seattle who joins the Pelican Pointe Police Department.

Kiki Hyland—Works part-time for Daniel at Vanilla Bean Machine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Vickie McKeehan has thirty-nine novels to her credit and counting. Vickie's novels have consistently appeared on Amazon's Top 100 lists in Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense and Mystery / Thriller. She writes what she loves to read—heartwarming romance laced with suspense, heart-pounding thrillers, and riveting mysteries. Vickie loves to write about compelling and down-to-earth characters in settings that stay with her readers long after they've finished her books. She makes her home in Southern California .

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