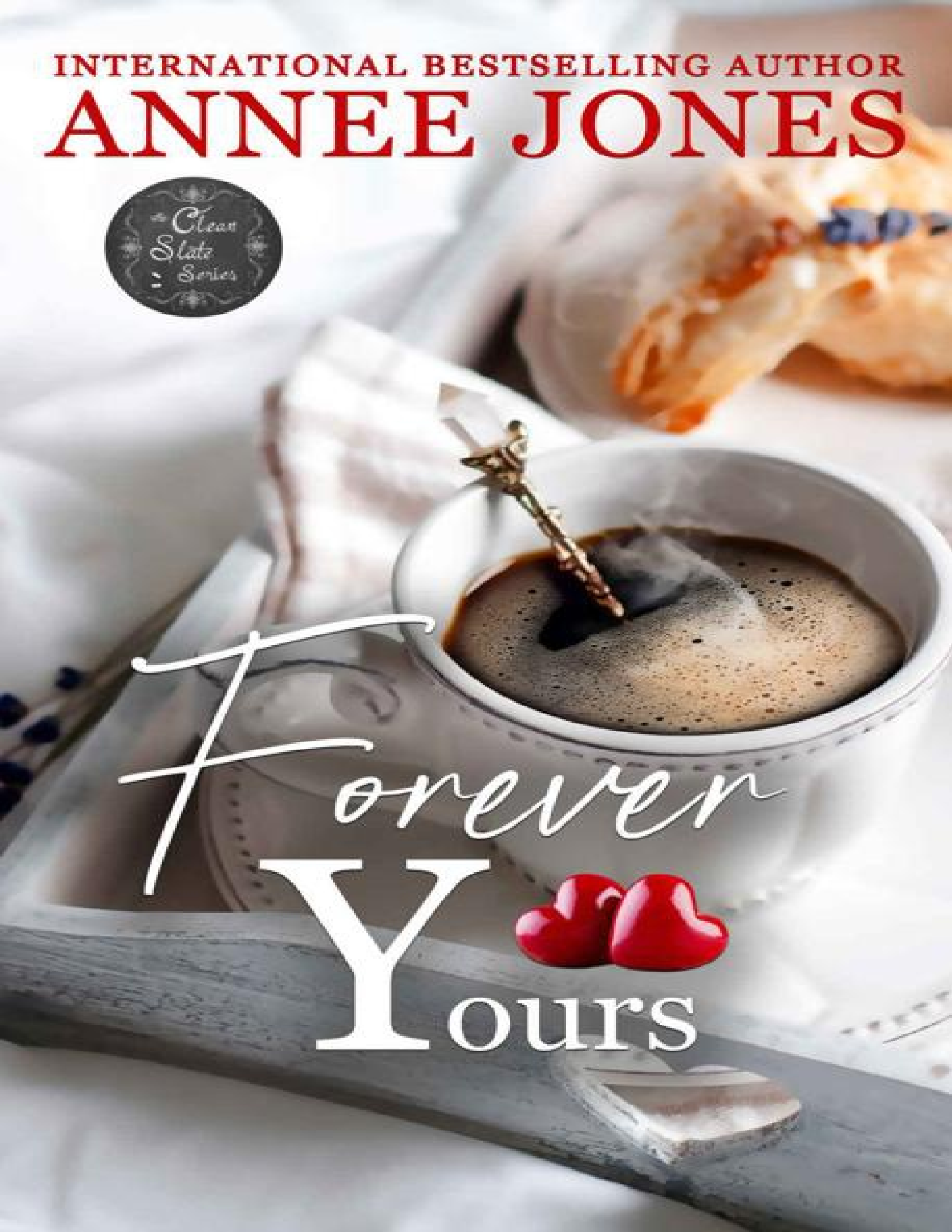


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANNEE JONES



*F*orever
Yours

Two small, glossy red hearts are positioned to the right of the word "Yours".

*Forever
Yours*



Annee Jones

Contents

[Contents](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Reflection Questions](#)

[Recipes](#)

[More Books From Annee](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright

FOREVER YOURS

©2021 Anne Kemerer Jones

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded, or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the author's permission.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale, or organizations is entirely coincidental. The author does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

Cover Designer: Black Widow Books, V. McKeivitt

Editor: Redline Editing

Scripture from the New International Version

Recipes from The Denton Woman's Club Cookbook

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To those who offered me the chance,
you know who you are.

Cast of Characters

PEOPLE

Callie Winthrop—Chicago PR consultant

Frances Pembroke—“Aunt Fran,” Callie’s aunt, owner of Harbor Inn in Seaview, FL

David Pembroke—Fran’s husband and Callie’s uncle (*deceased*)

Arthur Winthrop—Callie’s father and owner of Winthrop Public Relations and Advertising

Molly Winthrop—Callie’s mother (*deceased*)

Hunter Sandstrom—Callie’s Chicago boyfriend, account executive at Winthrop PR

Jackson Thorne—Tampa contractor

Rob Thorne—Jackson’s brother

Tracy Thorne—Jackson’s sister-in-law and Rob’s wife

Bradley and Penny—Rob and Tracy’s children

Michelle—Jackson’s former girlfriend

Amberley Drake—Dallas weather reporter

Benjamin Green—Atlanta math professor

Tony Rizzoli—New Jersey salesman

Margaret Evans—Ohio quilt shop owner

Thelma Ward—CEO of Forever Yours matchmaking agency

Sarah-Jane—Thelma’s assistant

Doug Lambert—St. Petersburg, FL, police officer

Deborah Bixby—Tennessee music teacher

PETS

Liza Minnelli—Thelma’s cat

Levi—Fran and David’s Labrador retriever (*deceased*)

Peanut Butter—Yorkipoo puppy

Prologue



CALLIE

Callie smoothed the sleeve of her blue cocktail dress. The holiday office party was a success. Streamers and helium-filled balloons in gold and white decorated the expansive conference room of Winthrop Public Relations and Advertising. The event planner had the large mahogany table and accompanying leather chairs placed into temporary storage and brought in small, round dining tables with matching chairs covered in gold and white linens. Atop the confetti-strewn tables, candles flickered in crystal votive holders. Buffet tables were set up along one side of the room and currently held steaming trays of beef tenderloin, chicken au vin, scalloped potatoes, and braised asparagus. The smaller dessert buffet offered an assortment of the finest chocolate truffles, tortes, and shortbreads.

Callie looked around the room at her colleagues and their significant others clad in festive, jewel-toned colors as they laughed and ate. She should be happy. This was her third year working for her father's company since graduating from college with a degree in marketing and communications. As Arthur Winthrop often remarked, she was already doing well at making a name for herself in the business world. Yet, she couldn't help but feel like something was missing. Her boyfriend, Hunter Sandstrom, was also part of the company and highly esteemed by her father. In fact, the men would often get together on weekends to join other associates for rounds of golf. Hunter was everything a girl could want—smart, successful, and good-looking. Always the perfect gentleman. He loved to call them *Chicago's next power couple*. Wasn't that a good thing? Callie's smile

wavered a little. *What was wrong with her?*

Maybe she was just tired, having worked overtime again the night before on a project deadline. She sighed. Working overtime was certainly nothing new for her. She relished the weekends when she had time to give in to her passion for cooking and baking. She enjoyed experimenting with different flavor combinations and spices, loving the tactile sensations of kneading out dough or practicing her knife skills. A ‘silly little hobby,’ her father called it. However, Callie couldn’t help but look forward to the minute she could go into her kitchen and put on her favorite blue-and-white gingham apron. She was always careful to clean up thoroughly after herself, even though she had a regular weekly housekeeper at her father’s insistence. He reminded her that she was better off delegating such time-consuming chores so that she could devote herself to more worthwhile endeavors, like climbing the career ladder.

Still, Callie felt terrible for the poor cleaning lady and didn’t want to cause her more hardship. Besides, she had to admit she actually enjoyed the hard work of scrubbing and liked the immediate satisfaction it brought from a job well done, but sometimes, she wondered whether all the money in the world would ever be worth the countless hours she spent staring at her computer screen.

Callie’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of clinking glass. Hunter stood in the center of the room, calling for everyone’s attention. His dark gray Brooks Brothers suit showed off the body of the former football athlete and complimented his thick blond hair.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he smiled broadly, “may I have your attention, please.” His eyes roamed over the crowd before settling on her. *What was going on?* He hadn’t told her he would be making a speech tonight. “Callie, could you come up here and join me?” He gestured towards her, leaving her no real choice but to set her water glass on the closest table before winding her way toward him.

He knew she really didn’t like to be the center of attention. As she walked past the rigid form of her father with his steel-gray hair and chiseled jaw, seated next to one of the company’s attorneys at the head table, she whispered, “Dad, what’s Hunter up to?” Arthur shrugged and grinned at her. *Humph.* That was not a good sign. Not at all.

“Callie,” Hunter roared as he grabbed her hand, “we’ve been dating now for two years, hon. I’ve seen the way you dedicate yourself to the business and take pride in the finer things in life—like me.” He laughed, pausing for a moment to enjoy his own joke. Callie didn’t feel the slightest bit amused.

“I know we haven’t talked about this,” he continued, “but hey, I know you feel the same way I do, babe. We are Chicago’s next power couple, after all. What could be better than making it official? Let’s take this city by storm, sweetheart.” He dropped to one knee and reached into his coat pocket, drawing out a small black velvet-covered box. *This can’t be happening*, Callie thought as beads of cold sweat began to form on her forehead. Hunter popped the box open with his index finger, revealing a gigantic solitaire. “Say you’ll be my wife,” he said, looking intently into her eyes. Callie could feel gazes shifting in her direction as the room grew silent.

“I... I...” she stuttered, then promptly burst into tears and ran from the room.

Chapter One



CALLIE

Callie stared out the airplane window into the opaque whiteness of a cumulus cloud, reflecting over the furor of the past six months following Hunter's proposal. Arthur Winthrop did not hide his disappointment in his daughter, calling her into his office on at least a weekly basis to ask what had gotten into her after that atrocious display of emotion. After the death of Callie's mother from breast cancer not long after she was born, Arthur had done the best he could to make sure Callie had received the very best of everything, from nannies to private schools, tutors, wardrobe consultants, and membership in the most elite Chicago clubs. How could she refuse to marry his protégé, whom he had hand-picked to be the future Vice-President of his company as well as his son-in-law?

Callie sighed. She agreed that on paper, Hunter was perfect. But was *perfect* what she really wanted? Callie didn't know anymore. All she knew for certain was that something was still missing. Thank goodness for Aunt Fran, her mother's older sister, who had recently invited Callie to spend the summer helping at the bed-and-breakfast she ran in Seaview, Florida. Her husband had passed away the year prior, and she confided to Callie that she would welcome the company of family, as well as someone to assist her with the paperwork and general management of the inn. ***Forever Yours***, a well-known matchmaking agency, would be hosting a getaway vacation week for people ages 25-39 in the picturesque seaside town that summer. Hence, all the rooms at the B&B were booked.

The clouds suddenly parted, revealing an aquamarine sky matched by the crystal blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico below. The beauty of the scene broke into Callie's reverie, and she couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe this summer would help her figure out what she needed. Regardless, at least it would be a nice break from work and give her and Hunter some space. They had both agreed that his proposal was probably too hasty. However, their relationship felt decidedly strained ever since, and they didn't see each other as often outside of work.

The plane began its descent, and Callie placed the paperback she was reading back into her tote. It would be nice to spend some time with her aunt as, other than her uncle's funeral, she hadn't been to Seaview since she was in high school. Maybe she would even get a chance to do some cooking at the inn. Callie smiled at the thought of baking for the guests. She was glad she had brought some recipe books with her and looked forward to experimenting with the fresh seasonal fruit of Florida in her muffins and pastries.

The plane landed smoothly and coasted along the tarmac to the gate. Callie looked out over the palm trees and pastel-colored houses. Florida was just as beautiful as she remembered. A few minutes later, she hurried through the airport to baggage claim, anxious to find her aunt amidst the throng of people. However, she needn't have worried—Aunt Fran couldn't be missed in her bright yellow sundress and orange scarf with a motif of what appeared to be smiling terriers wearing red collars. Callie squealed and rushed forward as her aunt opened her arms wide to envelop her in a warm hug. She smelled the scent of gardenia from Fran's perfume as she leaned into her aunt's round softness. Tears pricked her eyes as she suddenly missed the mother she had never known.

"Let me look at you, dear." Aunt Fran's grin was wide enough to reveal the dimples in her cheeks as she spun Callie around. "Gracious, do they have any food in Chicago?" she jokingly asked. "I think this calls for some good Southern shrimp and grits tonight. Why don't I treat you to dinner at the Seafood Shack, as our guests don't start arriving until tomorrow?"

Callie's mouth watered, and she nodded her acceptance. "Yum,

that sounds delicious. However, if I agree to let you buy dinner tonight, would it be too much to ask whether you'd allow me to make breakfast for you tomorrow along with any guests who arrive at the inn in time?"

"Absolutely! I do happen to recall your particular knack for baking, and as you know, darling, cooking is not my forte. Your sweet Uncle David was in charge of the kitchen, bless that man's heart. I'd much rather go antiquing and show off the collectibles in the inn's rooms. I like to change up the décor each season to keep the place looking fresh and provide guests something new to look forward to if they decide to come back. Decorating and gardening are my specialties."

Just then, Callie noticed her suitcase coming down the conveyor and leaped forward to grab it before it passed where they were standing. As she did so, she accidentally bumped into a man wearing jeans and a casual button-down with the sleeves rolled up, revealing tanned arms and a pair of strong, calloused hands. His dark eyes met hers.

"Here, let me help you," he said as he leaned forward and caught her suitcase with one hand, lifting it easily and setting it down in front of her.

"Thanks so much," Callie murmured, a blush creeping into her cheeks under his gaze. "I apologize for nearly mowing you over like that. Guess I was just a little overly enthusiastic."

"No problem," the guy said. Callie estimated he was probably about her age, late twenties to early thirties at most. She noticed the hint of smile lines beginning to form around his eyes as he gave her a wink. "I'm looking forward to slowing down some this week. I think some time at the beach is good medicine for us Type A's who are used to rushing around all the time, right?"

Callie laughed. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Aunt Fran tapped her watch. "Honey, we need to get going if we don't want to wait an hour before we can get a table at the restaurant."

"Right," Callie said and grabbed the handle of her suitcase as the guy gave her a quick wave goodbye. As she headed towards the sliding

automatic exit doors, she couldn't help but steal a quick glance back over her shoulder.

Aunt Fran nodded, her gray curls bouncing. "Um-hm," she said quietly, "I think a summer at the seaside is just what the doctor ordered."

~*~

JACKSON

Cute girl, Jackson Thorne thought to himself, turning back to the suitcases rolling down the conveyor. He sighed as he spied his duffel and hauled it up over his shoulder. He needed to find the rental car desk where he had reserved his vehicle for the week. He'd be spending the night at his brother-and sister-in-law's house outside Destin tonight before making his way to Seaview in the morning. He loved seeing them as well as his six-year-old nephew Bradley and four-year-old niece Penny but had to admit that somewhere deep down, he couldn't help but feel envious, especially after what happened five years ago. Rob had it all—a great job as a patent attorney, a loving wife, and adorable children.

Meanwhile, Jackson had thrown himself into his business as a general contractor, often working seven days a week. Granted, Thorne Custom Homes was now highly successful and, in fact, had recently been featured in a *Top 10 Best Local Companies* magazine issue in Tampa. Despite the financial success and employing a sufficient number of highly skilled employees, Jackson didn't feel right taking time off. Besides, what would he do? His condo was certainly spacious enough, and he'd tricked it out with a large flat screen tv and comfortable leather furniture. It was your typical all-American bachelor pad. But sitting in front of the tv by himself just wasn't his style. He'd tried dating here and there over the past few years, but no lasting relationships ever seemed to materialize with any of the women he met through the popular dating apps.

What in the world was I thinking agreeing to this? he wondered, searching for his car among the aisles in the parking garage. Finally, he located his vehicle and slid the key into the ignition. Rob had talked him into signing up for a matchmaking getaway vacation in Seaview,

hosted by the ***Forever Yours*** agency, which was supposedly quite well known for its high rate of successful romantic matches. However, he just couldn't see it working for him. He needed to be with someone who would understand what he'd been through and how it had changed him. Could a woman like that be out there? Jackson thought back to the strawberry blonde who had bumped into him at baggage claim. He smiled, recalling the light dusting of freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her pert nose and their easy banter. She looked sweet, though certainly a bit harried. He shook his head. *I'll never see her again anyway*, he thought as he clicked the radio on and drove out into the bright sunshine.

Chapter Two



CALLIE

Callie rubbed her eyes and stretched. Sighing with contentment after the first night of solid rest she could remember in a long time, she snuggled back underneath the light comforter that topped the vintage wrought-iron bed and glanced over at the clock on the bedside table. Five-thirty am. She was used to getting up early for work and had difficulty sleeping past her usual wake-up time. She looked around the room in the semi-darkness. Her aunt and uncle had lovingly renovated the large Victorian home when they purchased it, looking to turn it into a beachfront inn for vacationers traveling to the quaint seaside town.

Harbor Inn featured a wrap-around porch surrounded by a lush yard with sweet olive and flowering dogwood trees. Aunt Fran had filled the garden beds with purple hydrangeas and daylilies in yellow and white. Sunny red geraniums in terracotta pots sat on either side of the wide front steps. Inside, the drawing-room featured distressed furniture with plush cushions in a shabby chic style. Crochet afghans lay over the backs of the couches, creating inviting places for guests to sit and talk or read. The walls featured paintings of maritime life by local artists, and an enormous brick fireplace sat at the far end of the room. On the mantle, Aunt Fran had placed delicate porcelain figurines of embracing couples on lace doilies while seashell and rock collections were contained in bowls of sea glass of varying sizes and colors. An eye-catching ship-in-a-bottle was at the center of the arrangement.

She and Uncle David had named each of the bedroom suites after something specific to the seaside locale, and the rooms were decorated accordingly. Callie was in the Lighthouse suite. Hence, the room's focal point was the photographic prints of lighthouses on the wall opposite the bed. A soft rug covered the Birchwood floor, and a rustic bench held extra blankets and pillows. A small writing desk and chairs sat in the corner. The room had an en suite tiled bathroom with a pedestal sink and claw-foot tub. Homemade potpourri made from the lavender in the side garden perfumed the air. The suite was towards the back of the house, and Callie's window looked out over the sloping backyard and sandy path that wound down through the long saltgrass to a white sandy beach and the vast gulf beyond.

Pulling aside the sheets, Callie rose and dressed in a pair of khakis and a light green sweater. Tiptoeing downstairs and into the kitchen, she discovered several bowls of fresh fruit set on the large island and was delighted to find the pantry stocked with the ingredients she would need for baking. Humming, Callie delved into her favorite hobby, and soon, her mouth was watering with the smell of baking muffins. She had chosen to make a passionfruit and raspberry filling to celebrate the arrival of the guests and their hopes of finding love during the ensuing week of matchmaking events planned by *Forever Yours*.

As she was whisking eggs for a spring frittata with smoked salmon and fresh asparagus, Aunt Fran came into the kitchen. She was wearing a long jean skirt and knit twin set with a long necklace of dog breed shapes strung together with colorful beads. Callie couldn't help but admire the unusual piece. "My best friend Janice gifted me this necklace after our beloved chocolate lab, Levi, crossed the rainbow bridge not long after David's passing." Aunt Fran's eyes misted over as she continued. "I sure miss them both dearly, but it brings me peace to know that they are together in heaven. It is true what they say about dogs being man's best friend." Callie reached over and squeezed her aunt's hand.

"Have you considered getting another dog?" she asked.

"I have, honey, but I just haven't felt like taking the time to search for one. I suppose when the time is right. In the meantime,

we've always advertised that Harbor Inn is pet-friendly, so I've taken joy whenever guests show up with their furry critters in tow." Aunt Fran went back to business, pointing out where pet food and supplies were kept in the walk-in pantry.

"Now, I don't know how it's possible after last night's supper, but I am starving!" she exclaimed as she poured a bag of gourmet coffee beans into the grinder for the French press. "Whatever you are making smells delicious. Guests are scheduled to begin checking in today after 8:00 am. We typically serve a full breakfast and offer a light lunch of sandwiches or soups that can be prepared to go. Around 3:00 pm, I like to set out an assortment of snacks and beverages. People are on their own for dinner, as most enjoy sampling the local restaurants, although there are exceptions for those who prefer to stay here. Our refrigerator is certainly big enough to hold leftovers upon request. Jeannie helps me with the housekeeping duties. She arrives daily at nine."

Callie nodded as she listened to the information from her aunt regarding the inn's schedule and policies as she finished washing the last of the breakfast dishes. The check-in area was located next to the kitchen so they could hear if anyone came through the front door, especially as Aunt Fran had placed a silver bell bracelet around the doorknob, which would jingle slightly upon movement. Callie laid a selection of toast, butter, and jam on the buffet in the adjoining dining room, while Fran fetched pitchers of fresh-squeezed orange juice and carafes of coffee and hot water for tea.

Callie heard the bell jingle from the front door as they set out the muffin trays and frittata bake. "Could you finish bringing in the serving ware, dear, so I can greet our new arrival and show him or her around?" asked Aunt Fran as she headed toward the receptionist area.

"Of course," Callie said and quickly finished up preparing the breakfast buffet for the arriving guests.

Chapter Three



CALLIE

As Aunt Fran was checking in the first guest, Callie made herself a plate and quickly ate breakfast so that she could help with reception duties and give her aunt a chance to sit down. After she put her dishes in the kitchen, she walked into the hallway as Fran was showing an overweight, middle-aged woman with somewhat disheveled hair and a pair of thick glasses into the dining room. “Callie, this is Margaret Evans, who will be staying with us for the week in the Tidepool suite. She is here from Ohio and was just telling me about the quilt shop that she runs there.” Margaret smiled shyly and nodded, causing her glasses to slip down her nose. “Yes, I love to sew and collect fabrics and patterns. I also do needlecrafts and brought my knitting with me as it helps calm my nerves.”

“I’d love to learn how to knit,” Callie said. “That is something I’ve always wanted to do but never found the time.”

“I’d be happy to teach you,” Margaret offered. “I have extra needles that you can use.”

“That is so kind of you!” Callie exclaimed. “I’d be happy to pay you for your time.”

Just then, the front door jingled again. “Why don’t you two sit down to breakfast and let me take care of the new arrivals,” Callie said.

“Thank you, dear.” Aunt Fran led Margaret over to the buffet as Callie walked to the reception desk.

Standing there was a man with shiny black hair wearing a shirt

unbuttoned several buttons too low, revealing a bright gold chain against a mass of curly, dark chest hair. His pudgy fingers sported several chunky diamond rings. “Hiya, sweetheart,” he said with an unmistakable Jersey accent, “how you doin’ today?” He looked her up and down with clear admiration for what he saw, making her shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“Um, name please?” Callie asked, looking over the bookings.

“Anthony Rizzoli, at your service. Call me Tony.” Callie found him in the appointment book assigned to the Tugboat suite.

“Can I help with your bags?” she asked.

“Heck no. I couldn’t let a pretty lady like you lift a finger,” he said with a loud guffaw.

Callie coughed into her hand and showed him to the second-floor bedroom. Handing him a keychain featuring a sterling silver miniature tugboat, she was grateful for the sound of the bell jingling again, and excusing herself, walked back down the stairs.

In front of the desk stood a woman with platinum blonde hair that looked like it had been dyed to within an inch of its life. Her fuchsia dress was probably three sizes too small and revealed what Callie thought was an entirely inappropriate amount of cleavage. She tottered on four-inch heels and fluttered fake eyelashes, frowning when one stuck in her eyebrow. She quickly whisked it free with a pink fingernail. “Hi, I’m Amberley Drake. I’m here to attend the ***Forever Yours*** events this week.” She set a Gucci handbag on the counter. Her voice oozed Southern twang. “I can’t wait to meet all the hot men. I’m more excited than a bunch of chiggers at a playground!” She flashed a credit card at Callie.

“We hope you have a pleasant time.” Callie smiled as she completed the check-in process. “You are in our Starfish Suite, right up the stairs to the right. I could help with your luggage if you like.”

“Oh yes, that would be great.” Amberley pointed at two oversized designer suitcases. Callie groaned inwardly as Amberley gripped the banister and began climbing the staircase ahead of her, leaving her alone to haul up the bags. “What I wouldn’t give for an elevator right about now,” she muttered under her breath. Amberley smacked her

gum from the top of the stairs. “Do y’all have lounge chairs for the beach?” she asked. “I don’t want to get dirtier than I have to while I’m working on my tan. Also, what is the clothing policy here? Like, can I go topless? I hate tan lines. Especially as I’m on TV, you know. I’m the weather girl on DLLS 4 News in Dallas.”

“Oh, that’s neat. But, um, no, I’m pretty sure the city doesn’t allow nudity on this beach,” Callie said, fervently hoping that was true. “And, yes, we do offer a variety of beach chairs, umbrellas, and sports supplies like snorkeling equipment, volleyball and badminton nets, and bicycles off the back deck. At the top of the path, you’ll find a water pump that you can use to rinse the sand off your feet before coming back inside.”

Amberley clapped her hands. “Awesome. I’ll get changed into my bikini and get right out there.”

Callie handed her the key and pointed towards the hand-painted starfish design over the top of the doorway to the aptly named room. Hurrying back downstairs, Callie grabbed a cold glass of iced tea and brought it with her back to the front desk. She spied Tony Rizzoli as she glanced up from the appointment book. “The dining room is to the left,” she said as she tried to figure out which guests had yet to arrive and which bedroom suites Fran had assigned them. She needed to help her aunt invest in an online booking system.

“Hey, I’m signed up for a round of golf at the Delmont Links Club this afternoon,” Tony said loudly. “Any idea how to get there? Maybe you can join me, show me around a little, whaddya say?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I need to stay to help my aunt.” Callie swallowed. Hopefully, once the official matchmaking events began, Tony would focus his attention elsewhere. She pulled a folded map out of the drawer and spread it flat on the counter. Taking a red ballpoint pen, she carefully traced the route for him.

“Much appreciated, dollface.” Tony put the map into his back pocket. “I’m off to get some grub before I wow everyone with my swing.” He stepped back and mimicked swinging a golf club. “Oh yeah, that’s a hole in one right there, baby!” He rubbed his thick hands together and winked at her as he headed for the dining room.

Callie rolled her eyes and took another sip of her sweet tea. A few minutes later, the door opened again. A very tall, thin man with ginger-colored, thinning hair and a beard stood in the doorway. He squinted down at the crumpled list of directions in his right hand, muttering, “Left at the stop sign, go west two miles...now, did I take a left or right?” He scratched his head and peered at Callie. “Ma’am, I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m looking for the Harbor Inn.”

She smiled kindly at the confused guy. “Then I’m happy to tell you you’ve come to the right place,” she said. “Welcome to Harbor Inn.”

“Ah,” he said, “this is great, just great.” He looked around at the decor. “And do I detect the scent of something delicious of a baked variety?”

“Why, yes, you do. If you allow me to take your suitcase up to your room, I’d be happy to show you to the breakfast buffet.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I sure am hungry. I just came in from Atlanta, and they just gave us a tiny bag of nuts on the plane.”

“I completely understand,” Callie said. “May I have your name so that I can provide you with the key to your suite?”

“Name’s Benjamin Green. I teach math at the university.”

“Very good, sir. I have you in our Seashell Suite.” She placed the seashell-emblazoned key chain into his hand. “It is on the second floor, third door on your right. Each of our suites’ theme emblems has been painted by hand over the doorway, so you know which is which.”

Benjamin sauntered down the hall to join the others in the dining room, passing Aunt Fran as she bustled to and from the kitchen, clearing dishes and refreshing the beverages. Callie rose to help her, noting that the last two guests weren’t due to arrive until later that day. They included Thelma Ward, who was the CEO of ***Forever Yours***, and another of the event’s attendees, a man by the name of Jackson Thorne.

“I wonder what type of guy he is,” Callie mused as she worked alongside her aunt the rest of the morning.

Chapter Four



JACKSON

The sun was starting to set, casting a rosy glow over the horizon. Jackson had enjoyed spending time with his brother's family, helping grill hamburgers and hot dogs and horsing around with the kids in the backyard swimming pool. His sister-in-law, Tracy, patted his arm as he said his goodbyes after dinner last night. "Just try to be open to meeting people," she said in a motherly tone. "Smile and be yourself." Jackson scowled in response. Rob laughed and gave him a thump on the back.

"I know you guys are just looking out for me," Jackson acknowledged, "but I trust you're not getting your hopes up that I'm actually going to meet *the one* at any of these matchmaking events this week."

"Relax, brother," Rob said. "Look, if you meet a nice woman and feel a connection, great, and if not, you've earned yourself a vacation, anyway. Besides, your social skills could definitely use some practice," he joked good naturedly.

Jackson smiled. "I've got to admit, that's probably true." He loaded his duffel bag into the car. "I'll let you know how it goes." They waved at him as he backed the Honda Accord out of the driveway.

An hour later, he pulled into the small gravel lot beside the Harbor Inn. The trees waved gently in the warm evening breeze as he walked up the sidewalk towards the entrance. Just then, a loud roar from a tiny sports car speeding down the street disturbed the quiet. With a final screech, it sailed into the last parking spot. A large woman

who appeared to be in her 60s with teased black hair and a purse almost the size of her car got out and slammed the door.

“I need Marcy on the line right now!” she yelled into her cell phone. “The packets for tomorrow’s welcome event should have been delivered yesterday! I’m giving you one hour to find them!” She punched the End Call button with a harrumph. “It’s like herding cats!” she exclaimed to Jackson. Jackson thought it best to agree as he climbed the porch steps and held the door open for the woman, who brushed past in a cloud of too much perfume and stopped at the reception announcing loudly, “Thelma Ward, CEO, *Forever Yours* Agency.”

Jackson couldn’t quite hear the response, as whoever was behind the counter had bent down to retrieve something from a lower drawer or cabinet.

“We’re glad to welcome you to the Harbor Inn. Here is your key, ma’am,” said the receptionist kindly as she stood.

Jackson couldn’t help but do a double take when he recognized the girl from baggage claim, who just then caught his glance and seemed equally as surprised. He laughed as he extended his hand. “Hey, what a small world. Jackson Thorne, pleased to meet you... again.” The woman grinned as a pink blush crept into the apples of her cheeks. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Callie Winthrop. I’m helping my aunt with managing the inn this week.” Thelma Ward looked from one to the other of them. “Oooh, I like this, Liza,” she seemed to say to her purse. Both Jackson and Callie looked at her.

“Oh, I almost forgot to introduce you,” Thelma said, opening her bag and pulling out a very ruffled-looking tuxedo cat wearing a jeweled collar. “This is Liza Minnelli.” Glancing at the clock on the wall, she added, “And it’s time for her snack.” She transferred the cat to the crook of her left arm and kept rustling within her purse with her right hand, finally drawing out a bag of Cheez Puffs. She popped open the bag and took out a single puff, holding it out to the cat, who began eagerly licking off the bright orange powder.

Jackson didn’t know whether to be amused or disgusted, and from the confused look on her face, he was pretty sure Callie was feeling the same way. “Luckily, we are a pet-friendly establishment,”

she quickly recovered, resuming the role of hospitable hostess. “You’ll find extra pet supplies in the pantry off the kitchen, right that way,” she pointed.

“Oh, thanks, dear, I’ll just get settled in my suite first. The Wheelhouse room, right?” Callie nodded as Thelma hurried off with Liza Minnelli and the Cheez Puffs.

Jackson stepped up to the counter as Callie tucked a strand of her sandy-colored hair behind her ear. She was even prettier now that he had a chance to really look at her closely. He couldn’t help but wonder if she had a boyfriend. She held a key out to him. “You’re in the Driftwood suite,” she said. “It will be the third door on your left on the second floor.”

“Thanks. Guess I’d better get some rest. Have a good night.” Even though he wanted to talk to her further, she was obviously working, and he didn’t want to risk bothering her or coming off as intrusive. An hour later, after he’d unpacked and finished washing up for bed, he took out a thriller and settled back against the pillow he’d propped on the bed, determined to get Callie Winthrop off his mind before the official matchmaking began.

~*~

CALLIE

Callie awoke with a start and looked at her alarm clock. She hadn’t even realized she’d finally drifted off after tossing and turning most of the night. The shock of seeing Jackson again filled her with anticipation and excitement. *But why?* She already had a boyfriend. She shouldn’t be feeling like a teenager with a crush on the new guy at school. Throwing back the covers, she decided the best remedy would be to focus her mind on something else—quick. Even though it was earlier than she usually got up, she figured a bit of extra time should help her prepare some especially fine breakfast dishes for her guests as they kicked off the weeklong series of events.

Callie looked through her closet with dissatisfaction. When was the last time she’d taken the time to update her wardrobe? None of her outfits looked appealing. Finally, she chose a simple jean skirt and

twin set, opting for a classic look with pearl studs and no makeup save a swipe of mascara. She pulled her hair into a ponytail as she headed towards the kitchen and took out her favorite recipe book, compiled by women in some small southern town that she had discovered at a used bookstore. Each woman had included a small tidbit about the history of the dish, whether it was handed down from their ancestors or held a special religious or sentimental meaning. Callie liked to imagine the women and their lives as she cooked and hoped the care and connection she felt translated into the food she prepared.

For today, Callie chose fresh apple waffles, a sausage souffle, and crispy bacon. Aunt Fran joined her in the kitchen and turned the radio to the oldies station. A couple of hours later, as they finished setting the buffet, the guests began to wander into the dining room, eyeing each other as they filled their cups with coffee and tea.

Aunt Fran grabbed a napkin and offered it along with a plate to Benjamin Green, who had just managed to spill his coffee down his shirt. "Please take a plate and feel free to help yourselves, everyone," Fran announced as she passed plates to Amberley and Margaret, who were both entering the room, Amberley yawning while Margaret appeared well-rested and bright-eyed. "Thank you," Margaret said softly as she accepted a plate, exclaiming in delight when she saw the apple waffles and accompanying cinnamon sauce on the table. "Oh, that looks fabulous." She generously spooned the sauce over the waffles, added fresh red and green apple slices, and sprinkled a few walnuts on top from the side dish.

Amberley, who was sporting another pair of stiletto heels and a full face of makeup despite the early hour, selected a small portion of the souffle, a couple of pieces of bacon, and some fresh fruit. "So, where are you from?" she asked Margaret. "Do you recognize me? Because I'm kind of famous, you know. I'm on TV." Margaret's eyebrows knit together as she looked at Amberley and sat down at the dining table. "Um, maybe you look kind of familiar, but I'm not really sure? I'm from Ohio."

"Oh then, probably not. I'm the weather girl for a Dallas news station." Amberley looked a little crestfallen. "How about you?" She turned to Professor Green. "My name is Amberley Drake." Looking a

bit shocked to be addressed directly by the voluptuous blonde, he replied, “Ben Green from Atlanta, nice to meet you.”

“Well, you look like a math professor,” Amberley said as she popped a blueberry into her mouth.

“Then you would be entirely correct,” Ben smiled but then asked worriedly, “Is that a good thing?”

Amberley laughed and chugged some orange juice. “Oh, yeah, I tend to go for nerdy types. You know how to treat women with respect.”

Tony Rizzoli strode into the room and began heaping food onto his plate. He looked around as everyone stared at the pile, slowly forming a small mountain on his plate. “Hey, I’m Italian, what can I say? We like big food.” He grinned and sat down next to Amberley, eyeing her up and down as he said, “Now, how’re you doing, sweetheart?” She rolled her eyes in response and muttered, “Like I was saying...”

Callie stifled a laugh. She was starting to see why her aunt wanted to own a bed-and-breakfast. She was having more fun already than she’d had in the three years she’d been working at the firm.

“What did I miss?” asked Jackson as he walked purposefully toward the buffet and accepted a breakfast plate from Fran, who was refilling her mug with hot water for tea.

“Hey, man,” nodded Tony in greeting between mouthfuls, “I think the ladies around here should introduce themselves.”

“Yes, why don’t we all introduce ourselves since you and the other guests will be staying with us for the week?” asked Fran, who had sat down next to Margaret.

Jackson chose a seat beside Callie as he greeted everyone. “Good morning to you all. I’m Jackson Thorne. I run a contracting business out of Tampa.”

Margaret piped in, “Oh, it’s nice to meet another business owner. My name is Margaret, and I’m new to being an entrepreneur myself. However, I’m finding it to be very stressful. I’m afraid I’m much better at doing the crafts I sell in my shop, such as knitting and quilting, than selling to my customers. I just don’t think I’m cut out for marketing.”

“My mother was a quilter. God rest her soul,” commented Tony as he put his fork down to make the sign of the cross.

“Good morning, everyone!” Thelma called loudly as she came rushing into the room, her leather tote bag banging against her hip. Callie could smell her perfume from across the table and tried not to wrinkle her nose, grateful for the gentler aromas wafting from the sweet cinnamon sauce and peppery sausage on her plate. Thelma grabbed a slice of bacon from the serving tray and took a big bite as she pointed in Callie’s direction. “Thank you so much, young lady, for pointing out the extra pet supplies you have on hand in this place. Liza Minnelli told me to thank you for getting Favored Feline canned food. It’s her favorite brand, and the salmon pate is her favorite dish.”

Amberley looked confused. “Liza Minnelli’s here?” she asked.

“Yes!” Thelma gestured upstairs, “she’s in my room getting her beauty sleep.” She plopped her full plate at the head of the table and sat down.

Callie leaned over and whispered, “I believe she’s referring to her cat.” Upon hearing this, Amberley instantly perked up, turning to Thelma. “Oh, you brought your kitty here? I love kitties.”

Thelma nodded. “I remember you from your *Forever Yours* application. I’m Thelma Ward, I run the agency, and I’ll be hosting the events this week.” She looked around the room. “I assume you’re all attending?” There were murmurs and nods of agreement. Callie was halfway through her souffle before she realized that Thelma was staring at her. “You’re in our desired age group.” she commented, pausing a moment before continuing, “You work here, right?”

Callie swallowed. “Yes, I’m in town temporarily this summer. I’m assisting my aunt with getting the inn back on its feet since my uncle passed last year.” She reached out to Aunt Fran and gave her hand a tender squeeze.

“We have a small shortage of females registered for this week,” Thelma said pointedly. “I’m willing to make you an offer. If you come to all of the events, I’ll give you half off the total package price.”

Aunt Fran stirred a packet of sugar into her tea. “That’s certainly very generous of you, Thelma. Callie, I think you should accept. It

would be good for you to see what else is out there and have a little fun. Besides, I really don't need that much extra help around here since I have Jeannie coming in, and I'm pretty sure she could use more hours."

Callie frowned. Her aunt knew she had a boyfriend; however, she also knew their agreement to give each other some space that summer. She considered the offer. Money wasn't an issue. Maybe it would be good for her to expand her horizons and get out of her comfort zone. Besides, she hadn't done anything purely for fun since she could remember. She might also make some new friends.

She looked around the table, stopping at Jackson, whose thoughtful eyes met hers, and her heart quickened.

"I'll do it," she said softly.

Chapter Five



CALLIE

What had she gotten herself into now, Callie wondered as she walked into the convention center, nervously twisting a strand of hair as she asked the clerk at the information desk for help locating the banquet hall where the afternoon's Meet and Greet event would be taking place. She followed the man's direction to the bank of elevators and glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes. Suddenly, the thought came to her that she still had time to leave. She could just turn around and walk back out to the car she'd borrowed from Aunt Fran and leave a message for Thelma that she'd changed her mind.

Just then, Jackson appeared beside her. "I don't think the elevators will work unless you press the button." He grinned as he reached over and tapped the Up button, which lit in a circle of blue.

"Oh, right," said Callie sheepishly.

"Are you dreading this as much as I am?" Jackson said.

"Pretty much," Callie admitted, relaxing a bit. "To be honest, I haven't dated in a while, so I'm afraid my skills will be woefully rusty."

Jackson nodded. "Yeah, I'm in the same boat. My brother signed me up for this event as a birthday gift a few months ago. Apparently, he thinks I need a mate."

"Do you live alone?" asked Callie.

"I've got a condo in Tampa," Jackson replied, "but with my contracting business expanding, I've found more need to travel lately. That hasn't left me much time for socializing."

“Hey y’all!” came Amberley’s twang as she walked up along with several other men and women who looked to be about their age.

The elevator opened, and people began streaming out as they and the others climbed aboard.

As the doors slid shut, Amberley punched the button for the third floor.

“Let the matchmaking begin!” she cried. *The others looked a lot like deer in the headlights*, thought Callie as Jackson grinned.

~*~

JACKSON

Jackson walked into the large conference room where long-skirted tables and chairs had been set up. One side of the room was a small refreshment center with ice-filled buckets containing bottled water and soda. Small wicker baskets were filled with an assortment of packaged snacks. A podium stood in front with a microphone.

Jackson grabbed a soda and took a seat in the last row. Although he was tempted to follow Callie to the front, he resisted his desire to be close to her. She was here to meet people, just like he was. He had to give her some space. However, he couldn’t help but be drawn to the pretty strawberry blonde, feeling like she could relate to his sense of being a fish out of water when it came to dating.

He noticed what looked like magazines spread along the tables, as well as black ballpoint pens and plastic water bottles, both of which bore the logo ***Forever Yours*** in swirling pink letters. Baskets with self-stick name tags and sharpies were placed at intervals. After writing his name on a nametag and attaching it to his shirt, he picked up one of the magazines, which also bore the agency’s logo on the cover with the title *LOOKBOOK* underneath. He flipped it open and discovered a detailed itinerary section for the week and another with headshots of all the attendees in alphabetical order by first name, organized down the left side of each page. Details including age, hometown, and profession were included underneath each person’s picture.

To the right, was a grid with columns marked Event 1, Event 2,

Event 3, and Event 4, and rows with the labels Appearance (1-10) and Personality (1-10). Jackson found a photo of himself that his brother must have submitted. It had to be at least a couple of years old, as he'd worn a goatee back then. He also noticed with some consternation that now he had a bit more gray hair at his temples.

Oh well, he thought, I am what I am. If she's only interested in me for my hairstyle, that wouldn't be the girl for me.

Other people were milling about the room making small talk or glancing through their *Lookbooks* like Jackson. At precisely 3:00 pm, Thelma strode into the room dressed in head-to-toe turquoise blue and platform sandals carrying Liza Minnelli, who was busy licking a paw. A young woman with her hair in a messy bun wearing an outdated brown skirt suit several sizes too big and no-nonsense flats hurried behind with a notepad.

"Testing, 1-2-3." The microphone squealed in response to Thelma's loud rasp. Those still standing quickly found their seats. Jackson guessed there were probably about fifty people altogether, split evenly between men and women. The room stilled and all eyes focused.

"Welcome to your Summer of Love Vacation, hosted by the ***Forever Yours*** Matchmaking Agency. I am Thelma Ward, CEO, and this is my assistant, Sarah Jane." She waved a hand toward the young woman beside her, who was scribbling in her notepad and took no notice of her introduction. Thelma continued, "This week, you will enjoy a variety of events and activities designed to introduce you to other eligible singles in your age group. You will have dedicated time for fun and working together, enabling you to form bonds of friendship and kindling the spark of romance. Use this week to discover yourself as well as find that special someone that fate has chosen to be your soulmate."

Thelma stopped to take a drink of water from her ***Forever Yours*** water bottle, smearing her fuchsia lipstick in the process. She petted Liza Minnelli's head absentmindedly.

"There will be four events, beginning with Speed Dating this afternoon. Tomorrow is Beachcomb Bingo, Friday will be Pottery Making, and Saturday will be Swing Dancing."

“You may have noticed that each of you has been provided with a *Lookbook*. These contain our daily schedule as well as basic identifying information for everyone here. Write your name on the inside cover. Be sure to bring your *Lookbook* with you to each event. Following the activity, you will have time to make notes about the people you met. You will also rate them in the areas of Appearance and Personality with a number between one and ten, one being the lowest and ten being the highest. After the final event, you will all turn in your Lookbooks to me. Sarah Jane and I will crunch the numbers on Sunday. We will email you your top three matches and their contact information by 9:00 pm that evening, thereby concluding ***Forever Yours*** services. Be sure to let us know if any of the relationships you begin here lead to marriage—if so, drop us a line and be sure to include a photo. We love to showcase our successful matches on our website. Questions?”

An attractive man who reminded Jackson of Bradley Cooper spoke up. “I don’t think everyone here is in this book. I didn’t see that girl anywhere,” and he motioned towards Callie, who he was sitting directly behind.

“Oh, right,” Thelma said. “Sorry folks, she joined our group too late to be in the *Lookbook*. You can write her in at the end. Her name is Callie.”

Jackson could see several of the men quickly making notes in their books.

“Anything else? Good. Then in a moment, we will begin Speed Dating. Sarah Jane, the doors!” Thelma flung her free arm towards the double doors to the adjoining banquet hall on the right. Sarah Jane ran over and tugged them open, revealing a more dimly lit space where small tables with two chairs each had been placed in a large circle.

“In a moment, I would like all the women to follow me and choose a table. Once they are seated, men, you may enter and sit at any table. When I ring this bell...bell, Sarah Jane!” Thelma paused briefly while Sarah Jane hustled into the other room and returned with a large bell that she handed to Thelma, who promptly rang it for effect, “you will begin conversing. I will ring this bell at five-minute intervals thenceforth, at which time the men will get up and move to the table

on their right. At the end of the next two hours, you will have been introduced to each of your potential matches. When the event is over, you are welcome to find a spot in either room in which to make your notes and assign your ratings.”

Thelma stroked Liza Minnelli’s fur before handing her to Sarah Jane as she walked to the entrance of the speed dating room. “Ladies, right this way.”

Chapter Six



CALLIE

Callie realized that her hands were sweating as she gripped her *Lookbook* and company swag and joined the other women, jostling each other as they herded through the doorway to select their preferred tables in the adjoining room. Callie found an empty table and sat down, crossing her legs. She noticed that most of the other women were more dressed up than she was, but she hadn't had time after her chores at the inn to do anything but quickly run a brush through her hair and apply lip gloss before running out the door.

Once the women were seated, Thelma announced that the men were to enter the room and select a table to begin their first speed-date. Callie found herself face to face with a man who looked amazingly like Bradley Cooper. She felt her heat level ratchet up several more degrees and hoped she wasn't noticeably perspiring. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jackson enter the room among the last of the men and take a seat across from a plump brunette in a low-cut blouse who promptly angled herself closer to him.

Thelma and Sarah Jane followed the last of the men into the convention hall, and upon Thelma's nod, Sarah Jane swiftly shut and latched the doors, sending a gust of air across Callie's table. The room stilled as all eyes turned to Thelma, who held the bell up reverently and turned in a small circle so everyone had a chance to view it. "Ladies and gentlemen, when I ring this bell, speed-dating will officially begin. Remember, you only have five minutes with each person tonight, so I encourage you to be creative with your

conversation topics to guarantee a lasting impression. Now, on the count of three, one-two-three!” The bell clanged loudly.

The Bradley-double smiled, and Callie wondered if he’d had his teeth professionally whitened. “I’m Doug,” he said, giving her hand a firm shake. “And I already know your name is Callie from Thelma’s announcement a few minutes ago.”

Callie groaned. “Nothing like being called out in front of a group of people to ease a person’s nerves.”

“Oh, you don’t need to be nervous,” Doug said, “I’m sure all the guys here will want to date you. You’re quite beautiful, you know.”

Callie felt a mix of embarrassment and pleasure at the compliment. “Thank you. I haven’t dated in a while, though, so I’m woefully out of practice. Have you ever done speed-dating before?”

“Sure, a couple of times,” Doug said. “Once, I ended up meeting a woman and lived with her for a couple of years before we realized we weren’t right for each other.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Callie said.

Doug shrugged. “It was tough, but I’m sure it was the right decision. That was about a year ago, so I feel I’ve moved on.”

“That’s good,” nodded Callie, feeling like she should say something about her romantic history but didn’t want to reveal anything too personal. Doug must have sensed her discomfort and quickly changed the topic. “Well, Thelma asked us to think outside the box here, so tell me, do you prefer cats or dogs?”

Callie smiled. “Boy, that’s a hard one. I’ve never had any pets before but have always wanted one. My father thought they would cause too much mess.”

“Wow, that’s too bad,” countered Doug. “Me, I love German shepherds. Luckily, I get to work with them sometimes, being on the force in St. Petersburg. It’s amazing how they can detect contraband so easily by their sense of smell.”

The bell clanged, signaling it was time for the men to rotate tables. Callie couldn’t help but be impressed by Doug’s career choice as an officer of the law. “It was nice meeting you,” she said with sincerity, as a man with a shaved head sporting tattoos down both arms claimed

the chair Doug had emptied.

“Hey, babe, you like tats?”

Callie inwardly rolled her eyes. After five minutes of strained conversation that felt like twenty, the bell clanged again. Callie discovered that her dates were seeming to fade into each other as everyone asked and answered the same basic set of questions: “Where are you from? What type of work do you do? What hobbies do you enjoy?”

As she surreptitiously glanced at her watch after talking to a man who had the personality of a robot, she looked up to see Jackson sitting down across from her.

“Hey,” he said quietly, looking into her eyes. “How are you doing?”

Callie smiled and sighed. “To be honest, I can’t wait for this thing to be over.”

“Me too,” he agreed. “This feels like a game of duck-duck-goose for adults.”

Callie laughed. “How much longer do we have?”

“This is it,” Jackson said, “we’re the last ones.”

Callie looked towards her right and noticed the Bradley Cooper look-alike was charming, the same brunette who had appeared taken with Jackson.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness, I could use a good meal and some time to relax with my shoes off.”

“I can imagine you put in a full day of work before coming to this thing. Would you like me to grab some takeout on the way back to the inn? Have to admit I was on my computer most of the day, myself working up bids, and my brother tells me I should shut that thing off sometimes.”

Callie admitted that sounded wonderful. As much as she enjoyed cooking, she was feeling tired.

“Thanks so much. That would be great. There is a cafe near the inn that serves wonderful paninis. I could give you directions if you like.”

“Sounds good,” nodded Jackson. “I’ll place an order and meet you in the dining room in about an hour, so that will give you a bit of time to yourself.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” Callie said.

The bell clanged again.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Thelma called out. “This concludes today’s event. Just think—you may have met your soulmate tonight, the person you are fated to spend the rest of your life with! Now hurry and fill out your Lookbooks while you have the people you have met today fresh in your mind.”

Sarah Jane, who had placed Liza Minnelli into a fancy pink carrier, set it down next to Thelma as she swung the double doors open. Slowly, people began to wander back into the other conference room, choosing semi-private spots to complete their ratings.

Jackson got up and nodded to Callie. “See you in a bit.”

Callie opened her Lookbook and uncapped her pen. She found Doug Lambert’s photo with his boyishly handsome smile. On impulse, she turned to Jackson Thorne’s listing. There was his chiseled jaw and dark eyes looking back at her. His smile seemed forced as it didn’t reach his eyes, which struck Callie as haunting. She closed the Lookbook, rising from the table. Maybe she’d fill in her ratings later. Right now, she wanted to head back to the inn and maybe lie down for a few minutes before dinner.

Who is Jackson Thorne? she wondered, reaching into her purse for her keys.

Chapter Seven



CALLIE

Callie parked the car in the enclosed garage and entered the Harbor Inn through the door to the mudroom off the kitchen. Aunt Fran was folding a piece of tinfoil over a casserole dish cooling on a hot pad atop the large wood block island. She looked like she was dressed to go out for the evening in a peach-colored sundress and matching floral printed pashmina. She wore a gold cross pendant around her neck that shimmered beneath the overhead light.

“Are you headed out tonight?” Callie asked as she stifled a yawn and set her purse on the counter, along with the materials from the *Forever Yours*.

Aunt Fran eyed the Lookbook as she slid on a pair of oven mitts and lifted the casserole. “Yes, dear, I’m joining Janice, Marjorie, and the other members of our women’s Bible study potluck group tonight. We get together once a week to study Scripture and pray together.”

Callie smiled. “That sounds lovely. I hope you have a nice time.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. I made a summer squash casserole and put the second one in the fridge if you’d like some.”

“That sounds delightful, Aunt Fran,” Callie said. “Jackson is picking up some paninis for us on his way back from Speed-dating. I think this sounds like the perfect accompaniment.”

“Oh?” Aunt Fran raised an eyebrow as she carefully placed the casserole into a tote. “How did that go today?”

“Honestly, it was overwhelming,” Callie acknowledged. “But

fun,” she admitted with a sly smile.

Her aunt’s grin grew wide enough for the dimples in her cheeks to appear. “That’s what I was hoping for,” she said. “Remember, I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Callie said gratefully as her aunt kissed her on the cheek and picked up the keys to the Volvo. The back door opened and shut, and Callie found herself alone in the big kitchen. The inn was quiet. She walked up the stairs to her suite, considering.

As a child, her father had insisted that her nannies take her to church on Sunday mornings. However, he never went himself, preferring Sunday mornings to be spent on the golf course with his business colleagues or working from his home office. Once Callie was a teenager and old enough to join the church youth group, Arthur had insisted that she prioritize her grades over ‘needless socializing.’

Callie remembered feeling disappointed, having grown attached to her pastor and Christian friends. She hadn’t been to church since, other than accompanying her aunt on the rare occasions she visited Seaview. She always loved those mornings, dressing up and sitting next to her tender-hearted aunt, who she thought smelled like sunshine. She recalled feeling more relaxed and peaceful in her aunt’s church than anywhere else. But of course, her father always claimed to have too much work to do to go with them. Callie hadn’t thought about her relationship with God in many years. She felt something within her stir. Maybe she could ask her aunt if she would mind if she went to church with her on Sunday. *No time like the present*, she thought, as she lay back on the soft pillows on her bed and allowed herself a quick snooze before meeting up with Jackson for dinner.

~*~

She awoke with a start, her stomach growling. Callie realized she’d forgotten to set her alarm for dinner in case she fell asleep—as she clearly had—as she leaped up and rushed to the bathroom. Her hair looked a little flat, but she pulled it up quickly into a ponytail, as was her habit, before rushing downstairs to the dining room. Jackson had set out grilled ham and cheese paninis with a Caesar salad. He had obviously been waiting for her, as he appeared to be engrossed in a

thick volume of some sort.

“I am so sorry, Jackson, I fell asleep before I knew it, and....” Callie began feeling the lines of anxiety crease her forehead.

“Hey, no worries. What’re fifteen minutes one way or the other? Besides, this is supposed to be our vacation, right? And anyway, I’m almost at the end of a great action thriller, and all I can say is I’m already thinking about which actors will play these characters in the movie version.” Jackson laughed as he closed the book.

“Thanks, I love reading books like that too,” she said and then paused. “My aunt made a fresh summer squash casserole tonight for her Bible study group. I think it would make a nice side dish for our sandwiches. Would you like me to bring it to the table?”

“That sounds delicious,” Jackson affirmed as he sipped his ice water.

Callie quickly went to the kitchen and brought the still warm casserole to the table along with a serving spoon.

“Bon appétit,” she said, placing her napkin in her lap.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the meal. After swallowing his last bite of the panini, Jackson wiped his mouth and said, “So, tell me why you really came to Seaview this summer. Fran mentioned that you work in marketing back in Chicago. Is that where the rest of your family is?”

Callie looked into Jackson’s eyes, the color of molten chocolate that seemed overlaid with a veil of sadness. Feeling she could trust him, she replied, “Besides my aunt and father, who happens to own the PR firm where I work, I don’t have any family. My mother died of cancer when I was just a baby. I don’t have any siblings.”

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said.

“Me too,” Callie acknowledged. “My dad is pretty much a workaholic, and honestly, I’ve spent more time with him at the office than I think I ever did growing up. I’ve always wished I had a big family. As far as why I’m here...I don’t know exactly. Lately, I’ve felt like I’ve just been becoming the female version of my dad. But that’s not who I am.”

“Ah,” Jackson said, “so you’re in Seaview to find out who Callie

Winthrop is.” It was a statement, not a question.

Callie looked down at her lap then nodded without looking back up.

“Makes sense,” Jackson said. “I went through something similar a few years back. Guess that’s why dating feels so daunting for me. I know what I’m about but haven’t found a woman who ‘gets it.’”

Callie’s curiosity rose and she was intrigued to learn more about her companion’s past. However, just then, they heard what sounded like scratching coming from the kitchen. “Do you hear that?” she asked, frowning.

“I do,” Jackson said, setting his napkin down on the table and pushing back his chair.

They both went into the kitchen to investigate. The sound was coming from the door off the mudroom. “Let me,” Jackson said as he swiftly opened it.

There on the porch was a small dirty puppy that looked to be some sort of a cross between a terrier and a poodle. Its fur was light brown, and one of its ears looked scratched. Callie came closer. “It’s not wearing a collar,” she said as she scooped up the dog.

“Are you sure you should be picking it up?” Jackson said.

“It’s just a puppy, and it’s covered with sand, poor thing.” Callie rubbed its back as it settled against her heart. It was obviously tiring.

“Let’s see if it will eat something,” Callie said. “Could you please fetch a couple of the spare dog bowls and a can of food? I’ll bet it’s dehydrated as well as hungry if it’s been outside in the sun and heat for a while.”

Jackson found the pet supplies and brought them into the kitchen, filling the bowls with water and food. He set them down in a corner, and Callie put the puppy down. It slowly walked over and sniffed the food then dug in hungrily. After finishing almost the entire helping, it lapped up some water and then laid down. Callie went back to the supply closet, where she found a soft pet bed a couple of sizes too big for the tiny animal, but it would do, along with an extra towel or two to cozy it up.

After the puppy climbed into its makeshift bed, it curled up and

promptly fell asleep, uttering the softest of snores.

“It certainly is cute,” Jackson said. “Do you know who the owner might be?”

“Beats me,” Callie replied. “I’ll ask Aunt Fran when she gets home. If she doesn’t know, we’ll probably need to put some flyers up in the neighborhood.”

“Good plan,” Jackson said. “You know what it looks like to me?”

“What?”

“A chunk of peanut butter,” he said, grinning.

Callie laughed, “I’d have to agree with you.”

They retrieved the plates from the dining room and quickly cleaned up.

Jackson leaned back against the counter awkwardly as Callie shut the dishwasher. Holding his book, he said, “Well, thanks for sharing dinner with me tonight. Guess it’s Beach Comb Bingo on the schedule for tomorrow, right?”

“Right,” Callie said, “I’m looking forward to learning more about sea life and collecting shells, even if I don’t meet my soulmate.”

Jackson nodded, giving her a brief smile as he headed out of the room.

Callie watched his retreating back as he disappeared around a corner.

She knelt beside the puppy and stroked its fur gently. “Good night, Peanut Butter,” she whispered. “Don’t worry—we’ll find your family.”

Chapter Eight



CALLIE

After an early morning run intending to clear his head, Jackson grabbed a bagel and yogurt as he headed back to his room to check his emails while he ate. However, he found himself thinking about Callie. What was it about her that intrigued him so? Sure, she was attractive. But she didn't even live in Florida. Would he be up for a long-distance relationship? He realized he was getting ahead of himself. Still, he couldn't help but like that she valued family, personal growth, and the way she held that puppy so tenderly...

Sighing, he shut down his laptop. Callie had mentioned her aunt's Bible study group but she hadn't participated. What were her feelings when it came to questions of faith? Did she have a relationship with God? Would he ever meet a woman who could respect his relationship with his Savior? Pulling out his Bible, he devoted the next hour to Scripture study and prayer. After showering, dressing, and applying sunscreen for the late morning nature walk, he followed the directions in his Lookbook to the parking lot of the environmental learning center where the group would be meeting. He recognized several people from yesterday's speed-dating event touring the free exhibits.

"Hi, Jackson, right?" The bubbly brunette who had sat at the first table walked up to him. "Deborah Bixby."

He smiled back at her. She was friendly and pretty, even if he didn't feel an immediate connection.

"Isn't this place neat? I love vacationing at the coast and always

find more to explore. Then again, sometimes I just prefer to lie on a blanket on the sand for a week.” She laughed daintily, and he recalled that she was a music teacher from some place in Tennessee. They walked around the center for a few minutes as Deborah pointed out some of the exhibits she found interesting about the natural history of the local area. Jackson found himself looking around for Callie. She’d said she’d be attending this event, and it was scheduled to start in five minutes.

Thelma was across the room with Sarah Jane, speaking with one of the tour guides. She had left Liza Minnelli back at the inn for the day, which Jackson thought was a smart idea since cats didn’t happen to be too fond of water.

Thelma glanced at the clock and then clapped her hands loudly.

“Welcome!” she said as the group gathered around her in the lobby. “In a few minutes, we’ll board the shuttles waiting outside to take us down to the beach. I hope everyone has applied sunscreen and remembered to bring your Lookbooks and water bottles. We do have extra bottles of sunscreen if anyone needs to re-apply during the excursion, so please don’t hesitate to ask.” Jackson spied Callie hurrying into the room wearing shorts and a light green tank top with a small backpack. He liked the way the color green looked on her.

“Now, for this event, you will all need a bingo card and a whistle. Sarah Jane,” she said, cueing the assistant, whose messy bun was even higher on her head that morning, to take a large stack of cards off the welcome desk and begin handing them around the room along with a bag containing lanyards with small whistles.

Jackson pulled a lanyard around his neck and looked down at his card, seeing that it had an erasable marker attached with Velcro. The card showed pictures of various flora, fauna, and beach ephemera captioned in individual bingo squares.

“You will each be trying to find and identify as many of the items shown on your card as you can. Everyone will choose a partner to begin with. Whenever a couple finds a match, one of them should blow their whistle, which will signify that everyone should immediately find a different partner. The first person to identify everything on their bingo card will win a gift card to Paloma’s Restaurant, known for its

spectacular views, haute cuisine, and romantic ambiance. Does everyone understand?” Thelma glanced around the room, patting her hair.

There were soft murmurs of assent, and Jackson noticed that Deborah had taken a couple of steps closer to him and was obviously trying to make eye contact. “Partner?” she whispered, placing a manicured hand on his arm. “Sure,” he shrugged. They’d end up switching, anyway. From across the room, he saw Callie looking his way before the pretty boy went up to her and her attention shifted.

Thelma waited a few minutes as the group paired up. “When you have found a partner, please gather your belongings and board one of the shuttles waiting in front of the visitor’s center. When everyone arrives at the beach, I’ll blow my whistle to begin the game.”

~*~

CALLIE

Callie felt like she’d gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning. First, she’d found Peanut Butter happily chewing on somebody’s rogue sock, then she accidentally over-baked her homemade French vanilla granola for the breakfast parfaits and had to throw the entire batch out and start over, and now after putting up *Is This Dog Yours?* signs around the neighborhood with Aunt Fran, she was late for Beach Comb Bingo. Her spirits sagged a little lower seeing the lovely brunette with her hand placed protectively on Jackson’s arm. She feigned a cheerful smile when Doug Lambert asked to partner with her to begin the scavenger hunt.

The shuttles bounced over the terrain as they wound down the narrow road to the beach. When the group had re-assembled, Thelma blew her whistle and the game began. Callie’s mood lifted as she wandered over the sand and rocks, studying her card. She felt like she’d never really noticed the amazing array of differently shaped shells, types of seaweed, and intricacies of rocks smoothed by wind and water. She suddenly felt awed by the beauty and power that surrounded her, struck by the realization that nature’s majesty revealed the hand of the God who created it. Looking out over the water glinting beneath the sun’s rays, she longed to know more about

her Heavenly Father and said a silent prayer of worship to the Creator.

Somebody's whistle blew, and Doug reluctantly went in search of another female. Callie grinned as she spied Tony Rizzoli in the crowd, who smiled back as they agreed to pair up to continue the hunt. "How's it going, babe?" Tony asked in his distinctive Jersey accent. "You meet Mr. Right yet?"

Callie laughed. "Well, I sure wish he had that on his nametag to clue me in. How about you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Tony said slyly. "I kinda like one of the ladies, but not sure I'm quite what she has in mind."

"Don't sell yourself short," Callie replied, "Just remember to let her see your true heart."

"Ya, maybe I'll grow on her," Tony said thoughtfully. "Hey, look at this. I found some green sea glass. Isn't that on our cards?" He bent down and picked the glittering item up, dusting it off so they could observe it more closely and compare it to the photo on their cards.

"That's gorgeous," Callie said. "Maybe you could keep it, and if it all works out with your love interest, have it made into a piece of jewelry for her?"

"That's a great idea. Thanks, kid," said Tony, pocketing the item. They crossed out their bingo squares.

"Ready?" Callie asked, lifting her whistle.

"Ready," Tony nodded. Callie blew her whistle, and the group reassembled itself again. She shook her head as she spied Amberley, the weather reporter, who was practically glued to the same spot due to her stilettos sinking into the sand with each step she attempted. This being said, she certainly had no shortage of men vying to partner with her. She definitely looked the part of the tv star with her obviously surgically enhanced bosom that was threatening to pop out of her halter top. Callie had to wonder how her layers of makeup were miraculously staying in place despite the heat and humidity. She felt sure that the little mascara she'd applied must have melted completely off by now.

As the morning wore on, Callie was enjoying herself more and more. She took off her sandals and felt the warm sand beneath her feet

and the changing temperature as she approached the water's edge. As her feet got used to the cooler temperature, she bent down to feel the beach floor, lifting rocks and stones of various colors and sizes. She was excited to discover several sand dollars and placed the treasures she assembled in her backpack. Maybe she'd start a rock or shell collection. She enjoyed listening to the pleasant chatter of the others, the shouts of excitement as bingo squares were being crossed off, and the general camaraderie stoked by the morning's adventure. She engaged in small talk with each ensuing partner but felt she'd never be able to distinguish one from the other when the event was over. The men were certainly nice enough. Some better-looking or more well-spoken than others, but no one that quickened her heart. At least until she felt a tap on her shoulder. Callie turned around to find Jackson with his erasable marker tucked behind his ear and the collar of his t-shirt damp with sweat.

"Partner?" he asked, taking a drink from his water bottle.

"You bet," Callie agreed.

"How's the puppy doing today? Did your aunt have any idea who he belongs to?"

"Unfortunately, Aunt Fran doesn't have a clue. He seems to be house-trained at least and seems to be regaining energy now that he's had a couple of hearty meals. This morning I found him chewing on someone's sock. I have no idea where it even came from. I'm planning to stop by the pet store on the way home this afternoon to pick up some chew toys and a leash."

"Good idea," Jackson replied. "Want me to walk him with you later?"

"Sure," Callie said, feeling a blush rising in her cheeks. "I'd love the company." Why had she used the word 'love?' Where did that come from?

"Great," Jackson said, "After dinner? I need to go check on the status of a few projects in the area, so I'll probably grab something to eat on the road."

"Sounds good." Callie nodded. "I promised Aunt Fran to have dinner with her tonight, anyway."

“Now, what are we supposed to be looking for?” Jackson held up his bingo card. Suddenly, there came a shout. “Bingo!” someone cried. Callie saw that it was Amberley. Of course, that made sense since her partners would be eager to help her win in hopes of securing some coveted time alone with her on a romantic dinner date.

“That was fun,” Callie said as they marched back to the shuttles for the ride back to the information center.

“Agreed,” Jackson said. “I love getting outside and appreciating God’s creation.”

“Wow,” Callie said, “I was thinking the same thing this morning. Being in nature like this kind of reminds me that I’m not alone, that God is bigger than I am. Maybe I don’t have to know everything. Which is kind of a relief, you know?”

“I completely agree,” Jackson replied. “I’ve discovered that the more I spend time with God, the more I’m able to trust Him and be okay with wherever I’m at. His ways are higher than our ways.”

They were both silent for a moment, reflecting.

“I think I’ve missed having the Lord in my life,” Callie admitted impulsively. “I’m afraid I’ve shut Him out ever since my dad said that participating in youth groups at church was too frivolous a way to spend my time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jackson said. “But it’s never too late. God is always available, and what’s even better is that He wants a relationship with you.”

Callie blinked as she felt tears springing to her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said as they boarded the buses.

“Listen, I’ll be here if you want to talk about this stuff further,” Jackson told her, taking a seat.

“Deal,” Callie said. “See you tonight.”

Chapter Nine



JACKSON

Jackson finished freshening up after completing his site visits. He'd stopped to pick up a burger and fries from a fast-food drive-thru and ate on his way back to the inn. He was pleased with how far the construction projects were coming along but knew that the smile on his face as he looked at himself in the mirror didn't have anything to do with work but rather the cute strawberry-blonde downstairs.

He pulled a comb through his hair and stepped out into the hallway, nearly bumping into Ben Green, who was dressed in a three-piece suit and tie.

"You clean up well, man." Jackson grinned. "What's the occasion?"

Ben's face turned crimson as he smiled back. "I'm having dinner at Paloma's tonight."

Jackson was dumbfounded. "Wait a minute. You mean...?" Just then, the door to Amberley's room opened, revealing the weather reporter in a slinky cocktail dress. Ben turned to her as she walked up to him and looped her arm through his.

"That's right," she said, "I asked this brilliant professor here to be my date tonight." Ben beamed as though he'd won the lottery and escorted Amberley down the staircase to the cab waiting for the couple outside.

"Well, I'll be," Jackson muttered, "This summer is getting more interesting by the minute." He found Callie snapping a brand-new

navy leash onto a matching collar that Peanut Butter now wore around his neck. He chuckled. "I think this little guy has found a new home," he said as he bent down to scratch behind the puppy's ears.

"Aunt Fran said that she took him to the local vet earlier today to see if he was microchipped, but he's not," she said. "I don't know how anyone could let such a cutie go, but I have to admit I'm glad to see a dog here at the inn again. My aunt and uncle were huge animal lovers, and their lab passed on shortly after my uncle died."

"Sounds like Peanut Butter may be a gift from God," Jackson said.

Callie led the way out the back door and down the winding path to the beach, stopping every so often for Peanut Butter to scamper a bit in the Saltgrass and smell the seaside scents.

"Have you always had a strong faith?" she inquired.

Jackson paused, wondering how much he should tell her about his past. He took a deep breath and began.

"Not up until a few years ago. I was in a pretty serious relationship for a while. Her name was Michelle, and she was a nurse. Things were great in the beginning, at least I thought they were. However, after a few months, she began acting strangely, like she would go for several days with almost no sleep or else I'd find her still in bed when I got home from work at night. Her emotions were all over the place, too. One minute she'd be happy as a clam, and the next, she'd be furious over something or other. I kept asking her if she was okay, but she always said she was fine, just stressed or tired from work. One night, we went out for dinner, and she said her food was cold. She blew the whole thing out of proportion and ended up throwing her glass of water in the waiter's face. I couldn't have been more embarrassed. Later that night, after we'd gotten back to my place, I told her how upset I was with her behavior and said that she was acting as crazy as if she were strung out on something. She screamed at me, how dare I accuse her of such a thing, and we got into a huge fight. She ended up breaking up with me and packed up her things and left."

"That's awful," Callie said, tugging on Peanut Butter's leash to

keep going on the path.

“Yeah,” Jackson agreed. “About a month later, I learned that Michelle’s car had spun out of control in the middle of the night and slammed into a tree. The impact killed her instantly.”

Callie gasped. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Jackson continued. “It gets even worse. The police found a bunch of pill bottles and prescription pads in her purse, and her blood work revealed a mix of drugs and alcohol. Doctors at the hospital where she worked discovered that she’d been writing herself orders for dangerous medications and forging their signatures. Apparently, this had been going on for quite some time, and I just didn’t see the signs until it was too late, I guess.”

“How could you know?” Callie whispered. “Even the doctors didn’t realize what was going on.”

“I guess she had developed an addiction. After she died, I didn’t know how to feel,” Jackson said. “Angry—at her for making such poor choices. Angry—at myself for not recognizing she had a problem and doing more to help her before it was too late. I felt confused, guilty, and mixed up. The whole thing was pretty overwhelming.”

“I’ll bet,” Callie said. “How did your family react?”

Jackson paused as Callie unhooked the leash to let Peanut Butter play in the sand. He stared out over the water at the darkening sky. “My parents were wonderful, and I can’t thank them enough for being there for me back then. My dad sat me down not long after the accident happened and told me that he thought I should start going to church again. I’d pretty much stopped attending after I graduated from high school. Life just got busy after that, I guess, and I was young and immature and didn’t have my priorities straight.”

“I know the feeling,” Callie said.

“The first sermon I attended after that was life-changing for me,” Jackson said. “The pastor spoke about letting go and trusting God, even when we can’t understand why things happen the way they sometimes do. The Scripture was Romans 8:38-39, teaching us that nothing can separate us from the love of God through His Son, Jesus Christ.”

Callie gazed up at Jackson's face, shadowed in the fading light. "I need to remember that," she said softly.

He turned to meet her gaze. "We all need reminders," he said and reached out to squeeze her hand. "After church that day, I asked to meet with the pastor for individual counseling and prayer and have been walking with God daily ever since."

The puppy seemed to be tiring, and they turned for the walk back to the inn.

"I can definitely understand why dating again must feel so uncomfortable after what you've been through," Callie said.

"Exactly," Jackson replied. "My relationship with the Lord is my first priority, and most women haven't seemed to understand or be content with a man who follows Jesus in his everyday life rather than just identifying as a Christian. I study the Bible each morning and spend time in prayer."

"I think that's beautiful," Callie said. "You are walking the walk, not just talking the talk, as they say. Isn't that what it's supposed to be about? Having a relationship with God means spending time with Him and in His Word."

"Right," said Jackson. "Hey, would you be interested in attending a church service with me on Sunday? I'm not familiar with the local churches here, but we could ask around."

"Actually," Callie said, "Aunt Fran is part of a local congregation, and I was thinking about asking if I could go with her this weekend. Maybe you'd like to join us?"

"I'm in like Flynn," Jackson said. "Just let me know where and when."

They walked up the steps to the back porch, and Jackson pulled open the door to the mudroom. Callie grabbed a towel and wiped Peanut Butter's paws. She stood up and stretched, trying to hide a yawn.

Jackson smiled. "I think you should go on up and relax. I can get this little guy his dinner."

"That would be great," Callie said. "I think a hot bath is calling my name tonight. See you tomorrow for pottery?"

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Jackson said as his eyes locked with hers. In the moment of silence, the heat rising between them was undeniable. He stepped forward, closing the space between their bodies. “Callie, I...” he whispered as she tipped her face up toward his. Just then, Peanut Butter yipped and began pawing the leg of his jeans.

The moment was broken. Callie giggled. “I’d say he’s ready to eat,” she said. As Jackson retrieved a bag of dog kibble from the pantry and filled Peanut Butter’s dish, Callie turned to leave, pausing in the doorway. She looked back at him as the dog began happily munching his food. “Goodnight, Jackson,” she smiled. “And, me too.” Then she was gone.

Chapter Ten



CALLIE

Humming along to the music playing on the oldies station, Callie mixed the ingredients for a Mexican brunch casserole and chili-egg puffs for the morning's breakfast meal. Aunt Fran stood at the counter slicing fruit for the apricot, cherry, and macaroon fruit salad Callie had pointed out in her recipe book.

Aunt Fran sighed contentedly. "It feels good to have you here, Callie," she said. "You and Peanut Butter, that is." She looked over at the puppy, who wagged his tail as he happily chewed his toy.

"Are you going to keep him, then?" Callie asked.

"You mean, are we going to keep him?" returned Aunt Fran.

Callie sighed. "You know I'm only here for a few more weeks," she said. "Then I have to go home and get back to work."

"This is working, dear," her aunt reminded her. "And yes, since no one has claimed this ball of adorable fur, he'll just have to be Harbor Inn's new mascot."

Callie smiled. "By the way, I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind having some company for church this Sunday? It's been a while since I've been and I think it would be good for me. I mentioned it to Jackson Thorne, and he asked if he could join us while he's in town as he's a regular church-goer back in Tampa."

Aunt Fran beamed. "Of course, the more, the merrier. I was hoping you'd ask to come sometime. I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want you to feel pressured in any way, but I've been

praying for you to renew your relationship with the Lord.”

Callie set her spatula down and hugged her aunt tightly. “I’ve missed you,” she said. Aunt Fran pulled away and looked at her, reaching up to smooth an unruly curl off her forehead. “And I, you,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “You’re like the daughter we never had. I only wish I could have been there for you more while you were growing up.”

“You and Uncle David had the inn here,” Callie said, “and besides, I think I still have some growing up to do.”

Aunt Fran smiled tenderly. “Don’t we all,” she said. “It’s a never-ending process, and I firmly believe it’s what life’s all about. There are spiritual lessons around every corner.”

“So true,” murmured Callie. They finished the last preparations for the meal and set the buffet. After finishing breakfast, Callie excused herself to return to her suite. She knew her aunt and uncle had long ago placed Bibles in the drawers of the bedside tables in each room, and she felt inclined to see if there was one still there in her room. Sure enough, she found a worn leather Bible in the wooden drawer. She climbed on top of the bed and began to read.

~*~

The pottery studio was housed behind the shop in a large, cavernous building filled with aisles upon aisles of bowls, plates, cups, and figurines of all varieties. Callie looked forward to browsing the wares following the class. Each person was stationed at their own pottery wheel with sacks of clay, sponges, and small jars of water. Thelma, completely inappropriately dressed for the occasion in a bright red pantsuit, held a very bored-looking Liza Minnelli in the crook of her arm. Sarah Jane stood next to her, holding Thelma’s tote bag. The instructor was a wiry man with gray hair and a grizzly beard. His face held evidence of years spent too long in the sun, and his arms were strong and sinewed. “Welcome to Pete’s Pottery Barn, kids,” he said, revealing a gold-capped tooth. “I’m Pete, and I come from a long line of potters. We’re going to practice throwing clay today and getting the hang of using the wheel to make your own bowl. Don’t worry now if it doesn’t come out perfect. Like anything else, it takes practice and

coordination. As you'll see, the real beauty lies in the imperfections because pottery isn't uniform. Each piece is a little bit different from the others. Now, I hope everyone likes getting messy because this sure ain't gonna be a beauty contest." The old man guffawed, along with the men in the room, while the women smiled politely beneath furrowed brows.

Callie's station was next to Jackson's. The pretty brunette, Deborah—Callie hadn't been able to keep herself from looking up the woman's name in her *Lookbook*—had sat down at the station on Jackson's opposite side.

The group began following Pete's instructions as they tried pressing the foot pedals to spin their wheels. Soon, the room was filled with squeals and laughter as people sank their fingers into mounds of damp clay.

"Jackson, I can't get mine centered right," Deborah said. "Could you help me just a teensy bit?"

"Sure," Jackson said, getting up to assist.

Callie glanced over to see Deborah flash him a dimpled smile before narrowing her eyes at Callie.

When Jackson had gotten Deborah's clay centered, he came back and grabbed his water dish and dirty sponge. "I'm going to go rinse these out at the sink," he said. "Thanks for inviting me to your aunt's church on Sunday," he said to Callie.

Once he was out of earshot, Deborah turned to face her. "You asked him to church?" she said. "Kind of boring, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think God is boring at all," Callie said.

"Well, I'm sure Jackson is just too polite to turn you down because I know he's interested in me," Deborah said as she gave her bowl a firm push, promptly causing one side to cave in.

Callie was at a loss for words. She focused instead on keeping her hands gently positioned around her clay as her wheel spun evenly. The sensation was calming, centering her as well as the small bowl slowly taking shape.

Thelma was walking around the room with Liza Minnelli, looking at everyone's creations. "Photos, Sarah Jane," she said. The girl

promptly whipped out an iPhone and trailed after Thelma, snapping pictures. Thelma stroked Liza Minnelli's fur. "It's time for your snack, my little queen bee," she cooed. Sarah Jane reached back into the tote bag and handed Thelma a bag of Cheez puffs. As she held one of the orange crinkles out to the cat, Callie saw the looks of curiosity on men's and women's faces as they glanced up from their wheels. Liza Minnelli stuck out her pink tongue and began licking off the salty orange coating with gusto.

One of the ladies gasped loudly in astonishment, startling a man who was in the process of carrying an over-full water cup back from the sink. He promptly tripped then shouted, and water splashed all over the woman at the nearest station. She shrieked, jumping up to collide with Thelma, sending Liza Minnelli flying out of her arms. Upon landing, the cat began to race through the room, searching for cover. Jackson tripped as she leaped by, and before Callie knew it, everyone was either slipping or bumping into each other, and water and clay were in the air. Callie saw Ben Green stand up to shield Amberley. Deborah rose, holding wet clay in her hands, and with a loud "Oops!" took a step and flung it in Callie's direction.

Suddenly, Callie found the whole scene incredibly funny. Jackson, his empty dish in hand, reached over to pluck a chunk of muddy goo from the top of Callie's head and then wiped a finger across her nose. The two of them dissolved into peals of laughter, and men and women around them followed suit, making the most of the opportunity to tease each other in merry abandonment. Deborah crossley wiped her hands on her towel. "Such children," Callie overheard her mutter.

"Got her!" yelled Sarah Jane, who was on her hands and knees trying to pry Liza Minnelli out from underneath a wooden cabinet. Sarah Jane's usually perfectly styled messy bun was tilting precariously to one side. Doug Lambert knelt beside her. "Allow me," he said. "Cheez doodle, please?" One of the women picked up the bag, which had fallen to the floor, and brought it over. Doug pulled out a puff and held it out calmly. After a minute, the cat crept out from her hiding place and walked over to sniff the treat. Doug lifted her and handed her and the Cheez doodle back to Thelma. Looking around at

the female faces that were staring at him with blatant adoration, he sat back down at his station with a satisfied expression.

Jackson shook his head. “This is one day I definitely won’t forget,” he said.

Callie wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. “That’s for sure,” she agreed.

Chapter Eleven



JACKSON

Jackson thought now was as good a time as any to wrap up his visits to his local construction sites, especially since he was already covered in mud and grime. He stopped again for takeout on the way back to the inn. Entering, he saw a casually dressed woman with gray hair that was pulled into a ponytail filing paperwork at the reception desk. This must be Fran's housekeeper and new assistant, Jeanne. The inn's telephone rang with a sudden buzz as she closed one of the file cabinets. She reached over and answered, welcoming the caller to Harbor Inn. Jackson watched as Jeanne listened for a few minutes. "Why yes, she's here at the inn, and I'm pretty sure she's fine. Okay, I'll tell her," he overheard her say. Looking up as she hung up the receiver, Jeanne said, "Hey, if you see Callie around, would you mind letting her know that her boyfriend's been trying to reach her? I guess she hasn't checked her phone messages lately, so Hunter called the inn's main line."

Jackson felt blind-sided. *Boyfriend?* Callie had never mentioned that she had a boyfriend before. He went up to his room in a daze. Maybe he was wrong, thinking that his feelings of attraction had been mutual. Or had he misjudged her character? Was she just leading him on? Could he even trust her? Had he learned nothing from his previous relationship? He was angry with himself for allowing himself to open up to her. He thought this girl was different...but maybe he'd just been fooling himself, same as before. He got ready for bed and lay down, willing sleep to come. But there was only shame and

restlessness.

~*~

CALLIE

Callie looped a pair of dangle rhinestone earrings through her ears as she finished getting ready for the ballroom dance lesson Saturday night. She had to admit that she was both nervous and excited about the event. While she had a sense of rhythm and was confident that she could hold her own on the dance floor even if she wouldn't be winning the next *Dancing with the Stars* competition anytime soon, the thought of dancing cheek-to-cheek with Jackson made her heart trill. She couldn't deny that she was developing feelings for him. She was definitely on a new path, rekindling her relationship with Christ, for starters. Everything felt like it was changing, and she felt more optimistic than she had in a long while. However, when Jeanne mentioned during the course of tidying the inn's rooms that afternoon that Hunter called the night before, looking for her, Callie felt a wave of dread and anxiety.

She frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She'd listened to several voicemails from Hunter, asking her to call him as he wanted to talk about the future of their relationship. Up until now, she hadn't felt ready to make a decision, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, she'd been avoiding him as well as the subject. But she knew now, without a doubt, that she didn't want to continue dating him. Even though she'd only just met Jackson, she felt a deeper connection with him than she ever had with Hunter or any of the previous men she'd dated, for that matter. She just couldn't go backward and now owed it to Hunter to let him know their relationship was over for good. Sure, it would be uncomfortable for a while seeing each other around the office back in Chicago, but they were both professionals, and they would both handle it like adults.

Callie blinked away tears that were suddenly welling in her eyes at the thought of having to leave Seaview, the inn, and her aunt to return to Chicago—a place that had never felt like home to her. She grabbed a tissue to catch the falling drops before they ruined the makeup she'd just carefully applied. And what would happen with her

new blossoming friendship with Jackson when it was time for them both to leave and go back to their old everyday lives? She shook her head. *One thing at a time*, she thought.

With a deep breath, Callie wiped her hands, now damp with cool sweat, on a towel and went into the bedroom to fetch her phone from where it lay in the charger on the bedside table. She sat down on the edge of the bed and dialed.

Hunter picked up on the first ring. "Callie," he said flatly.

"I'm sorry I haven't responded until now," she said hastily. "I've been busy helping my aunt and.... well," she blew out a breath, "the truth is I needed some space to think."

"Hey, that's okay," Hunter replied. "I've been doing the same thing and want to be honest with you."

"Oh?" Callie asked, her curiosity piqued.

"You remember the woman we worked with on the Minneapolis account last year? Samantha?"

"I do," Callie said. "She was bright and outgoing. I enjoyed collaborating with her."

"Me, too," Hunter said. "She was in town this week to take a look at some advertising updates, and we ended up having dinner together. We had a great time and have gotten together a couple more times since outside of work. I hate to hurt you after all that we've shared the past few years, but I'd like to get to know Samantha better and see where our relationship may lead. I'm sorry."

Callie laughed with sheer relief. "Oh, Hunter, don't be sorry, it's perfectly okay with me if you want to date her. I was going to tell you something similar. I've met someone here that I feel a connection with, too. We had a couple of fun years together, but it seems like we're both ready to move in different directions now after all."

"Callie, you don't know how relieved I am to hear you say this. That is wonderful that you've met someone there, and I hope it works out for you. Shall we agree to be colleagues and friends instead of a couple?"

"Agreed," Callie assented. "Goodbye, Hunter."

Clicking the end call button, Callie placed her phone in the small, studded clutch she'd be carrying for the evening and looked out the window to the rolling tides of the sea under a setting sun. Colors of pink and gold streaked the sky. Below, Callie could see Aunt Fran walking Peanut Butter along the boardwalk.

“Okay, God,” she whispered, “I’m yours. Lead me where you will.”

Chapter Twelve



CALLIE

Callie entered the large warehouse that housed The Dance Space. The ground floor held a small lounge with tables and chairs set up around a dance floor and a live music area. On the left were signs pointing up a steep staircase to the second floor where the dance lessons took place. Floor to ceiling mirrors covered one entire wall, reflecting soft golden light from antique crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. Callie was early to arrive, and the room was just beginning to fill with patrons. She noticed a man and woman dressed in vintage 1920s outfits busily working with the sound system equipment. Callie felt certain they were the group's instructors. They reminded her of the days of Prohibition when swing dance was in style. The man wore dark pants held up by a pair of suspenders and a red bow tie. The woman was dressed in a coordinating outfit with a drop-waist fringe dress, low heels, and a red feathered headband.

Callie felt a tap on her shoulder. "Isn't this neat?" said Margaret. "How have you liked all the events this week? I'm having a much better time than I thought I would."

Callie could see that was true—Margaret seemed happier and less self-conscious than when they had first met. She had taken more care with her appearance, and her hair was curled into soft ringlets. "You look lovely," Callie told her honestly.

Margaret smiled. "Thank you. This is turning out to be a most interesting summer."

"I couldn't agree more," Callie said, "definitely out of the

ordinary.”

The sound of clapping called their attention to the front of the room, where Thelma, sans Liza Minnelli, stood with a nervous-looking Sarah Jane and the dance instructors. Thelma was dressed in a polka dot ensemble with a tiered ruffled skirt and sequin dance shoes that appeared worn with wear. Sarah Jane wore an understated, simple shift dress in her typical neutral palette. “Testing 1-2-3,” Thelma said into a hand-held microphone, which promptly reverberated loudly. The woman hurried to adjust the knobs on the speakers in the corner. “I’d like to introduce you to Zachary and Jessica. They are professional ballroom dance competitors as well as your instructors for the evening. We will be learning the basics of the two-step swing, the box step, and the foxtrot. Let me demonstrate. Music!” She handed the microphone to Sarah Jane as Jessica keyed up a big-band tune.

Thelma grabbed Zachary by the arm and dragged him, looking slightly flustered, into position. Suddenly, Thelma broke into an energetic two-step, and for a couple of beats, it was unclear which of them was leading the other. However, Zachary quickly adapted, appearing to enjoy his partner’s enthusiasm. Callie had to admit Thelma was quite good, if forceful. The group began to tap their feet and clap to the beat.

When the number was over, Zachary bowed to his partner, and Thelma curtsied in a swoop of ruffles before retaking the microphone from Sarah Jane.

“And that’s how it’s done,” she said breathlessly. “Ladies, if you’ll form a circle around the perimeter, we’ll have the men line up and switch partners after every few minutes when called.”

“Excuse me!” came a yell from the back of the room. It was Tony Rizzoli, whom Callie was surprised to see had an arm draped over none other than Margaret’s shoulders. “What if you don’t want to change partners?” He squeezed his arm around Margaret and looked into her eyes with unabashed affection.

“Well, I’ll be,” Callie muttered to herself. “Talk about no ordinary summer, indeed.” She would have thought he’d prefer a much showier woman more like himself, such as Amberley. But then again, Amberley had been clear about her interest in the math professor. She recalled

that Tony had mentioned how Margaret reminded him of his late mother. She surmised the man was deeper than she'd assumed, feeling guilty for having judged a book by its cover so readily.

Callie realized she hadn't seen Jackson yet. Was he late? She hoped nothing had come up as she'd been looking forward to the evening and planned to be honest about her past relationship and the fact she was now single and could freely explore their mutual attraction.

Jessica's voice trilled through the speakers as she spoke into a clip-on microphone. She and Zachary demonstrated a few patterns, and the group practiced the steps. As the music played, Callie's partner whirled her around in a circle with a bit more force than Callie was expecting and she tripped over his shoe, losing her balance. In doing so, she realized her shoes had far too little traction, and she skidded wildly across the room before crashing into someone's outstretched arms. Looking up, she saw it was Jackson who had caught her. But despite orchestrating the quick save, his expression was almost angry. Callie hoped she hadn't accidentally hurt him. "Did I hurt you?" she asked worriedly.

"No," Jackson said flatly.

"Thank you, I apologize," Callie said, confused by his stoniness. There was an awkward pause.

"Could you be any clumsier?" asked Deborah, rolling her eyes. Her blouse was so tight the buttons looked as though they might pop at any moment. She placed a hand on Jackson's arm and guided it back around her waist. "Now, where were we?" she asked sweetly, leading him back into the coordinated movement pattern. He glanced back at Callie briefly before hastily turning away.

The evening wore on in a swirl of partners and steps, and by the end of it, Callie was exhausted and more confused than ever. When it was Jackson's turn to partner with her, he had excused himself to the restroom and didn't reappear until they were told to change partners again. Callie was sure he was avoiding her. But why? What had she done? She couldn't think of anything. Would he still be accompanying her and Aunt Fran to church in the morning?

The song ended, and Thelma again took the hand-held mike. “I’d like to thank each and every one of you for coming tonight and for joining us this summer for your seaside vacation. At the ***Forever Yours*** matchmaking agency, we strive to bring you the best in world-class opportunities to meet your future one-and-only. Please don’t forget to fill out your final ratings in your Lookbooks tonight before you leave. There is a bin by the door for you to drop them off on your way out. If you forgot to bring your *Lookbook* to tonight’s event, you are welcome to bring them to the Harbor Inn and leave them at the front desk before 10:00 am tomorrow. We will be compiling the data tomorrow afternoon and will email you by 9:00 pm to provide your top three matches. Thank you again for partnering with ***Forever Yours*** to meet your perfect match.”

Callie realized she had left her *Lookbook* back at the inn but had never actually completed any ratings. It just didn’t feel right to her, like she was judging people rather than getting to know them as fellow human beings. Besides, she knew that there was only one man who pulled at her heartstrings and made her yearn for more. But now, it seemed that man wanted nothing to do with her.

Chapter Thirteen



CALLIE

After rushing out of the dance space, Callie hurried back to the inn, hoping to avoid Jackson. It was clear he had lost interest in her for some reason. Dejected, she changed into her favorite pair of comfy pajama pants and matching t-shirt and went into the bathroom to scrub the makeup off her face. She felt silly wearing it, anyway. With her hair up in a scrunchy, she climbed into bed and tried to read but closed the book when she realized she'd read the same page for a half hour and hadn't retained a single word. She tossed and turned, but sleep failed to come. She had no idea whether Jackson was still planning to attend church with her and Aunt Fran in the morning. She had to make sure to get up early enough to prepare breakfast for the inn's guests. Everyone was scheduled to check out Sunday since the matchmaking events had ended. She and Fran would have a few days off until new guests were expected to arrive later in the week. Callie felt a twinge of sadness. She was scheduled to return to Chicago at the end of the month. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Or was that hunger? She'd only had a quick sandwich for dinner before getting ready for dancing. Sighing, she reached over and switched the bedside lamp back on. It was chilly with the air conditioning, and she threw a sweatshirt on over her thin t-shirt and pushed her feet into slippers before leaving her suite for the kitchen.

The staircase was faintly lit by several nightlights placed for safety, and Callie padded down the steps quietly. She knew that Aunt Fran had taken Peanut Butter to her room for the night after returning

from their evening walk. She was glad her aunt was bonding with the puppy.

Entering the kitchen, Callie pressed the switch, turning on the lights over the island. It would be sufficient for getting a snack but not blinding, since her eyes were already accustomed to the darkness.

Callie opened the refrigerator and stared morosely inside. The silence enveloped her.

Suddenly, a voice sounded from the entrance, startling her. Callie tried not to scream as she leaped back several feet.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” Jackson said, walking into the glow cast by the light. He was in a plaid pajama set with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of sneakers on his feet. “I couldn’t sleep and thought I’d raid the refrigerator—looks like you had the same idea, huh?” He ran a hand through his dark hair sheepishly.

“I guess great minds think alike,” Callie said, letting out a breath. “Even if you did scare me out of one of my nine lives,” she half-joked.

“Yeah, I am sorry about that,” Jackson said. “You were so still I wasn’t convinced you were just a figment of my imagination at first.”

“Oh?” Callie said. It was now or never, she decided.

“Jackson, was there something I said or did that turned you off? It seemed like you were trying to avoid me tonight. I thought we were...getting closer.”

Jackson took another step and leaned against the kitchen counter, looking at her.

“Callie, you didn’t tell me you have a boyfriend. I know nothing has really happened between us, but it could have, and you must have sensed that I’m attracted to you. I can’t help it—you’re smart, sweet, generous, and beautiful. And you’re a Christian who wants a relationship with Jesus. What is there not to love? What I don’t understand is why you’re not married yet.”

Callie was shocked. How did Jackson know about Hunter? She recalled Jeanne telling her that Hunter had called the inn’s main line, looking for her. Had Jackson been present at the time? That must have been what happened.

“Jackson, it’s not what you think—I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Jackson looked confused. “What?” he said. “Then who is Hunter? I wasn’t deliberately eavesdropping, but I was in the foyer when I overheard Fran’s assistant talking to someone on the phone. She said that your boyfriend, Hunter, was trying to reach you.”

“Oh, boy,” Callie said, “yes, he was looking for me. But I think you need to know the whole story.” She took a deep breath.

“Should we sit down and make ourselves more comfortable?” Jackson asked.

“Yes, I’d like that,” nodded Callie. “There are some chairs on the back deck. Would you like to head outside to talk?”

“Works for me,” Jackson said. They headed through the mudroom to the back door and walked out into the warm salty air of the southern summer night. The tide rumbled rhythmically below.

Jackson pulled a couple of all-weather lounge chairs close together, and they settled into them. Callie could faintly smell the spicy scent of his aftershave.

“Hunter proposed to me at our company’s holiday party last year,” she said. “I turned him down, and we agreed to take a break and get some space. My aunt offered to have me stay with her this summer.”

“So that’s the real reason you came to Seaview?” Jackson asked.

“Yes,” Callie said. “My aunt is my mother’s sister. I never knew my mom as she died of cancer when I was still a baby. Besides my father, Aunt Fran is the only family I have left.”

Jackson reached over and took her hand tenderly. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I can’t even imagine what it must have been like to grow up without a mother or even other siblings.”

Callie wiped away a tear with her free hand.

“That’s why I’ve always longed to have a big family of my own one day,” she admitted. “Hunter was so driven and focused on his career. I could never really see him as the *dad* type. The relationship really wasn’t right for either of us. I guess it was just a matter of convenience at the time, more than anything. Getting some distance

helped us both see that more clearly. Jeanne told me that he'd called, and we finally talked. It turns out he met someone, too, since I've been here, and we agreed we both feel pulled in different directions. My relationship with him is over, Jackson."

"I don't know what to say," Jackson responded. "I am so sorry for not trusting you. I'd been so sure that you were the woman I've been searching for, and the thought that you might be like Michelle was too much to bear. It was my own fault for not giving you enough credit. Can you ever forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," Callie said, squeezing his hand with both of hers. "I understand why you assumed the worst."

Jackson scooted closer, cupping her cheek with his hand. "I need to start trusting people again. I'd like you to help me do that."

Callie nodded, tipping her chin to bring her face closer to his. "There's nothing I want more," she whispered as he lowered his lips to hers.

Chapter Fourteen



CALLIE

Callie stirred the chocolate-chip pancake batter early Sunday morning and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She was reaching for a tissue when Aunt Fran entered the kitchen, still in her pajamas and robe.

"Honey, I couldn't sleep last night because something's been on my mind, and I wanted to talk to you first thing before the day leaves us without another opportunity."

She paused and looked intently at Callie. "Why, something's happened!" A smile came over her face as she walked over to envelop her niece in a hug. "Does his name happen to be Jackson?"

Callie pulled back and looked into the eyes of her aunt, wise with the understanding that comes with years. "I should have realized I can't get anything past you," she said before uttering what came out as a half-laugh, half-sob.

"Oh, Aunt Fran, I've never felt such a strong connection with anyone before, and I have to admit I'm scared—what will happen when the summer is over, and we go back to our regular lives? I feel like I just found the man I'm supposed to be with, only to lose him before we ever have a real chance together."

"Well, my dear," said Fran, "that's actually kind of what I wanted to talk to you about." Callie gave her a quizzical look.

"I need someone I can trust to help me with managing the inn. While I love Jeanne, she just isn't family, and I need someone who is business-savvy around here. Besides, you make better chocolate-chip

pancakes than I do. What do you think? Could I entice you to move to Seaview and accept partial ownership of the Harbor Inn?”

Callie heard a tiny yip! as Peanut Butter scurried around a corner. She began laughing and crying at the same time as she reached down to scoop up the little ball of fur. Hugging him in one arm, she threw the other around her aunt.

“I think that’s a yes,” laughed Fran as they both reached out at the same time to grab tissues for the tears streaming down both faces.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy,” said Callie.

“Oh honey, just you wait,” replied her aunt.

~*~

Later that morning, Callie sat in the church pew with Jackson on one side and her aunt sitting on the other. The pastor had selected the book of Philippians for the sermon that morning. She opened her Bible and followed along with the Scripture: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Phil. 4: 4-9.*

Callie felt Jackson squeeze her right hand and Aunt Fran squeeze her left and knew that she was finally home.

Epilogue



CALLIE

Callie studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror as she placed a pastel pink headband into her hair, complimenting the new dress she had picked out for Easter. She considered all the changes that had taken place in the last year and felt an overwhelming surge of gratitude for the blessings the Lord had bestowed. After relocating to Seaview, she had been working steadily with Aunt Fran to computerize the inn's scheduling and bookkeeping systems and launch new advertising. The upgraded marketing strategies had proven effective, and there was now a waitlist of several months to schedule a reservation.

Jackson had moved his home base to Seaview, and he and Callie were dating and becoming more serious by the day about spending their future together. They had heard from Amberley Drake, who had called excitedly from her car phone after she and Ben Green eloped over Christmas. She had found a position as a local reporter for one of the Atlanta tv news stations, and she and Ben were house hunting. They had also received a text from Tony Rizzoli, who proposed to Margaret on New Year's Eve. He was moving to Ohio, and they were planning a gigantic wedding with a guest list of five hundred.

Callie uncapped her lip gloss and gave her lips a quick swipe. She, Jackson, and Aunt Fran were picking up her father from the airport on their way to the Easter church service. Arthur Winthrop had been tight-lipped when Callie informed him that she was changing her career direction and moving to Florida. But she was encouraged by the fact that he wanted to make the trip that spring to visit her and meet

Jackson. She prayed that things would go smoothly and their time together wouldn't be as awkward as she currently felt. Grabbing her clutch and her keys, she headed downstairs.

~*~

The church had been packed that morning, the pews filled with a sea of bright colors, fancy hats, tulle, and patent leather. Callie, Jackson, Arthur, and Aunt Fran had headed back to the inn for a catered mid-day meal, a gift from Arthur. The four of them sat at the mahogany dining table, finishing roast lamb, honey glazed carrots, scalloped potatoes, and hot cross buns.

Sipping a cup of decaf, Arthur suggested they head into the sitting room. Callie felt apprehensive, sure that a lecture of some sort was about to take place. She plumped the pillows on the sofa before taking a seat next to Jackson, who immediately reached for her hand. Arthur sat in the wingback chair facing them, while Fran perched on the edge of the opposite chair, looking slightly nervous as she fingered the strand of pearls around her neck.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Callie, I owe you an apology," he said, leaning forward to place his cup on the coffee table. Callie tried not to let her mouth fall open. She searched for something appropriate to say, but she decided just to keep listening as no words came out. After a brief pause, her father continued.

"After losing my beloved Molly...your mother, my grief was almost unbearable. I understand now that I've buried myself in work all these years to avoid feeling the pain, or feeling much of anything, for that matter. I haven't been there for you as I should have been. When you decided to leave the company and move here, it was an eye-opener, quite frankly. Frances, I'm sorry I haven't been better at keeping in touch with you, either. It's just been too hard since you remind me so much of my wife."

Fran's eyes filled with tears. "Arthur, please don't apologize. I completely understand, and it's never too late. Molly would want you to be happy, you know."

Arthur passed a hand over his face. "Yes, I know she would," he said. "Jackson, I understand that you love my daughter, and from

what I hear, she loves you, too.”

Jackson looked into Callie’s eyes before responding. “Yes, sir, I love her, and I intend to spend my life with her, with your permission, that is.”

“I understand that you are a Christian?” Arthur continued. “I mean, not just in name but in practice—you read and study the Bible, correct?”

“Yes, sir, that’s correct,” Jackson replied.

“Hmm,” Arthur said thoughtfully. “I’ve avoided church since Molly died because I was so angry. However, now I think maybe that wasn’t such a good idea. I probably could have used the help making sense of it all, but I was just too stubborn at the time to ask for it, much less accept it.”

“We’d love to welcome you to church with us whenever you are in town,” Jackson said. “All I know is that God is always available, even when we don’t understand why things happen the way they do.”

Arthur nodded. “I’d like to find a church back home, and maybe I’ll even pick up a Bible in the airport on my way back to Chicago.”

Callie got up and went to embrace her father. “Dad,” she said as the tears ran down her cheeks, “I love you.”

Arthur hugged her back. “I love you too, honey. Guess it’s never too late for an old dog like me to learn some new tricks.” He looked at her as a sly smile spread across his face. “Maybe I’ll even sign up for a matchmaking service. What do you kids think?” Callie was sure their laughter could be heard all the way up to heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, Callie often feels like something is missing in her life. What do you think this was? Did she find it?
2. Having been hurt before, Jackson has chosen to isolate himself to avoid having to trust anyone again. Do you think this was the right choice? How did fear play a part? How did he handle his fears?
3. Have you ever let fear prevent you from doing things you have longed to do? How can fear lead to excess control?
4. What steps can you take to face your fears and overcome them? What role does faith play?
5. What do you think it means to “surrender to God’s will?” How would you feel differently if you did this? What is the difference between trusting God and trusting yourself?
6. Do you see a resemblance between Arthur Winthrop (Callie’s father) and Jackson Thorne? What things has Jackson learned that Arthur hasn’t? Do you think Arthur will change? How would that affect his relationship with Callie?
7. Were you surprised by some of the couples who ended up together? Why or why not?
8. Have you ever (or would you) sign up for a dating service, app, or matchmaking event? Why or why not? What do you think of these? If you have used one of these services, how was your experience? Would you do it again? What advice would you give someone who is considering using them?

Recipes

Mexican Brunch

12 eggs, beaten

2 C. cream-style corn

4 C. (1 lb.) sharp Cheddar cheese, grated

2 4-oz. cans green chilies, drained and chopped

1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce

1 Tbsp. Salt

1/2 tsp. pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.
2. In a large bowl, combine all ingredients; beat well until mixed.
3. Pour into a greased 9x13-inch baking dish. (May be prepared in advance up to this point; cover and refrigerate up to 24 hours in advance).
4. Bake for 1 hour 15 minutes, or until firm to touch. *Serves 12.*

Frozen Lime Salad

1 3-oz. pkg. lime jello

1 C. hot water

1 3-oz. pkg. cream cheese

1 C. cold water

1 8-oz. can crushed pineapple, drained

1 6-oz. jar maraschino cherries, drained

1 banana, mashed (add a little lemon juice)

1 C. whipped whipping cream

1 tsp. vanilla

1/2 C. chopped nuts

1/2 C. sugar

1. Mix lime jello and hot water
2. Add cream cheese and beat with an electric mixer until smooth.
3. Add cold water.
4. Refrigerate to congeal slightly.
5. Fold in the remaining ingredients.
6. Spoon into molds and freeze.

Serves 15.

Tenderloin of Beef with Lobster

1 3 to 4 lb. tenderloin of beef, oven-ready

1 onion, sliced

2 Tbsp. grated fresh ginger

1/2 C. soy sauce

1/4 C. sherry

3 lobster tails

4 Tbsp. melted butter

1. Rub beef with soy sauce and ginger.
2. Put sliced onions in a 9x13-inch baking dish; place beef on top of onions.
3. Bake for 25 minutes at 450 degrees, basting with sherry.
4. Remove from the oven and turn oven heat down to 350 degrees.
5. Split lobster tails, loosen meat, rub with sherry and bake 10 to 15 minutes at 350 degrees.
6. Remove lobster meat from the shell. Split the tenderloin 3/4" deep and stuff lobster meat into the slit.
7. Baste with sherry and soy sauce and place under a broiler or in the oven just long enough to heat.
8. Sprinkle with chopped parsley and melted butter.
9. Slice and serve with pan juices.

Serves 8 to 12.

Baked Spinach and Tomatoes

2 1/2 lbs. chopped spinach
2 C. fine breadcrumbs
1/2 C. Parmesan cheese
1 1/2 tsp. thyme
1 Tbsp. MSG
1/2 tsp. Tabasco
Salt to taste
1 tsp. black pepper
6 green onions, chopped (including tops)
1 C. melted butter
6 eggs
1 tsp. garlic powder
12 thick slices of tomato

1. Cook and drain spinach.
2. Add breadcrumbs, cheese, and the next five ingredients.
3. Sauté onions in butter and add to spinach mixture, then beat eggs and add to spinach mixture.
4. Sprinkle garlic powder on tomato slices and place in the bottom of a 9x13-inch baking dish.
5. Pour spinach mixture over tomatoes.
6. Bake for 25 minutes at 350 degrees.

Serves 12.

Applesauce Puffs

2 C. biscuit mix

1/4 C. sugar

1 tsp. cinnamon

1/2 C. applesauce

1/4 C. milk

1 egg, slightly beaten

2 Tbsp. oil

Topping:

1/4 C. sugar

1/4 C. cinnamon

2 Tbsp. melted butter

1. Combine biscuit mix, sugar, and cinnamon; add applesauce, milk, egg, and oil.
2. Beat vigorously for 30 seconds.
3. Fill greased muffin tins 2/3 full and bake 12 minutes at 400 degrees.
4. Cool slightly.
5. Combine topping ingredients
6. Remove puffs from muffin tins and dip in topping mixture.

Chocolate Delight

2 4-oz. pkg. Sweet German chocolate

2 Tbsp. milk

4 eggs, separated

Ladyfingers, angel food cake slices, or pound cake slices

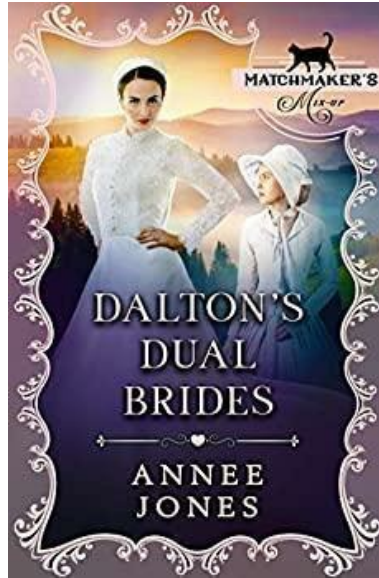
Whipped cream

1. Melt chocolate and milk in a double boiler.
2. Beat egg yolks and add.
3. Cool.
4. Beat egg whites until stiff but not dry; fold into chocolate mixture.
5. Line a souffle dish with ladyfingers or cake slices.
6. Pour chocolate mixture into pan.
7. Refrigerate for several hours.
8. Top with whipped cream.

Serves 6 to 8.

More Books From Annee

Historical Romance



Dalton's Dual Brides

Matchmaker's Mix-Up Series

A naughty cat... a mixed-up matchmaker... an outlaw's ghost... and now dueling brides - what's a cowboy to do?

1870, Wyoming Territory. Dalton Sweetland is one stressed-out cattle rancher. Notorious outlaw Butler Robb was recently caught following a life of crime spent stealing cattle, robbing stagecoaches, and committing murder. Right before being hanged, Robb uttered one final word, "Sweetland." In the months since, a rumor has popped up in a town that the outlaw buried his loot somewhere on Sweetland land. Multiple townsfolk are claiming they've seen Robb's ghost wandering the property, purportedly to recover his lost gold. To make matters worse, Dalton's ranch hands keep quitting out of fear of being accosted by the apparition, and Dalton himself keeps being accosted by mischievous young ladies wishing to marry him, find the treasure, and get rich quick. After Dalton's brother suggests hiring a matchmaker to help him find true love, Dalton hopes the end of his problems is finally in sight. Little does he know...

1870, Chicago. Cleo the cat, after enjoying a bit too much

catnip, lost her balance while prancing along the high bookshelf where Agatha Sinclair, matchmaker, keeps her files. While skittering down, Cleo's weight proved too much for the flimsy wood, and the structure came toppling over, sending Agatha's papers flying. Nobody could blame poor Agatha for promptly having an apoplectic fit upon seeing the mess. Now her granddaughter, Maggie, is left with trying to sort out her grandmother's matches. The files indicate that Dalton Sweetland was matched with a "J. Knight," but Maggie can't seem to locate the woman's address to contact her. Hence, she takes out an ad in the newspaper looking for a marriageable lady named "J. Knight" who wishes to claim her ticket out West to meet her match. Much to Maggie's distress, not one but TWO Miss J. Knights come knocking at her door, ready to claim the golden ticket.

Was Dalton matched with Jessalynn or Jenna? Maggie doesn't have time to figure this out, so throwing up her hands, she apologizes for the mishap and agrees to foot the bill for both of them to take the stage to Wyoming.

May the best bride marry the cursed cowboy...



Tess

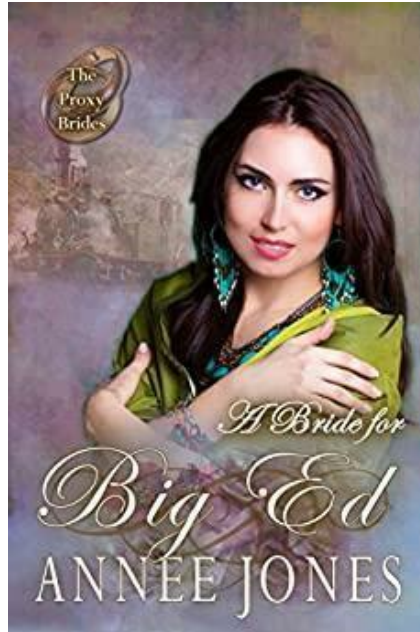
Prairie Roses Collection, Book 9

A betrayal... a secret baby... an unknown imposter... will Tess survive the wagon train journey to Sunset Hills, Oregon after her life is threatened? And if so, what will she do once she gets there?

1855. Independence, Missouri. Tess Findlay can't wait to be reunited with her beau, who went out west three months ago to mine for gold, saying he'd send for her once he'd gotten established. Even though she hasn't heard from him, she's discovered she's with child and decides to join a wagon train to travel to Oregon to surprise him with the news. When a band of robbers holds up the caravan, Tess is shocked to recognize her beau as one of the outlaws. He warns her that someone on the wagon train isn't who they seem, but before he can reveal the person's identity, he is killed in a gunfight. Who can Tess trust? She is drawn to widowed physician Garrett Kincaid but fears for her life and that of her unborn child. Besides, what man would ever want a woman who is carrying another man's baby?

Garrett Kincaid is looking forward to bringing his youngest nephew, Jacob, to join his sister- and brother-in-law in their new home of Sunset Hills, OR. His sister begged him to care for her young son until the rest of the family got settled. The time is right for them to

make the journey west. There is nothing left in Kansas now for Garrett, anyway, not since his wife died of typhoid fever. He's always wanted to start his own medical clinic, and Sunset Hill seems like the perfect place. However, after the wagon train is robbed, Garrett realizes he will have to do everything in his power to help the group arrive safely. When Jacob befriends a beautiful young woman, Garrett can't help but wonder why she is traveling alone. Can he discover her secrets without scaring her away? And he is ready to love again?

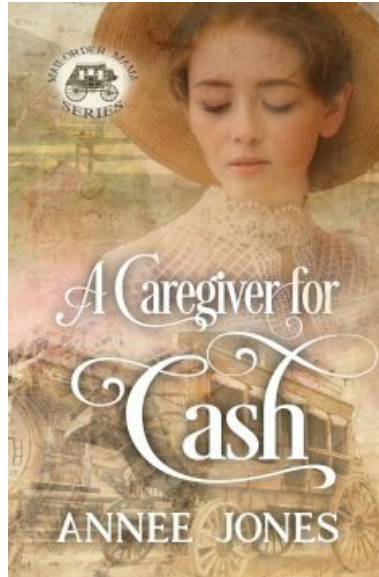


A Bride for Big Ed
The Proxy Brides Series

She's wanted dead or alive.... a desperate plan to keep her safe.... will answering an ad for a proxy bride be the answer? Or will Ophelia Price get more than she bargained for when she finally meets her new husband, Tombstone Marshal Edward "Big Ed" Lawson?

1875, Baltimore. Ophelia Price has a secret. That may not even be her real name. But what she does know for sure is there are people looking for her, bad people who want her and her family dead. After her parents receive a mysterious missive, Ophelia learns she's not who she thinks she is—just a daughter of poor immigrant servants—but rather, the next queen in line to the throne of a foreign country rife with conspiracies, violence, and false claims to the monarchy.

Suddenly, she's faced with danger from unseen forces and hastily scrambles for protection. Is becoming a proxy bride the answer? When her parents find an ad asking for a bride for a busy U.S. Marshal in the town of Tombstone, the arrangement seems like the perfect answer. But is Ophelia prepared to handle all that she signed up for—including caring for a man bent on trying to save everyone but himself?



A Caregiver for Cash

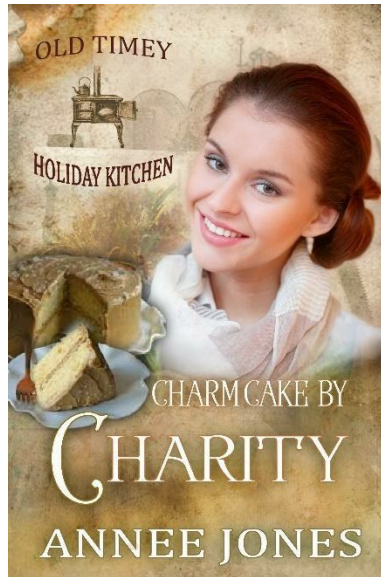
Mail-Order Mama Series, Book 18

A widowed controlling father.... A blind but rebellious daughter.... can caregiver Eliza Abraham help this family before tragedy occurs?

1890, Illinois. When she sees an advertisement in the Springfield Tribune for an upstanding, single Christian woman between 18 and 25 years of age for matrimony, housekeeping, and motherhood, Eliza Abraham jumps at the chance for a life she would never otherwise have. Being an only child and a poor orphan at that, Eliza longs for a family of her own.

When she arrives by stagecoach in Laramie, Wyoming, she discovers that widowed coal miner Cash Jacobs has no intention of marriage whatsoever, despite the best-laid plans of his meddling mother and 10-year-old blind, headstrong daughter Rosemary. Cash agrees, however, that his child could benefit from a caregiver, and since Eliza has experience as a nanny, he offers to hire her for the position.

Eliza quickly discovers that Cash's controlling ways have estranged his young daughter's affections and begins to wonder which member of the Jacobs family really needs a caregiver?

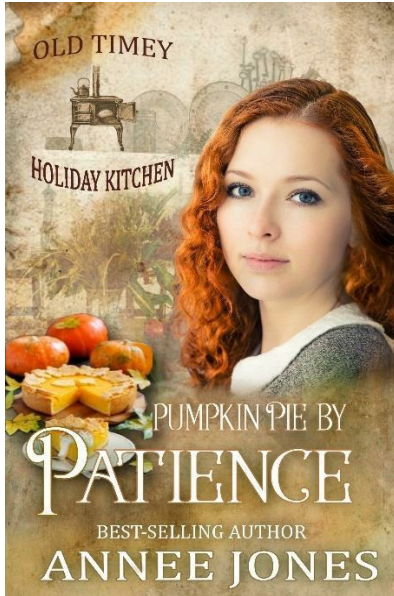


Charm Cake by Charity
Old Timey Holiday Kitchen Series

1889, Chicago. It's Christmas, and Charity DeWitt is celebrating her engagement to recent medical school graduate Dr. Fox Skilling with a Charm Cake—a cake that contains symbolic charms crafted by her father at his jewelry store. When her slice contains a fleur-de-lis, she's certain the tiny silver symbol of new beginnings has to do with her upcoming wedding to Fox—or does it?

When he announces his plans to go out west to open a medical clinic, she journeys with him to Oregon where she meets Peter Abrams, a schoolteacher partially paralyzed after being thrown off his horse. Why is she so drawn to Peter and his books? Is it just because she's never learned to read? Or could it be more?

Find out as you read this heartwarming holiday romance set in Sunset Hills, Oregon!



Pumpkin Pie by Patience
Old Timey Holiday Kitchen

1890, Baltimore. 19-year-old Patience Sutton has never been praised for her cooking—in fact, she burnt the pumpkin pie at her family’s last Christmas celebration. As the youngest of 10 children, she’s tired of always being the baby and longs to grow up. When she spies an ad in the paper from Oregon banker Jefferson Cooke seeking a mail-order bride willing to travel out west and who “must love children,” Patience jumps at the chance for a new life. With children of her own to take care of, maybe she’ll finally get some respect! Right?

Find out as you read this heartwarming holiday romance set in Sunset Hills, Oregon!

A Note from the Author

Thank you so much for reading my book—I hope you enjoyed it!

I would greatly appreciate you leaving a review on Amazon, even if it is only a one liner. Posting a good review helps get books you consider worthwhile into the hands of more readers!

~Annee

All my books can be found on:

My Amazon Page:

[amazon.com/Annee-Jones/e/ B08KSFSHX1%3F](https://www.amazon.com/Annee-Jones/e/B08KSFSHX1%3F)

My Goodreads Author Profile:

[goodreads.com/authoranneejones](https://www.goodreads.com/authoranneejones)

-

About the Author



Annee Jones has always liked playing “dress-up.” Indeed, she wears many hats: As a historical and contemporary Christian romance novelist, Annee loves to share stories guaranteed to entertain, encourage, and inspire.

Annee is also a professional book reviewer for Publishers Weekly in the genres of Christian living and Christian fiction. She writes many of the editorial book reviews you see on Amazon! She has worked for over 20 years as a disability counselor where she helps people navigate through complex medical and legal systems while rediscovering their wholeness in Spirit. Annee loves to connect with her readers.

You can reach her at:

Amazon

[amazon.com/Annee-Jones/e/Bo8KSFSHX1%3F](https://www.amazon.com/Annee-Jones/e/Bo8KSFSHX1%3F)

Facebook

[facebook.com/AuthorAnneeJones](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorAnneeJones)

Goodreads

[goodreads.com/authoranneejones](https://www.goodreads.com/authoranneejones)

Annee's Website

<https://www.anneejones.com>

Join Her Newsletter

<https://www.anneejones.com/newsletter>

She invites you to join her online readers' group,

“Annee's Cozy Corner” at

<facebook.com/groups/anneescozycorner>