

BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

# MANDY MAGRO

## ONE *More* TIME

IF YOU  
LIKE NICHOLAS  
SPARKS, YOU'LL  
LOVE THIS

One split-second choice. A spark of magic.  
What if your life could be completely different?

**MANDY MAGRO** lives in Cairns, Far North Queensland, with her fiancé, Des, their daughter, Chloe Rose, and their two adorable pooches, Sophie and Sherlock. With pristine aqua-blue coastline in one direction and sweeping rural landscapes in the other, she describes her home as heaven on earth. A passionate woman and a romantic at heart, Mandy loves writing about soul-deep love, the Australian way of life, and the wonderful characters who call the country home.

**Also by Mandy Magro**

*Rosalee Station*

*Jacaranda*

*Flame Tree Hill*

*Driftwood*

*Country at Heart*

*The Wildwood Sisters*

*Bluegrass Bend*

*Walking the Line*

*Along Country Roads*

*Moment of Truth*

*A Country Mile*

*Return to Rosalee Station*

*Secrets of Silvergum*

*Riverstone Ridge*

*The Stockman's Secret*

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*Savannah's Secret*

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ONE  
*More*  
TIME

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MAGRO

FICTION



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*For Mum and Dad – Gaye and John – I love you  
both with all my heart.*

*My two loves of my life, Des and Chloe,  
you are my world.*

*And for my publisher, Rachael Donovan,  
for believing in me, always.*

12 December 1974

Dearest Mr Charlie Wilson,

I am writing to thank you for your heartfelt letter. I wish it were under different circumstances that we are now in contact with one another.

It makes me so very proud to know that my darling Joey saved you from death on the battlefield of Vietnam. He is a compassionate man, my husband. I still find it hard to believe he's listed as missing in action. I cannot – and will not – accept that he's not coming home to the children and me. Every day, I wake trusting it will be the day he's found and returned home to us in Alabama, and every night, I get back onto my knees and pray it will be tomorrow that he will be at our door. I will not give up on him, not ever.

I know you said that you would hopefully be able to return to Vietnam to track him down and save him from a terrible fate as a possible POW. All I can say to that is that if you ever get the chance and you are his saviour, I would be forever grateful to you for bringing my one true love home to me, and our two beautiful children.

Bless you and yours,

Margaret Mary Baker

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# PART I

# CHAPTER

## 1

### **17 September – modern day**

Holding her future in trembling hands, Grace Burrows took one last tear-blurred look at the results of her recent blood test. Her doctor had been gentle when delivering the shocking news, but that hadn't softened the blow. After thirty-odd years spent nursing people through sickness, she understood surviving this would take a miracle, and her long life had been fairly short on those. But she still believed in the power of prayer – unanswered or not – and the potency of positive thinking. That's what she needed, now more than ever.

Breathing in deeply, she folded up the document and tucked it into her safe spot – beneath her mattress. There were too many prying eyes in her house to risk such information being seen. Flattening the quilt and then straightening her weary bones, she rubbed her lower back. Arthritis was making her left hip achingly tender, and her knees didn't have much suspension left. But even though her body was failing, getting older was still a wonderful gift, not least because it meant more time with her daughter and beloved grandchildren.

Taking unhurried steps toward the golden shafts of sunlight stretching across the oak floorboards, she pondered her next move. She had to tell her loved ones the news, but she didn't know quite how to put it into words. Besides, the timing was off – it would be selfish of her to break it to them now.

She drew a slow, steady breath, then sighed it away. After a day filled with a steady stream of out-of-town visitors, and with only an hour until her seventieth birthday celebrations began, she had sought to steal a few moments to herself before once again putting on a brave face.

Gone were the days where she yearned for companionship and conversation, although it had been lovely catching up with people she hadn't seen in years. With her deteriorating health, she was well aware it could be the last time, and it made every moment spent with her family and friends bittersweet. Tonight was going to be emotional. She just hoped she made it through without breaking down.

She parted the blackout curtains, passed through the French doors, then raised a hand to shield her eyes. Resting against the wrought-iron railings of her top-floor balcony, she blinked into the stunning view. The setting sun was stealing the warmth of the glorious spring day, and the cool sea breeze stirred the hem of her crimson cocktail dress and brushed the few wisps of silver hair she'd left loose from her chignon against her cheeks. Even after calling Waterside Estate home for the past forty years, she'd never tired of the view. How could she, when the only thing separating her from the softly rolling hills of Moonflower Acres was the soothing lap of the turquoise ocean upon the white-sand shores of Sapphire Bay? Her hometown was heaven on earth.

Her thoughts drifted back. She'd quite often stood here, wondering what her life would've been like if she'd stayed at Moonflower Acres, with her first and – dare she say it? – only true love. She was fairly certain she wouldn't have ever been able to move past the hurt, after he'd broken her heart so categorically. She'd forgiven him for deserting her and their baby girl, but she'd never forgotten the pain of Charlie Wilson's hardheartedness.

As she gazed out at the myriad boats bobbing in the marina, her late husband's face came to mind. She smiled softly as she reflexively twisted her wedding band. She adored anything to do with the ocean, but Rodger Burrows had sadly not shared her passion, his predisposition to seasickness making it all too much. 'Opposites attract' had been the embodiment of their relationship, and the saying had proved to be both a blessing and a curse. They'd had so many contradictions – their taste in music, religious beliefs, even the

way they each liked their steak cooked, and yet she'd loved him so. How could she not? Right from the start, when she'd been a broken, guarded young woman, he'd been gentle with her, simply content in her company, and had quickly proven to be a devoted stepfather. And in all their years together, he had never raised his voice to her, not even once. If only they'd been able to have children, maybe there would have been something to fill the many silences that had hung between them, especially in the later years.

Shifting her gaze closer to home, she admired the gardens she meticulously tended. What had been a row of tiny plants and buried seedlings all those years ago was now a flourishing display of tropical trees and shrubs, bursting with differing shades of blooms, and her lemon, orange and limes trees were abundant with fruit. It was a haven for the birds, butterflies and bees she liked to capture in photos. As with anything in life, consistent love and attention could yield great things.

Gardening had always been one of her three greatest passions in life, along with dancing and baking. She pondered how much longer she had to enjoy such simple pleasures. A month? A year? Either way, she was going to fight until her very last breath. She still had lots of life to live.

Making her way back inside, she eased onto the seat at her mahogany duchess. Not one for lots of make-up, she applied some lipstick and blush, then brought her fingertips to the crinkles framing the corners of her sea-green eyes. Laugh lines, her darling daughter Hope preferred to call them. Grace liked to agree, even though she knew that though she'd laughed a lot throughout her seventy years, some of those lines were due to disappointments and heartbreak.

A knock at the door had her twisting to face it. 'Yes?'

'It's just me, Mum. Can I come in?' Hope's singsong voice carried through it.

'Yes, love, of course you can.'

Grace stood as the door swung open and Hope stepped in, her long cobalt dress whooshing around her ankles and her silky dark hair swishing around her shoulders. ‘So, what do you think?’ she asked, spinning, her arms wide and her blue eyes sparkling.

‘Oh my, you look ...’ Hope was, and had always been, the spitting image of her father. As emotions overcame her, Grace’s hand came to her mouth, and she blinked faster. ‘... absolutely beautiful.’

‘Aw, thanks Mum.’ Her eyes widening, Hope closed the distance, and took Grace’s hands in hers. ‘Like mother, like daughter.’ She stepped back, her fingers lacing with Grace’s at an arm’s length. ‘You seriously never age, Mum. You don’t look a year older than fifty.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that, but thank you for being so nice, my darling.’ She patted Hope’s hand before letting it go.

‘I’m not just being nice, Mum, it’s the hand-on-heart truth. You’ve got an ageless elegance about you.’ Hope rested down on the edge of the bed, and watched as Grace slipped in her sapphire earrings. ‘Dad asked me to give you this.’ She held out a goldwrapped parcel adorned with a blue ribbon.

A little taken aback, Grace tipped her head to the side as she cautiously took it. ‘Why didn’t he just give it to me tonight?’ A thought struck her – Charlie’s dependability had not been great over the years. ‘He *is* still coming, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, he is.’ Hope nodded enthusiastically. ‘I don’t think he’d be game not to, knowing how much Sharni and Rose are looking forward to dancing with their grandpa.’

Grace chuckled – they unquestionably were a bloodline of strong-minded women, and she was proud of it. ‘Ha, yes, I suppose, with three generations of us around to lecture him at the moment, your father would most certainly be in big trouble if he didn’t show up.’

‘You got that right.’ Hope smirked playfully. ‘To be honest, though, tonight has been the topic of conversation with

him ever since we arrived last week.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Anyone would think the man’s still madly in love with you,’ she added, giving her mother a knowing look.

‘Mm-hmm,’ Grace replied, brows wrinkling. There was truth behind Hope’s words, and an awareness in her daughter’s gaze, all of which Grace had learnt to turn a blind eye to over the years. Charlie had had his chances – too many chances – all those years ago. And he’d blown them, good and proper.

‘Right, well, on that tongue-tied note ...’ Hope pointed to the present, still clutched in Grace’s hands. ‘I’m not sure what it is, exactly, but Dad was hoping you might like to wear it to the party.’

‘Oh, okay.’ After sitting down beside her one and only child, Grace carefully peeled the elaborate wrapping paper back, revealing a little velvet box. ‘He’s bought me jewellery?’

*How ... odd.*

She was almost too afraid to open it.

‘Well, come on, Mum, the suspense is killing me.’ Hope bounced on the spot.

Her heart thudding, Grace flipped the box open, and the sight of what was inside caught her breath. The sapphire and diamond brooch instantly dragged her back. She’d forgotten all about it, though the nostalgia it brought was raw and real and ever so powerful.

She went to speak, but her mouth was too dry to move, and her mind was too enfolded in the past to string a sensible sentence together.

Hope placed a gentle hand on Grace’s knee. ‘What is it, Mum?’

Grace felt a surge of emotions, born from days gone by – happier days, when all had seemed beautifully attainable, with Charlie by her side. They’d had so many dreams for their future, had shared so many promises to be able reach those dreams.

Looking back, as she had many times over, they'd been so naïve to believe it was going to be achievable.

'Mum, are you okay?' Hope's voice was laced with concern.

Harnessing all of her inner strength, Grace cleared the emotion from her throat and found her voice. 'This is the brooch your father bought me in our second year together, a few weeks before he decided to go back to that dreadful place, on that hopeless mission.' She lifted it from the box, and looked at it as if for the very first time. 'All those years he was missing, spent hoping and praying he would be found alive, that he would come home to us ...' Overcome with resentment, she choked on her words, and had to take a moment to regather herself.

'Oh, Mum, I'm so sorry you had to go through all of that.' Hope's tone was soft, and her blue eyes were filled with compassion. 'Even though I was only a little girl, I still remember praying with you, asking god to bring him back to us.' She took a moment, sniffled, then smiled through her own heartache. 'But as I've said to you before, I don't believe Dad valued finding the missing American soldier who saved his life, or being in the army for that matter, more than he treasured you or me.' She half shrugged. 'He was just a desperate man living with a tonne of guilt that he didn't know how to deal with. Going back to Vietnam and trying to find that man, or his remains at the very least, so he could have a proper burial, was how he dealt with it.'

Grace drew in a long, steady breath. 'Darling, I know more than anyone how it was for your father was when he came home from the war. But he promised me he was done with the fight, and that my love was enough. So I will never understand how he could leave his wife and eighteen-month-old baby girl behind, and go back to the very place that ruined him.' She brought her teary gaze to Hope's. 'Don't get me wrong, I don't regret marrying Rodger, but I do often wonder, if I hadn't been so vulnerable at the time, desperate to somehow fill the void your father's desertion had caused, and had waited that little

bit longer, if your father and I would have made things work.’ She sniffed back her welling emotions, and smiled sadly. ‘Too little, too late, now, hey.’

‘I suppose we’ll never know, Mum.’ Hope regarded her with equally sad eyes. ‘So it’s no use beating yourself up.’

‘My sentiments exactly.’ Reining her emotions in, Grace stood and carefully pinned the brooch to her dress, admiring how it looked in the mirror of her duchess. ‘I can recall the day I gave it back to your father, too. The very day he boarded the plane for Vietnam. It feels like it was only yesterday ...’

Grace’s voice trailed off as she remembered Charlie at the front door, six years older and shocked to see she’d re-married, this very brooch in his hand. He’d desperately tried to explain why he’d gone MIA, his foolish belief that losing his leg when he’d stepped on the unexploded buried bomb meant he wasn’t man enough to return to her. She’d both loved and hated him so much in that moment.

‘You weren’t to know Dad was still alive, Mum. How could any of us have known he was living in some hut in the Vietnamese jungle while he searched for that lost soldier? Or that when he failed to find him, he’d come back to Australia and was in Sydney, basically on the streets, for two years?’ Hope sighed, and rose from the edge of the bed. ‘But all that aside, as much as you two infuriate each other, I know you both still love each other very much.’ She slid her arms around Grace’s waist, and rested her chin on her shoulder, regarding her mother in their reflections. ‘And that means the world to me, knowing my parents had me out of pure, unconditional love.’

Grace turned and cupped her daughter’s rouged cheeks. ‘You, my darling, are the greatest accomplishment in both my life and your father’s and yes, when we had you, we were both very much in love.’

‘I know you were.’ Hope rested her hands over her mother’s. ‘And as much as you refuse to admit it, you still are.’ With Grace scowling, Hope’s sad smile gave way to a



cheeky one. ‘On that note, I better get back downstairs and round up the girls and Kelvin.’ She groaned, rolling her eyes playfully. ‘I swear, I spend half my life telling them to hurry up, all three of them are highly trained side-trackers.’

‘And you do a very good job of running the ship, my darling.’ Grace leant in and brushed a kiss on Hope’s cheek. ‘I’ll be down in a few minutes, okay?’

‘Of course it is, take your time.’ She regarded Grace with tender adoration. ‘I love you so very much, Mum.’

‘Love you too, my sweet girl, with all my heart and soul.’

With one last meaningful look between the two women, Hope padded out. As the door clicked shut, Grace felt the urge to delve a little deeper into the past that was now at the forefront of her mind. She knew she didn’t have much time, but she walked over to the wardrobe, eased down to her knees on the sheepskin rug, and then dug behind her shoe rack. There, hidden away for all these years, sat the small suitcase she’d first used as her travel bag as an eighteen-year-old girl and which she’d eventually come to store her keepsakes in. Pulling it toward her, she dusted the top off and unclipped the two latches. As she lifted the lid, wistfulness stole her breath. Time slowed, stalled and rewound. Sat atop everything were the two pairs of booties, ones she’d knitted while dreaming of what their twin boys would look like. She’d even picked names for them – Hudson and Bryn. Her heart squeezed tight as she lifted each bootie out and pressed them to her cheek.

She’d never got to meet her boys – her miscarriage at five months had robbed her of that chance – nor had she ever told anyone about them, not even Charlie. Nor would she ever. Some secrets were better kept.

Tired of staring at his bedroom ceiling, Charlie Wilson groaned as he rolled onto his side and gradually pushed himself up to a sitting position. Gazing out the bay windows to where the sun had all but vanished behind the mountain ranges that backdropped Moonflower Acres, he saw a crescent moon and the first star beginning to peek out of the darkening sky.

Shifting his gaze across the water, first to the glowing lights of Grace's grandiose home and then to where tonight's festivities would be held, he gruffly rubbed a hand over his face, hoping to goodness Hope had made the right decision in holding the party at the very place his childhood sweetheart had long ago dreamt of turning into a seaside teashop. He knew he was partly responsible for the fact that she never had, and hated himself for it – but it was too late now to make it up to Grace. An entire lifetime had passed them by.

Besides, Rodger Burrows had played his part too, steering Grace off what she'd believed to be her predestined path, though Charlie held little comfort in not being the only one to blame. As much as his beautiful daughter had asked him over the years, if not for himself, than for her mother, he'd never been able to find it within himself to forgive Rodger for stealing his girl. Or, as Grace had once brought to his attention, maybe it was actually himself that he found impossible to forgive, for breaking her heart, for leaving her to believe she was widowed for all those years, for not initially being the father figure to Hope that he'd promised to be.

Grace had deserved better than either of them, and merited way more love than either he or Rodger had ever given her. Rodger may have believed that financial security was the way to a woman's heart – if that were the case, Grace would be the happiest woman in Sapphire Bay – but Charlie knew Grace better than she liked to admit, and had witnessed the loneliness that had lingered in her striking green eyes in all the years she'd been by Rodger's side.

As for himself, he'd been young and stupidly trusted that if he could go back to the place that had torn him apart, he could somehow put all his broken pieces together and finally be the man he believed Grace needed him to be. Yet, here he was, more broken than ever, mind, body and spirit. He now understood that all she'd ever wanted was for him to let her in, to love her like he meant it, to be there as a husband and as a father, to walk beside her, hand-in-hand, toward all of their dreams. That understanding came too little, and far too late.

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. It hadn't been a lot for her to ask of him. If only he could've seen this at the time, done things differently. If only he'd been less self-centred, if only he hadn't gone back to Vietnam because he felt he owed his life to Sergeant Joseph Baker and his war-widowed wife, if only they hadn't met with that long-buried IED in the derelict building, if only he hadn't gone into hiding while he'd tried to come to grips with being an amputee ... then maybe they'd have been right where they'd envisaged being. Here. Together. Happily in love.

The if-onyms were what ate away at him, as did the fact he'd never get a second chance to devoting himself to the one and only woman he'd ever truly loved with all his heart and soul. It was a regret he'd take to his grave as a lonely old man, a fate he truly believed he deserved.

His heart hurting with the agonising contemplations, he heaved an almighty sigh, as the weight of his past remained upon his shoulders. Regardless of his inner turmoil, he needed to snap to the present moment and get a damn grip. He'd tried to nap for the past couple of hours, unsuccessfully, and it was now time to put on his leg and his happy face, for Grace, Hope and his two beautiful grandchildren. So he grabbed his prosthesis from where he'd rested it up against the bedside table and placed it beside him on the mattress. Sliding the cotton sock over his stump, he skilfully eased the prosthetic leg on – more than half a lifetime of doing so had afforded him the experience to make it sit perfectly. He was grateful for the advances in the medical field over the years; this prosthesis was much more comfortable than his last few.

One single second.

One wrong move.

*Boom.*

The life he'd known was well and truly over.

Forty-three years on, and he could still recall every detail of the explosion that had taken the lives of his two friends, and

half his leg. Many times, he'd thought of ending it all – he'd spent six long years with the barrel of a gun in his mouth and a bottle of whisky in his hand. Those had been his darkest of days. The only reason he was still here had been at first for his darling Hope, and was now for his two beautiful granddaughters as well. The three of them brought him so much joy. He just wished they didn't live a four-hour drive away. How uncanny it was that his only daughter had gone and married an infantry soldier. Talk about history repeating. He just prayed Kelvin didn't go and break his daughter's heart, like he had his darling Grace's. PTSD had a way of making a man do things he'd never dream of. And boy oh boy did he know how the suffocating darkness could consume any possibility of a happy life.

Swinging his legs over the bed, he felt one foot hit the floor and heard the clomp of his other before he slowly eased up to standing. Making his way into the spare room, he methodically took the clothes he'd laid out on the bed this morning with Hope's help, and after stripping off his boxer shorts and shirt, got dressed in his finest suit, matching tie and gleaming Oxford shoes. Then, heading to the bathroom, he popped some brylcreem in his thick silver hair, combed it into position, cleaned his teeth and sprayed on his favourite cologne – this one had always been Grace's favourite too.

Popping two painkillers into his mouth, he bent to take a mouthful of water from the tap. Preferring not to take the prescription drugs after his years of addiction, and long-winded recovery thereafter, he'd resolved that he needed the relief of analgesics tonight. Because, if everything went to plan and she accepted his hand, he wanted to waltz Grace around the dance floor, just like they used to all those years ago. Dancing had been their solace. He sought to feel her near him. He craved to be able to breathe her in. Just one more precious time. But, as the title of the Rolling Stones song said, 'you can't always get what you want'. In his case, contrary to what they'd affirmed in the very next line of the ballad, he'd barely been able to get what he needed either.

But a man could dream, especially when dreams were all he had left.

His hand sliding along the timber banister of the two-storey homestead, Charlie took his time descending the stairs. He knew he needed to seriously think about moving his bedroom to the ground floor, but he just wasn't ready to accept he'd reached that point in his life. Although his spirit still felt no more than thirty years young, his true age was defying him – his joints creaking and groaning almost as much as he did, or so Hope liked to teasingly tell him.

Wandering down the hallway and into the lounge room, he took a seat in his reclining chair. With twenty-five minutes until he was meant to arrive, he still had fifteen minutes to kill. He'd become a master of killing time over the years. Somehow, someway, one day to the next, year after year, his life had been an internal struggle of survival, of getting through a moment to then get through the next. Try as he might, he'd allowed himself to become a victim of his past, instead of the survivor he so longed to be – a characteristic he was none too proud of, but felt helpless to change.

Staring toward the blank screen of the television and then to the mantelpiece above – the ledge void of the happy family photos he wished with all his broken heart were there – he closed his eyes and heaved a weighty breath. There was only himself to blame for all the lack and the loss. Maybe, if there was an afterlife, he could make it up to Grace when they met there.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, he climbed behind the wheel of his fifteen-year-old sedan, wound his window down while he waited for the roller door to slide up, popped the hand-shift into reverse and eased out of the carport. The salty scent of the sea drifted in and he breathed it in deep. Something about it always helped to ease a little of the ache from his heart and soul. Travelling down the winding driveway, past the line of macadamia and avocado trees his great-grandfather had planted, he reached the front gates of the five-acre coastal property he'd called home since he was

twelve. He'd inherited the estate when his precious grandmother had passed away, and had been offered a pretty penny for the place over the years – Rodger had been the highest bidder – but he wasn't about to let go of the one place that still held a piece of his heart. Grace held the rest of it, and always had.

He turned toward the main street of town, his gaze occasionally drifting from the road, to where a few bike-riders and walkers with dogs in tow made their way along the palm-lined pathway. Gentle waves lapped at the horseshoe-shaped shoreline, seagulls swooping into sparkling blue-green water in search of their next meal. A little girl skipped along in front of her mother, a bucket in one hand as she bent to gather seashells so white they looked as if they had been bleached. That had been Hope, in days gone by, her smile like sunshine as she found magic in so many things with endearing childlike wonder. He missed those days more and more as time passed him by. If only his granddaughters lived nearby, he would relive such enchanting moments with them.

He stopped at the first pedestrian crossing. A young couple crossed in front of him arm in arm, their love evident, as was their happiness in each other's company. He wanted to call out and tell them not to take each other for granted, and to hold on tight to what they had, but zipped his lips shut – he'd just look like some silly old fool.

Easing along the cobblestone street of Romance Avenue, he passed the pretty-as-a-picture stores and cafes, some shopfronts retro, some colonial, some rustic – all distinctive in their own right. Side streets stretched upwards like capillaries from the main artery of the township to reach softly rolling hills, a place called home by the six and a half thousand residents—the majority of them retirees now that jobs were few and far between.

He pulled into the parking lot of the newly renovated Sapphire Bay Yacht Club, and switched off the engine. Fairy lights had been strung along the railings, and the new timber deck with waist-high glass panels provided the perfect place to

admire the views over the sparkling harbour with a glass of wine, or three.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie reminded himself he could do this – he could be among all these people who knew how much he'd failed Grace over the years, especially the earlier ones. As he climbed from the car and made his way inside, he pondered the fact that the old building had gone through quite a few transformations over the years – from derelict shack to a council restoration project, to a dance hall, to a second-hand shop, to a failed seafood restaurant and finally to what it was now. Although all new and shiny-looking, the building had lost its lustre, in his opinion. It was a charmless shadow of its former glory. Like him, it had taken on a new identity over the years, and the potential Grace had seen in it now benefitted someone else.

It should have been her. And he should have been beside her, encouraging her dreams and making her happy.

If only he had the power to turn back the clock. He'd do everything in his power to make his life more about living and less about survival; less about loss, and more about love.

# CHAPTER

## 2

Grace felt like the luckiest woman alive. Eighty-five people had been invited, and almost all of them had come. It was now two hours into the festivities and the night was in full swing. The three-piece band was doing a fabulous job of drawing people onto the shimmering dance floor and, with the occasional slow song, into each other's arms. Elaborately decorated round tables had been placed to face the stage and the bi-fold doors had been pushed back, allowing the room to flow out onto the moonlit terrace overlooking the sea.

It was bittersweet for Grace. Even now, after all these years, she could still picture what her teashop would have looked like, if she'd had the chance to make her dream a reality. She would have called it Serendipity – she loved the enchanted meaning – and it would have been a place to eat delicious cakes, drink fine tea, to fall in love with the sweeping views and, possibly, even with another.

Making her way from one table to the next, wanting to make sure she thanked everyone who'd made an effort to be there, Grace regarded the long buffet tables lined with silver platters and delicacies galore. Above, draped from the ceiling, were hundreds of sparkling gold lights. It was exquisite, but certainly a far cry from how this old relic used to be. Gone were the rustic open-beam ceilings, striking stone walls and characteristic timber floors, replaced with all the modern conveniences and abstract art that made absolutely no sense to her. Although pleasant, the place had lost its heart, its soul.

She blinked the present into her focus. All around her, the champagne was flowing as easily as the conversation and laughter – it was a wonderful distraction from her failing health. Fleeting, she wondered if she'd see her next birthday, or her grandbabies' Holy Communion, or Christmas for that



matter, but she quickly shrugged the melancholy off as Hope approached her. Living in the moment was all she had, and she was going to make the most of every single breath.

‘There you are, Mum.’ With a delighted smile, Hope clasped her hands beneath her chin. ‘It’s almost time for your surprise.’

‘It is, is it? Grace placed a tender hand on Hope’s arm. ‘You’re looking very mischievous, sweetheart.’ She tipped her head to the side. ‘Should I be worried?’

‘Of course not.’ Hope gave an angelic smile. ‘It’s not like I’ve gone and gotten you a stripper. Or have I?’ She wriggled her brows teasingly.

Grace lightly slapped her. ‘Oh, stop it, or you’ll give me a heart attack.’

The band stopped playing, and the singer asked everyone to kindly take a seat, and to turn their attention to the stage.

The room hushed as Hope grabbed Grace’s hand, and tugged her forward. ‘Come on, the girls have made a spot for you to sit between them.’

Grace positioned herself between her granddaughters, both looking tickled pink. ‘So, tell me, you two munchkins, what’s this all about, then?’ she whispered.

Flashing her legendary cheeky smile, Sharni laced her fingers in between Grace’s. ‘It’s a slideshow of your life, Nanna.’

Rose did the same as her twin sister, squeezing Grace’s hand tightly. ‘We helped Mum make it.’

Before Grace got a chance to respond, a screen dropped down from the ceiling, the lights dimmed and Sarah McLachlan’s voice sang out ‘I Will Remember You’. The room hushed as all eyes fell upon a black-and-white image of Grace’s dear mother admiring her as a giggling baby, then to a toddler looking up at her father with such wonder, to a teenage girl playing ball with her golden retriever, Holly, to an image

of her on the beach in her very first bikini with wind-whipped platinum blonde hair, a smile as wide as the ocean behind her and a handsome man's arm slung around her shoulder.

Caught up in the recollection, Grace's hand went to the brooch resting above her heart. Charlie looked so young, and so happy; a man head-over-heels in love. That had been the day he'd proposed to her. The nostalgia was so intense, it made her soul ache. Feeling eyes upon her, she glanced to the left and came to meet Charlie's gaze. They shared a lifetime of emotion in those few short seconds, the profound bond between them overwhelming her so much that she had to look away or risk bursting into unstoppable tears.

The trip down memory lane continued, and Grace blinked faster as she looked toward the screen. As each clip flashed before her eyes, she felt herself transported back to each captured moment and flickers of a life gone by. For the next minute, the fragments in time caught her breath, made her laugh, and brought tears of both joy and sadness. Then came snippets of her life as a single mother, and she wondered if everyone else could see the ghosts hidden within her eyes, the sadness behind her smiles. Next, there she was, with her dear Rodger – short, wiry and serious, he'd been the polar opposite to Charlie. He'd proven to be exactly what she'd thought she'd needed at the time – a man she could rely on to always be there, for her and for Hope. Sadly, their relationship had become more of a friendship over the years, and that could be seen in the photos – not one picture showed the look of love that she and Charlie had so evidently shared and, according to Hope and her lack of better judgement, still did.

Before Grace knew it, the show was over, to the cheers and claps of her family and friends. The band started up again, to the familiar tune of 'Macarena'. Squealing with glee, Sharni and Rose kissed her on the cheek, and then headed over to the dance floor to join their father who was giving the moves his best shot. Grace wanted to thank Hope for the moving tribute, but it appeared her daughter had found herself cornered by two of the township's gossips. It would take her a little while to pry

herself away from Jacob and Christine Jones, so Grace took the chance to step outside and get a minute to herself. She quickly realised she wasn't alone; Charlie was leaning against the railing, his gaze fixed on the glittering lights of the harbour. She almost turned around and headed back inside, but thought better of it.

'Hey, you,' she said, easing in beside him. 'That was a lovely slideshow, don't you think?' She drew in a quick breath and then added, 'It was crazy seeing us both so young.'

'Yes, it was, and a little overwhelming, to be honest.' His voice a little quivery, Charlie didn't turn to look at her. 'I needed a moment out here to regroup, before dancing with the girls.'

Grace nodded. 'Great minds think alike.' The sea breeze was a little chilly, and she pulled her shawl over her shoulders.

'It's such a pretty spot, isn't it, Grace?' His voice steady, it became low and husky, almost dreamy.

'It sure is.' She looked to where bobbing boats lapped the water against the mooring. 'It always brings me peace, this view.'

With neither of them feeling the need to fill it, they remained in a comfortable silence.

'Thanks again for my gift, Charlie,' Grace finally said, bringing her hand to the brooch. 'I'd forgotten just how beautiful it is.'

'You're very welcome.' Charlie turned to her now, his smile heartfelt. 'I'm glad you like it, and that you decided to wear it tonight. It means a lot that you did.'

'Of course.' Her heart pitter-pattering a little faster, she offered him a delicate smile. 'I had no idea you'd kept it all these years.'

'Yes, and I'm so glad that I did.' Reaching out, Charlie gently brushed his fingers over the sapphire, his smile

widening. ‘It’s been my lucky charm on more than one occasion.’

‘It has?’ Grace peered into his calm blue eyes, like an ocean without waves – the depth in them had been what had drawn her to him, like a bee to honey, all those years ago.

Charlie nodded. ‘Yes, I like to think so.’

‘How so?’ Grace tipped her head to the side.

There was a short silence before Charlie answered. ‘I took it with me everywhere in Vietnam, and the day of the explosion ...’ He stumbled over the word, and cleared his throat. ‘I realised at the last second that it wasn’t in my pocket, and that I must have dropped it outside the building we were meant to be bunkering down in for the night, so I left the others to get settled and went back out to see if I could find it. That’s when the bomb went off.’

‘Oh my goodness, Charlie! Why haven’t you told me this before?’ Grace’s throat ached with rising emotion – if he hadn’t have gone looking for it, he’d likely have died too.

Nodding, Charlie sucked in a breath. ‘Maybe I should have, but, at the very least, I’m telling you now.’

‘Indeed you are.’ Blinking back tears, she reached out and gave his hand resting on the railings a gentle pat. ‘I know how it broke you, losing your friends like that, and I know how guilty you’ve felt, being the only survivor of that mission, but I’m pleased to know I played a part in saving you that day.’

‘Oh, believe me, Grace, you’ve saved me a hundred times over, and when I least deserved it, too.’

Grace left her hand over his and gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘You’re the father of my child, Charlie, and were my very first love. Of course I’m going to try and take care of you when and where I can.’

‘You’re a beautiful soul, Grace, in every single way.’ Charlie blinked faster. ‘I know I’ve said it before, but I hope you believe me when I say how sorry I am, for all the hurt I’ve

caused you over the years.’ For a few short moments, he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were wet with unshed tears. ‘Just know, that if I could take it all back, and do things over again, I would do everything so differently.’

Unable to witness his anguish, and not sure what to make of the emotions swirling within her heart, Grace lowered her gaze, drawing in a slow, steady breath. ‘I do believe you, Charlie, but let’s just enjoy every moment for what it is, and be content in the fact we’ve remained friends over the years.’

‘Yes.’ With a sharp inhalation, he nodded. ‘You’re right.’

‘Come on then.’ She forced cheerfulness she was far from feeling. ‘Why don’t you come back inside and dance with your beautiful granddaughters?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Of course. Just give me a few minutes.’

‘Okay.’ She leant in and kissed his cheek. ‘Be kind to yourself, won’t you? You’re a good man, Charlie Wilson. Just broken, that’s all.’

‘You’re too good to me, Grace.’ He shifted from foot to foot, and then looked her in the eyes with deep intent. ‘God certainly sent me an angel, the day you skated into my life, and for that, I’ll be eternally grateful.’

‘I don’t regret having loved you, Charlie, not ever.’ Holding his powerful gaze, she offered him a small smile. ‘I’ll see you inside, okay?’

He nodded and she walked away, each step feeling heavier than the last.

Ten minutes later, Charlie was on the dance floor, waltzing both girls around. Grace took absolute delight in watching them out of the corner of her eye, as she caught up with her oldest and dearest friends, Jenny and Marty Lovell.

‘This next song is a request for the birthday girl,’ the singer said in his smooth drawl, catching Grace’s attention,

and also half of the room's.

As the band began to play Joe Cocker's 'You Are So Beautiful', Grace's pulse quickened as she watched Charlie make his way toward her. When he reached the table, her friends fell silent and all eyes fell upon him.

'Hi Charlie,' Jenny said with her customary cheeky smile.

'Hi Jenny, Marty. Nice to see you two.' He smiled that same charming smile that had won Grace over all those years ago. 'May I have this dance, please, Grace?' he asked, his gaze locking onto hers.

Almost declining his offer, but thinking better of it – she didn't want to embarrass him in front of everyone – she smiled and said. 'Of course you can.' Then she stood before she changed her mind. 'Excuse me, ladies.'

Reaching the dance floor, Charlie took her hand and she swayed into him as they found their little space amid the crowd. Sticking with tradition, Charlie led, and Grace was happy to follow. Dancing near them, Hope flashed her mother a meaningful glance over Kelvin's shoulder. Grace gave her daughter a don't-start look back, along with a playful smile. Although, not having been this close to Charlie for many years, she silently admitted how well they still fitted together and how nice it felt to be back within his arms again, if only for this dance. With his hand resting in the small of her back, they all but floated around the dance floor, lit by the large disco ball above. The glittering fragments evoked so many memories.

Her gaze met with his chest, and she released a contented sigh as she looked up and into his eyes. 'This song brings back some sweet recollections, Charlie.'

'It sure does,' he said. 'Those were the days, weren't they?'

'Some of them, yes.' She caught a whiff of his aftershave, and couldn't help but smile. 'You're wearing my favourite.'

‘I am.’ He flicked his gaze down at her, looking at her as if from the depths of his soul.

Lost in that moment, Grace found herself at a loss for words. Before she knew it, the song had changed, and Willie Nelson’s hit song ‘Always On My Mind’ began. How uncanny, or had Charlie requested this song too? What was he playing at, making her feel so much?

She stepped back a little, in a bid to catch her breath. Charlie seized her eyes with his again, his gaze begging her not to walk away ... and just like that, the earth tilted beneath her feet and she was tumbling into their past. It was as if a lost piece of her had suddenly returned and clicked back into place. The sensation was both sweet and heartbreakingly bitter.

Maybe, if she weren’t about to bid her life farewell thanks to the cancer riddling her, she’d allow her heart to connect with his again, but she couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

And she couldn’t let him know the news. Not tonight, and certainly not before she’d told Hope.

Tomorrow.

There was always tomorrow.

She blinked a few times, trying to right the world around her, but despite her efforts, everything began to spin like a kaleidoscope.

‘Are you okay, Grace?’ Charlie’s voice sounded as if it were under water.

She nodded, blinking fast.

‘Here, let me walk you back to the table,’ Charlie said gently as he took her arm in his. ‘You look like you need to have a rest.’

\* \* \*

A few hours later, after bidding all of the guests goodnight, Charlie was driving Grace home, as Hope had left a little earlier to tuck her two incredibly tired girls into bed.

Halfway to Waterside Estate, the sky opened and heavy raindrops pelted the windshield. Slowing, Charlie flicked the wipers on, and they bounced in rhythm to the Frank Sinatra song playing from the radio. Grace hummed beside him, her gaze transfixed out the window.

Charlie's heart swelled to bursting as he snuck glances at her. She was still as beautiful as ever. Caught up in the tender moment, he decided it was time to come clean with her, and say what had been on the tip of his tongue all these years.

'I'm still very much in love with you, Grace,' he said with his eyes still glued to the road.

It took a few long moments for Grace to respond, and when she did, it was with a heavy sigh. 'Maybe you are, Charlie, but I don't know what you want me to say to that.' She sniffled and fidgeted in her seat. 'Letting you go was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, as was moving on with my life without you by my side, after you'd promised me you always would be.'

After witnessing the undeniable love in her eyes when he was dancing with her, this was not the response he was expecting, but it *was* one he deserved. Seeing her dismayed, because of him, again, tore at his heart.

He was a silly old fool.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.' He turned to show the sincerity behind his apology, but the sudden glare of blinding lights had him staring at the front of an incoming truck.

He went to swerve, but it was too late.

The truck struck with violent, jarring force. The airbags exploded. Time seemed to slow. The sounds of Grace's screams combined with the crunching of metal, the screech of tyres and the explosion of the windshield. Shards of glass pierced Charlie's face as the car spun, once, twice, three times, and then flipped, before toppling over and over and over along the bitumen road. All sound seemed to vanish for a split



second – the rain, the wipers and his very own heartbeat. Then, just as suddenly as it had tumbled, the sedan hit a guardrail, the bonnet crumpling like a concertina as it came to an abrupt halt in a ditch, upturned on the roof.

Charlie was still gripping the steering wheel that was now pressing painfully into his chest. With no room to move, he fought to breathe. Something was digging into his side, the pain of it close to unbearable, but he didn't care about himself.

He was almost too afraid to turn and look for Grace, and when he did, every bit of air left his lungs. Suspended by her seatbelt, Grace's body hung limp, blood dripping from a deep gash along her forehead. Strangled noises came from her parted lips. Another onslaught of fear pounded Charlie as he fought off the possibility that she was dying right before his very eyes. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Desperate to free himself so he could get to her, so he could free her from the wreck, he yanked at his seatbelt, but it locked tighter. 'Oh god, no. Please, not my Grace. Take me instead. I beg of you. Please.'

Running footsteps neared, and a man dropped down beside him. 'I've rung the ambulance. They're coming, just hold tight, okay.'

'Please, help me, my Grace, she's badly hurt. I need to get her out.' Charlie's voice was raspy and frantic. 'Please.'

Hunching down further still, the man peered in, his expression grim. 'I'm sorry sir, but I really think you should wait for the paramedics to get here.'

Dread ripped through Charlie as he heard Grace's breathing grow shallower, her murmurs became more smothered, while the smell of fuel grew stronger.

Voices rang out in the night. The man at his side disappeared and more hurried footsteps sounded. Chilling seconds slipped by. All Charlie could think of was the car exploding with them in it. Grace didn't deserve to die like this, and all because of him.

*You silly old fool.*

He should have stayed away from her.

Taking her hand in his, he heard the distant wail of sirens and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Help is coming, Grace, so you hang in there, you hear me? I can't lose you, not like this.'

Then, while he desperately tried to blink away the blurriness, everything started to spin as Charlie's world went suffocatingly black.

# CHAPTER

## 3

Stirring from the depths of stifling darkness, Charlie tried to force his eyes open, but blinding brightness made it impossible. A rush of terror frenzied his pulse as he squeezed his eyelids shut, fighting to gather his bearings. He could hear erratic beeping, and someone was saying something to him, over and over, but try as he might, he couldn't make out the words. He strained to say Grace's name. Thought he did. But did he? Did her name pass his lips?

Heat brushed over his fingertips. Was someone holding his hand? His mind whirled and his heart beat more wildly as he relived the accident ... the rolling, the crunching of metal and smashing of glass, Grace's screams, and then her whimpers. Were they still stuck in the car? Had they died and gone to heaven? If they had, what right did he have to be here? Grace, yes, but certainly not him. After what he'd done to her, he deserved fire and brimstone.

Desperately needing answers, his conscious mind battled with the woozy and insensible, but his body sank further into what felt like quicksand. He grappled with the invisible, mentally trying to claw his way out of the dizziness. He couldn't drift back to the darkness. Not now. Grace needed him and for once in his damn life, come hell or high water, he was going to be there for her.

*Come on, you old fool. Wake up!*

He tried to speak again, but his bone-dry lips wouldn't move. But then, with grit and determination, he finally found the strength to blink his eyes open. A fluorescent light came into his blurry focus, as did the starkness of a hospital room and finally, Hope's distraught face.

‘Oh my god, Dad,’ she breathed, squeezing his hand before turning away. ‘Quickly, Kelvin, go and get the nurse.’

A muffled reply followed. Hurried footsteps sounded and disappeared.

His mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton wool, and Charlie fought to string words together. ‘Your mother, is she...?’ He choked on the horrific finality of what he was picturing.

‘She’s alive, Dad.’ Hope’s hand came back to his as a nurse appeared at his side. ‘She’s on life-support, though.’ A sob escaped from his beautiful daughter, swiftly followed by another.

‘Oh no, please god no.’ He tried to shake his head, briefly closing his eyes against the pain, both physical and emotional. ‘This is all my fault.’

‘No, Charlie, it’s not.’ Kelvin’s voice was way too kind, way too gentle. ‘The truck swerved onto your side of the road. You had no hope of getting out of the way.’

‘But ...’ Pausing, Charlie drew in a shaky breath.

‘How are you feeling, Mr Wilson?’ Fussing over him, the nurse shone a torch into each of his eyes.

‘I’m not sure.’ Charlie wanted to tell her to leave him alone. He deserved to be in pain. He deserved to die. But not before he got to see Grace, and tell her he was so deeply sorry. ‘I need to see her, please. Now.’

‘Soon, Dad. Just let the nurse check you over first, okay?’ Hope’s tear-stained face was now clear, as was Kelvin’s.

Thankfully, the nurse stopped prodding and poking him. ‘You’ve suffered a blow to the head, Mr Wilson, and we’ve had to give you quite a few stitches, so take it slow when you try and sit up, okay?’

‘Yes, will do,’ he said, telling the nurse what she wanted to hear.

The nurse turned to Hope. 'I'll be back to check in on your father again, and the doctor will be here as soon as he can be.' She huffed. 'Sorry for the delay, but we are very short-staffed at the moment.'

'Okay, thank you,' Hope replied.

The second she was gone, Charlie grabbed Hope's hand. 'Please, sweetheart, get me to your mother. I have to see her.'

'All right, Dad. Just give me and Kelvin a few minutes to get you up and on your feet.' Pulling the sheet down, she competently attached his prosthetic leg. 'Maybe we should get you a wheelchair?'

'I'm not getting in a wheelchair, Hope.' Charlie paused, coughing. 'I need to be strong for her. I will walk into your mother's room, no matter how much pain I might be in.'

'Your stubbornness is going to be the death of us, Charlie,' Kelvin grumbled.

'It'll probably be the death of me, too, son.' Charlie winced as Hope moved his legs over the edge of the bed where he then sat, wheezing, for a few lengthy moments, trying to catch his breath.

Working together, they slowly but surely got him standing. The wooziness made Charlie want to heave quite a few times as Hope and Kelvin helped him shuffle down the hallway to Grace's room.

The shocking sight of the love of his life, the light of his world, so lifeless, almost brought him to his knees. Grace's face was black and swollen, the top of her head bandaged, with tubes and machines hooked up to her. Overcome with raw soul-tearing grief, Charlie collapsed into the chair alongside her, blinking through a sudden onslaught of relentless tears.

'Oh, my beautiful Grace.' He took her limp hand in his and rubbed a thumb over the back of it. 'Please, my darling, come back to us. We all love you so very much.' Bringing her hand to his lips, he placed a lingering kiss. 'I'm so sorry.'

Hope broke into wracking sobs beside him, and Kelvin comforted her as best as he could, taking her into his arms. 'We're going to do everything we can to make sure she wakes up, Hope, okay?' Kelvin said as he tipped his head down a little to look her in the eyes, brushing wayward strands of hair from her forehead. 'Your mum is a fighter, just like you. We all have to try and be strong for her.'

Hope nodded into Kelvin's chest.

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut for a shaky breath, then another, as he prayed harder than he ever had before.

\* \* \*

Seventy-two heartbreaking hours later, Charlie turned from Grace's ghost-white face and ambled over to take in the third-storey views, her brooch clutched tightly in his hand. The large window was barred and locked shut; he was desperate to push it open, to let the pulse of the world rush in with the sea breeze, imagining it would somehow breathe the life back into Grace. He was beginning to lose faith he'd ever see the life in her sparkling green eyes again, but he wasn't about to say that out loud. He wasn't going to tempt fate by letting the words slip past his lips, nor did he want to add to the load on Hope's already burdened heart.

Across the road in Seaside Park, the annual spring fair had rolled into town, and he watched as the Ferris wheel circled, the colourful lights bright against the dark of night. He imagined all the excited children, their faces painted, eyes wide and bellies filled with fairy floss and hot dogs, and their tiny hands clutched tightly by a protective parent. He and Grace had been there many times, all those years ago, surrounded by squeals and laughter, her smile as warm and encompassing as the sunshine as they made their way through sideshow alley and braved the topsy-turvy rides. They'd share spontaneous kisses, he'd try to win her stuffed toys, she'd wipe the remnants of tomato sauce from the corners of his lips when they ate dagwood dogs while sitting cross-legged on the

ground. If only he could go back to such simple, precious times when they had been so alive, so free, and so very happy.

Footsteps sounded behind him and he turned to see Hope enter the room, a bunch of colourful gerberas in one hand and a paper-wrapped parcel in the other. 'I picked these little beauties from Mum's garden,' she said as she tossed drooping sunflowers into the bin, replacing them with the gerberas. 'And I grabbed you a toasted ham, cheese and tomato sandwich.' She passed it to him. 'On wholemeal bread, with extra butter, white pepper, hold the salt, and a little bit of onion and hot English mustard. Just how you like it.'

'Thank you very much, sweetheart.' Grateful for Hope's kind, thoughtful heart, just like her mother's, Charlie took the paper bag and kissed her cheek.

At his side, she pointed out the window to the bright lights of the fair. 'It's so odd, seeing life go on, while Mum is fighting for hers.' Glancing toward Grace, she sniffled and straightened her shoulders. 'It makes me feel guilty, wanting to take the girls there tomorrow, but they need something that's going to help them smile.' She sighed, shaking her head. 'They've been so upset through all of this.'

Charlie smiled sadly. 'There's no need to feel guilty, Hope. You're doing what a good mother should, and helping to take their mind off this.' He placed a gentle hand on Hope's back. 'Your mother and I used to love going to the fair when it was in town.' Grace rested her head on his shoulder as she listened. 'She was always hopeful I'd win her a teddy bear, and afterwards she'd always want to eat some fairy floss.'

'Mum does have a bit of a sweet tooth.'

'Ha, a bit?' He shook his head, chuckling at the memories of Grace devouring bags of lollies and copious amounts of chocolate over the years they were together. 'Actually, I recall we went to this young fortune teller the last time we were there, back in ... 1976, I think it was.' He racked his brain, trying to remember the reading, and clear as day, it came rushing back to him like a wave arriving upon a shore. 'That's

right, she told us we would always be in love, but that we would lose each other many times over.’ He turned to Hope and blinked quicker, his emotions overwhelming him. ‘I never really understood it at the time, or really believed it for that matter, but maybe I do now.’

Straightening up and turning to him, Hope pondered this for a few moments, then smiled. ‘Well, maybe you should go and see if this fortune teller is still there. And while you’re at it, buy Mum a bag of fairy floss for when she wakes up.’ For the very first time in three days, there was optimism in her gaze.

Charlie smirked. ‘Are you trying to get rid of me?’

Hope matched his tiny smile. ‘No, Dad, but I do think it’ll do you the world of good to go outside and get some fresh air.’ She glanced at the fold-out chair he’d been sleeping on. ‘You’ve been cooped up in here for days.’

Looking from Grace, out the window, then back to Grace, he heaved a weighty sigh. ‘Maybe you’re right.’ He hated the thought of her waking without him by her side, or worse—god help him if it were so—passing without him here to bid a final farewell.

As if privy to his thoughts, Hope patted his hand reassuringly. ‘Just to remind you, Dad, I’m always right, so you should heed my advice.’

‘Ha, that’s what your mother always says.’

‘Like mother, like daughter.’

‘Okay, well, I might just do that. And if I feel up to it, I might try and win her a teddy bear too, for old times’ sake.’ He looked to Grace’s bedside again. ‘It’ll give her a good chuckle, when she wakes up.’

‘Yes, it will.’ Leaning in, Hope wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. ‘I love you, Dad, so very much.’

Charlie nestled her against him and gave her a squeeze. ‘I love you too, sweetheart, with all my heart.’



‘I know you do, just like I know you love Mum with all your heart too.’ After lingering in his arms a little longer, she unravelled and stepped back. ‘Now go, be off with you.’ She gestured his path to the doorway with a smile too wide to be real. ‘And I’ll be right here, with Mum, and both of us will be waiting to hear all about your little adventure when you get back.’

Nodding, Charlie dragged himself away, eating his toasted sandwich as he wandered down the hallway to the elevator.

The air outside was clean and fresh, unlike the antiseptic room he’d grown accustomed to spending his every moment in. Not knowing what to do with his spare hand now he wasn’t holding Grace’s, he shoved it into his pocket, the feel of the brooch against his skin comforting. Then, one slow step after the other, he crossed the street and walked into the fairgrounds. The sights, sounds and smells were oddly comforting, yet overwhelming. It felt wrong, walking into such fun when behind him, his world was a deep, dark hole. But he reminded himself he was doing this for Grace. Everything he did from now on was for her.

Passing the food vans then making his way down sideshow alley, he kept a keen eye out for the fortune teller’s wagon. He didn’t hold out much hope of her being here after all the years, but he could at least try to look. Never in his life would he have believed he’d been so desperate to find a fortune teller, after labelling them storytellers and phoneys, much to Grace’s dismay. It had been his firm opinion that the future wasn’t predestined, nor could it be foretold, but what did he have to lose right now?

It was on the final laneway, when he was just about to give up and instead go in search of pink fairy floss, that he stumbled upon the barrel-roofed wagon with its pretty paintbox colours. Golden moons and silver stars dangled from the eaves and the scent of rich, spicy incense lingered on the cool night breeze, enticing him toward it. A sign at the front stated readings were forty dollars. Grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket, he smiled at the photo of Grace he’d had

tucked in there for forty-eight years as he ruffled two twenty-dollar notes out. As his quivering hand met with the coolness of the railing, he carefully climbed the four steps, parted the red velvet curtains and, after confirming nobody was in there for a reading, ducked into the confines.

The doorway was like a portal to another world, one that was primitive, ancient and free. A whisper greeted him and he found himself staring into ageless eyes. The fortune teller's long black hair had turned shiny silver, her vibrant youthfulness waned long ago, but she still wore the big-hooped earrings and had the same commanding presence.

The lamp cast her in an amber glow as she peered at him from her chair, her forearms resting upon a silky cover. 'Come, sit.' She gestured to a two-seater chair opposite her, scattered with ornate cushions.

'Okay, thank you.' Feeling way out of his depth, Charlie did as he was told. There was a long awkward silence as he got himself settled, and he swore she was staring into the depths of his soul as he passed over his forty dollars.

Her gaze never leaving his as she tucked the money into the silky folds of her dress, she drew in a long, steady breath. 'So, what can I do for you?' Her accent was thickly exotic.

'Oh. Well, I was here, back in the seventies.' He shifted uncomfortably while clearing his throat. He felt ridiculous with what he was about to say. 'And I'd like you to do a reading for me again.'

Taking her time, she nodded slowly, then her pursed mouth formed a tiny smile. 'Ahh, yes. I remember you.'

Charlie sat to attention. 'You do?'

Her smoky eyes locking onto his, she fixed him with a steady stare. 'Yes, and I also remember the young woman who wore what you have in your hand.'

At a loss for words, Charlie unfurled his arthritic fingers, his heart in his throat.

She looked from the brooch to him. ‘May I?’

‘Yes, of course.’ He stretched his arm out. ‘Please.’

Jangling gold bangles slid along her arm as she took the brooch and placed it in her crooked hand, staring at it as if it were telling her decades of stories. Using one bony, bejewelled finger, she tipped it back and forth, examining it, her breath quickening and her brows furrowing deeper. A minute passed in silence, followed by another.

Until Charlie couldn’t wait any longer. ‘What do you see?’ Sitting forward, he raked his desperate gaze over the deep etches of her face.

For a drawn-out moment, she did not reply, instead stared at him, almost through him, her eyelids flickering. Then, in the next breath, she brought all her focus back from wherever she had been, and to him. ‘She is near death’s door, your one great love, yes?’

Her insight along with the sharpness of her voice stilled his tongue for a few tortured breaths. ‘I’m afraid so.’ A stab of dread pierced his stomach.

She sat back and sighed. ‘I have to tell you, it’s in more ways than one.’

Charlie sat further still. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you mean?’

‘You don’t need to worry yourself with such things right now.’ She tilted her head to the side. ‘She has many secrets, this woman, ones she will take with her into another life, to protect those she loves.’

‘That sounds like our darling Grace.’ Clasp ing his hands upon the table, Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. He wasn’t going to cry, not here, not now. ‘I would give anything to see her live.’

Sitting forward, the fortune teller brought her hand over his. ‘Do you really mean that?’ Her tone had softened, but her touch was strong.

Charlie's eyes opened now, wide and hopeful. 'Yes, of course I do.'

'Hmm. Well, beware of what you reply to my next question.' She drew in a breath, watching him like a hawk. 'Would you give up your own life, to save hers?'

Charlie didn't hesitate. 'Absolutely.'

'I see.' The woman rose with the aid of her walking stick, slowly unbending her body, then shuffled to a little side table. Collecting a notebook and pen, she moved back, sat, then pushed it toward him. 'Would you write it down, in your own words, what you just agreed to?'

'Yes, of course.' Charlie clicked the pen, and then wrote:

*I, Charlie Wilson, will give my life for the love of my life, Grace Burrows.*

Closing the notebook, he placed the pen on top and, while wishing Grace carried his last name instead of Rodger's, slid both back to the fortune teller.

Charlie released his held breath with a whoosh. 'Now what?'

She raised both hands. 'You allow it to be done.'

Although wrapped up in the magic, Charlie felt himself coming back to reality, along with his cynicism. 'Just like that?'

She nodded. 'Just like that.'

'Right then.' For the first time since sitting opposite her, he rested back. 'So, how will I know this is working?'

'I know you're not usually a believer.' The fortune teller eyed him inquisitively as she passed the brooch back.

Clasping it tightly, it was his turn to nod. 'You'd be right there.'

'So what do you expect from me to prove my words are true, huh?' She slowly shook her head. 'A puff of smoke, the

bang of firecrackers? Or maybe for me to wave my arms around saying “Abracadabra”?’

Charlie felt a pang of shame. ‘Of course not. It’s just ... being a man of practicality, it’s very hard to believe in something I cannot see, or touch, for that matter.’

Tutting, she graced him with a knowing smile. ‘You sceptics have such misconceptions about fortune-telling. It has nothing to do with hocus-pocus. It is about the fortitude of an open mind, and heart.’ She leant in closer. ‘The power of the spoken word is all that is needed, and a genuine belief in the powers that be.’ She patted his arm. ‘Trust me, and you will see.’

A shiver overcame Charlie, but he also felt peculiarly reassured. ‘I will try to.’

‘Good.’ A singsong voice carried from the doorway as a lady asked for a reading, and the fortune teller acknowledged the giggling young couple with a nod. ‘I’m just finishing up here. I won’t be long.’

Charlie took it as his cue to leave. Rising, he gave the fortune teller a smile. ‘Thank you.’

‘You take care now, Charlie.’

It was only after he’d passed the loved-up couple, kissing at the foot of the stairs, that he realised she’d called him by his name. But how did she know it, when he hadn’t told her?

Turning back, he watched the young twosome disappear through the curtain, something about the woman’s hair and the way it bobbed around her shoulders reminding him of Grace. There was something oddly familiar about the young chap too ...

Wanting to get back to Grace, he shrugged the déjà vu off and took steps away, back into the meandering crowd. He wasn’t sure what to make of what had just happened within the wagon, but maybe he wasn’t meant to. If anything, Grace would be over the moon that he’d sought the fortune teller out, and it had also helped to take his mind off things, if only for a

little while. In a crazy kind of way, it had made him feel like he wasn't so helpless, as if he had a grip on the reins of his future, and Grace's. Just how, he hadn't a damn clue.

His mind in a spin, he went in search of pink fairy floss – Grace's favourite colour – and that's when he felt the world tilt and give way beneath his feet.

# **PART TWO**

# CHAPTER

## 4

**September 1975**

Sliding to a stop near the pinball machine, out of sight of her boss, Grace Denver plucked her strawberry lip-gloss from the pocket of her shorts. As she reapplied, she stole yet another glance across the street, at the crystal-clear water lapping at the white sandy shore of the horseshoe-shaped bay under the powder-blue sky stretching as far as the eye could see. It was a perfect seaside spring day. What she'd give to be among the beachgoers, donning her new swimming costume and burying her face in a book. Alas, the Blueview Café was only starting to come to the end of the lunchtime rush. What a way to spend such a glorious day, working her tooshie off so she could save for her dream. But it could always be worse, as her father would say.

Tightening her white-and-gold rollerskates and ignoring her throbbing feet and aching back, Grace got back to it. Her break was still ten minutes away, but it might as well have been ten years. Humming to the new song, 'Get Down Tonight' by KC and the Sunshine Band, she weaved her way through the tables, collecting empty glasses and full ashtrays before whizzing into the kitchen, filled with the aromas of sizzling burger patties and simmering deep-fryers. After dumping the tray near the sink, she efficiently unloaded while making sure to stay out of the way of the cantankerous chef. Not that she could blame him – overworked and underpaid, he had the right to be an old grump. If she were the owner, she'd make sure all her staff felt treasured and valued, but at the rate she was saving her dream of her very own teashop was still a long way off.

She glided back out of the chaotic kitchen, now humming the latest hit song, 'Mamma Mia', by one of her top-ten



favourite bands, ABBA. Man oh man, they were so cool.

As she took another longing look out to the sea, Grace's gaze stuttered on a very familiar, and very handsome, face. She pulled in alongside her best friend, who was busy making milkshakes. 'Far out, Jen, is that who I think it is?'

Jenny Brown's giant gum bubble burst with a soft pop and she craned her neck to see the tall, muscular man striding along the street. 'Uh-huh, sure is.' Jenny turned to Grace with wide eyes. 'Sapphire Bay's bad boy is finally back.'

Grace couldn't help but notice how almost every woman Charlie passed turn her head for a second look.

Jenny shoved a glass in Grace's hand. 'Pretend to look busy, or we'll get in trouble,' she said. 'He must have come home to check in on his grandmother, now that his grandfather's gone and kicked the bucket.'

Grace gasped, almost spilling the half-filled milkshake. 'That's horrible, saying it like that.'

Jenny shrugged. 'He *was* horrible, you have to admit.'

Grace couldn't help but grin – Jenny had always had a knack of saying it how it was. 'Yeah, okay, fair point, but you don't want everyone hearing how much we hated the town's oldest police officer.'

Jenny shrugged. 'Didn't everybody?'

Grace rolled her eyes. 'Another fair point.'

'Drop these to table four?' Jen said, pushing the tray of malt shakes at her. Grace carefully skated to the table and distributed the drinks to the family sitting there.

Turning her attention back to the man possessing her thoughts, she felt a rush of butterflies swarm her belly as she watched Charlie Wilson stub his cigarette out on the corner of a bin, shove his hands into the pockets of his bell-bottoms and make a beeline for the front door of the café. She weaved back to the counter. 'Oh my goodness, he's actually coming in here!

Jen, what am I going to do?’ Grace could feel her cheeks burning like wildfire.

Jenny shook her head. ‘Take a chill pill, Gracie. He’s just a guy.’

‘Yes, but he’s *the* guy I kissed in high school, behind the sports shed, and then he never came near me again! Remember?’

‘How could I not?’ Jenny chuckled. ‘You went on about it for *ages*.’

Poking her tongue out at her friend, Grace watched him step inside, the bell on the door handle jingling as it closed behind him. In his faded jeans and white t-shirt, most people would have said he resembled every other man in the place. But not to Grace. To her, Charlie Wilson had always been different.

Jenny elbowed her. ‘Well, go on then. Go see him.’

‘I ... I can’t.’ Nerves suddenly turned Grace’s legs to stone. ‘Can you go and serve him? Pleeese?’

‘Just imagine him naked and you’ll be right.’ Her smile playful, Jenny wriggled her brows. ‘You’ve already done that a million times, haven’t you?’

‘Oh, stop it.’ Grace gave Jenny a good-natured shove. ‘You’re only going to make me more nervous.’

‘Oh, come on now, you’re one of the most confident women I know, Grace Denver.’ She offered a reassuring smile. ‘You got this.’

Observing him making his way through the tables and settling at the far back corner, Grace couldn’t help but be reminded how blatantly male Charlie was – it was no wonder he’d returned from Vietnam only to then devote himself to training new army recruits at the Kapooka Barracks in Wagga Wagga.

‘I hope you’re right,’ Grace replied a little dazedly, her focus back on Charlie. ‘Here goes nothing.’

Not confident her dry mouth was going to form the right words – a rarity for her – she smoothed out the wrinkles in her uniform with sweaty palms. Then, before she could convince herself to do otherwise, she skated toward his table.

Charlie looked up from the menu and his frown gave way to a bright, sunny smile. ‘Well, I’ll be damned. Grace Denver, is that really you?’

Her breath catching, Grace found herself completely tongue-tied. Time seemed to stop. Their gazes locked, then held. Something sparked. She was sure he felt it too. A flush rose up her neck and gathered in her already glowing cheeks. ‘Yes, it’s me.’ She pitched her voice over the noise of the crowd and offered him her best larger-than-life smile.

‘Holy moly, you’ve gone and grown up while I’ve been away.’ He never took his blue eyes from hers.

‘Six years will do that to a person.’ She laughed a little too loudly, then silently told herself to pull her wits together. ‘How are you?’ She knew it was a stupid question, given he was here to check in on his grandmother after losing his grandfather to a heart attack, but what else was she meant to say to the guy who’d been her one and only teenage crush?

‘I’m doing okay, thanks. No use in complaining because no one really wants to listen.’ He waved to someone behind her.

‘Oh, but I will,’ she said off-the-cuff, kicking herself instantly.

‘You will what?’ He tipped his head, his oh-so-kissable lips still smiling.

‘I’ll listen to you complain. If you like. I mean, if it helps.’ She almost rolled her eyes at herself.

*Shut up, Grace. Just stop talking.*

‘You’d do that for me?’ His smile was still a little playful, but his gaze was searching hers, almost as if he wanted to believe her.

‘I certainly would.’ The butterflies in her stomach morphed into charging bulls. She took breath. ‘So, what can I get you?’

He regarded her for a few more lingering moments. ‘I’ll have the special, whatever it is.’ He closed the menu and handed it to her. ‘And a Coke with lots of ice, please.’

Although it was easy to remember, she scribbled his order down – anything to avoid his powerful gaze.

‘So. When do you get off?’ His voice cut through all the chatter of the place, and caressed her racing heart.

Grace swallowed down a squeal of delight. ‘At five.’ She cleared her throat and tried her best to sound casual. ‘Why?’

He shrugged, just as casually. ‘I was wondering if you’d like to catch up?’

Shocked at his directness, and the way his kind eyes were considering her, she didn’t answer for a few moments. Her mind drew a blank. She looked to his hands, resting atop the table – the very hands she remembered cupping her cheeks as he’d kissed her all those years ago.

‘Grace?’

‘Oh, sorry. Yes, thank you, that’d be great.’

She was rewarded with a slow, easy smile. ‘Great, I’ll swing by and pick you up when you knock off, if you like?’

She tilted her head. ‘You don’t want me to go home and get changed first?’

‘Why would you want to go and do that when you already look amazing?’

Grace almost buckled at the knees. ‘Well, thank you. Okay then. Five o’clock, here.’ She offered him one last smile before skating off in the direction of the kitchen, excited to tell Jenny how well his order had gone – and that she’d been included in it.

\* \* \*

Charlie wasn't about to admit to Grace that he'd come here with the intention of running into her, or that he'd had a crush on her way before they'd shared that one mind-blowing kiss behind the sports shed. Or how her father, the town's champion boxer and his maths teacher at the time, had cautioned him to stay the hell away from his only daughter. Looking back on his former scallywag self, Charlie couldn't blame Victor for his protectiveness.

He was also going to remain tight-lipped about the nightmare he'd had the night before, so seemingly tangible that it had taken him hours to move past it. If he was completely honest, he still hadn't, which was why he'd needed to see her alive and well. A flash came back to him, of a truck sending the car rolling, smashing into a guardrail, then of him helplessly watching at Grace's hospital bed. A shiver traced down his spine. Spooked was an understatement, and as a man who'd seen things no human ever should while fighting in Vietnam – hell, he'd watched most of his battalion get shot or blown to smithereens – he wasn't easily spooked.

He hadn't been sure what he was going to say to her, but when Grace had arrived at his table, her smile as warm as the sunshine and looking cute as ever in her skates and uniform, he'd known exactly what to do. Ask her on a date. He'd rarely considered having a girlfriend – being an infantry soldier didn't really allow for it – but right now, with this strange, new feeling he had for Grace, he was struggling with his usual rule. His heart kept skipping beats as he covertly watched her flutter around the café, the rest of the world fading into the background – unheard of for a man trained to have eyes in the back of his head.

He couldn't quite put his finger on what had changed, but their connection was certainly one he couldn't ignore. Just where their date was going to take them, he wasn't sure, but there was only one way to find out.

Almost six hours later, water lapped at the shoreline not far from their bare feet, and seagulls swooped for their dinner. The last of the fish and chips sat on a piece of newspaper

between them. Grace sat crossed-legged, her energy easy and the conversation flowing and effortless.

Across the inlet, the sun was beginning its descent behind the lush green mountain ranges that hugged Sapphire Bay like a warm embrace. As the sun set, the brilliance of Mother Nature's ovation-worthy show rightfully stole her attention, and her dreamy smile endeared itself to Charlie's already smitten heart. Lying on his side, propped up on his elbow, he dunked another vinegar-laden chip in tomato sauce then popped it in his mouth. In a moment of quiet contemplation, he admired the way the dusk enhanced the dusting of freckles on her cheeks, and made her glossy lips all the more desirable. He'd thought she was beautiful back in high school, but now she was absolutely breathtaking. What he'd give to lean in and kiss her ...

For now, though, his focus was on proving to Grace and her father that his rebellious ways were far behind him, and he could be a true gentleman.

'See that beautiful building at the end of the wharf?' She pointed, and smiled softly. 'One day, if everything pans out, I'm going to make it all mine.'

'You mean the old fishermen's shack?' Charlie propelled another chip into his mouth.

'Yes.' She nodded.

'Hmm.' Sitting up, he regarded the rickety structure, unable to hide his grin. 'I don't think I'd call it beautiful, but as they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'

*And by god, she was beautiful ...*

Regarding him thoughtfully, her head tilted a little to the side. 'Oh come on, Charlie, you have to admit, it has amazing character.'

'Yeah, okay, I'll give it that,' he laughed, nodding. 'When you make it all yours, what are you thinking of doing with it?'

Her sea-green eyes glittering with unbridled enthusiasm, Grace pulled her knees to her chest. ‘I want to turn it into a teashop, with pretty paintings on the walls and big windows and doors that allow the ocean inside.’ She breathed in deeply, her smile and eyes widening. ‘And a deck that stretches out over the water’s edge, with settees to watch the sunsets from, so it’s casual and relaxing but sophisticated.’ She closed her eyes for moment, as if envisioning it, and when she brought her gaze back to Charlie’s, it was filled with purpose. ‘I want it to be a place where people can share time with family while they eat delicious cakes, or propose to their lover over a pot of tea and scones, or just choose to kick back and watch the world go by. A place that people come back to, again and again.’

‘Wow, Grace, that sounds really fantastic.’ He turned his gaze from her pretty face, to seeing the old shack through her eyes, feeling honoured to be envisioning her vision. ‘And what would you call it?’

‘Now that, Charlie Wilson, is a great question.’ She rested her chin on her knees. ‘I’d call it Serendipity, because the word makes my insides sparkle.’

‘Sparkle, huh?’ His eyes met hers. ‘I really like that, Grace.’

She sighed, then shrugged. ‘It’s all a pipedream for now. One day, maybe, I’ll be lucky enough to make it my reality, but I have a lot of hard work ahead of me to save enough to do it.’

Her hunger to turn her ambitions into an actuality was so palpable, Charlie could feel it deep within his soul. ‘Well, if it counts for anything, I really hope you get the chance to fulfil your dream, Grace.’

She beamed from ear to ear. ‘Thanks, Charlie.’

He bathed in the genuine warmth of her smile. ‘So, what would you do, if you didn’t open a teashop?’

She thought about this for a few moments. ‘I’d probably become a nurse, like my mum.’ Her smile faltered. ‘I like to think I could help people, if I can’t feed people.’

‘Nice.’ Charlie couldn’t help but stare at her in adoring wonder – this woman was amazing, in every single way.

Grace narrowed her gaze a little, her smile turning wispy. ‘What are you thinking about, Charlie?’

He thought it best to be honest. ‘I know we shared that one magical moment in high school, which I’ll never forget, but it wasn’t like we spent much time together after that, and well, how do I put this ...’

‘Oh, Charlie.’ Grace cut him off as she began fidgeting with the hem of her blouse. ‘Let’s not go there.’

‘No, please, let me finish.’ He reached out and touched her arm, wanting to put her at ease. ‘What I’m trying to say is, and I hope to god you don’t think I’m a weirdo, but I ... I genuinely feel like I’ve known you for a lifetime. I mean, like I’ve *really* known you.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ she said quietly. ‘Weird, huh?’

He felt a flash of uncertainty. ‘Weird in a good kind of way, I hope?’

‘Yes, definitely in a good kind of way,’ she said, reassuringly, biting her bottom lip shyly.

Then, for a breath, followed by another, and another, they held each other’s gazes. A flood of heat rushed through Charlie, followed by a feeling of uninhibited tenderness and a potent need to protect this woman. He’d never experienced such an overwhelming sensation.

*Not ever.*

*What in the heck is happening?*

‘Dinner was great,’ he finally choked out, breaking the mood before he went and said something stupid, like ‘I think I’m going to fall madly in love with you’, and needing to do



something with his hands, like wrapping up the greasy newspaper, before he did something else with them, like pulling her to him. ‘Did you want to stay a bit longer and stargaze before I drop you home?’ Although thrown off-kilter by what he was feeling, he didn’t want this night to end.

‘I’d really like that.’

Lying back on the sand, they got comfortable beside each other. Charlie made sure to leave a bit of space between them, not wanting her to think he was trying to make a move on her. He wanted to take this slowly, carefully. She was so special, there was something about her, so delicate and yet so strong. It was a heady combination, one he wanted to understand more.

Right before their eyes, the day gradually gave way to a star-dazzled sky. Tucking his hands behind his head, Charlie turned to gaze at the most beautiful being he’d ever laid his eyes upon. Between her company and the peaceful rhythm of the waves, he’d found his little piece of heaven, right here on earth. Just like that.

And in that instant, he wanted to give up on his plan of returning to Vietnam to find Sergeant Joseph Baker, the man who’d saved his life and was now MIA. He wanted to quit the army entirely and move back home to Sapphire Bay, and be Grace’s boyfriend, her husband, and the father of her children, and make her happy every single day for the rest of his life.

But practicalities intruded. How was he meant to tell her any of this without sounding like a crazy person? And what would he do if he wasn’t a soldier? It was all he’d ever known.

*Am I losing my mind?*

Grace rolled onto her side and met his gaze. ‘What are you staring at, Charlie?’ She wiped at her cheek. ‘Do I have food on my face?’

The twinkle in her eyes promised adventure and laughter and, if he was lucky enough to win her over, a rare kind of love – the unconditional kind that not everyone finds. ‘You, sweet Grace. I’m staring at you.’

She blinked faster. ‘Why?’

‘Because you amaze me.’

‘I do?’ Her gorgeous lips curled into a bashful smile. ‘How?’

‘Just by being you.’

‘Well, that’s not really telling me much, Charlie Wilson,’ she giggled.

Charlie could imagine the blush on her cheeks deepening. He released a slow, deliberate breath in an attempt to gather his wits. ‘I don’t know how to put it into words, but I’ll try.’ He cleared his throat. ‘You somehow make me feel like I don’t have this gaping hole in my heart anymore, as though this weight of my past is no longer there. It’s kind of like I can breathe properly for the first time in forever.’

‘Wow.’ She regarded him seriously. ‘Well. I’m happy I can help you feel so happy.’

‘Me too, Grace.’ He sighed, smiling. ‘Because after everything I’ve been through, I didn’t think happiness would ever be possible again.’

They fell silent, but not the uncomfortable silence Charlie had grown accustomed to when it came to the company of women. It was the kind of silence felt between two people who had known each other for an eternity.

‘So, tell me, Charlie, how did you come to live with your grandparents?’ Her question was so sweetly innocent.

Charlie’s breath caught in his chest. ‘I’m not sure you really want to know.’

‘I’m sure I do.’ She tucked flyaway wisps of blonde hair behind her ears. ‘I actually want to know all about you.’

How could he refuse that? ‘Okay, well, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just cut to the chase.’ He sucked in a breath then let the horrific words tumble from his lips. ‘My father killed my mother in a drunken rage. Then, like the

coward he was, he shot himself.’ He said it almost mechanically. It was so long ago, he felt as if it were part of his past life, not this one. ‘I can still feel the weight of my mum’s head in my lap as I tried to stop the bleeding. The look on my father’s face, the gun in his hand, sirens coming down our street.’ Charlie shook his head, as if the action could clear away the images. ‘It all happened so fast.’

Now bolt-upright, Grace moved a little closer to him. ‘Oh my god, Charlie, I’m so sorry.’ She shook her head, her hand over her mouth and her eyes filling with tears. ‘I honestly didn’t know.’

‘That’s okay. How could you have known when my grandparents swore me to secrecy?’ He sat up too, and touched her arm, soothingly, tenderly. ‘I think my grandfather was ashamed that it was his son, that he’d raised a man like that.’

She took his hands in hers, and gave them a squeeze. ‘I’m here for you, any time, if you want to talk about it, or not, okay.’

‘Thank you, Grace. That means a lot.’ He offered her an appreciative smile – nobody had ever made him feel so understood, and so alive. ‘I don’t want to talk about the past. I want to know more about you. How about you tell me three things you love?’

‘Hmm. Okay, well.’ She looked to the sky, her head tipping side to side. ‘I love all there is about food. Shopping for it, cooking it and eating it. I love the smell of the ocean, and I love music.’

‘I really like your answers.’ He studied her more closely now. ‘You do know that a way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, don’t you?’ He laughed the line off, enjoying how easy it was to pull her into the present moment.

‘Yes, Dad says that to Mum all the time.’ Her laughter was music to Charlie’s ears. ‘Your turn. What are the three things you love the most?’ She watched him with keen interest.

*You, you and you.* ‘I love sitting by the ocean, eating good food and dancing.’

‘Oh my gosh, really?’

Her excitement was contagious. ‘Yes, really.’ Here he was, just being himself, and she adored it.

She wriggled on the spot, clapping her hands. ‘I love dancing too.’

Something within her gaze deepened, and transfixed him further. ‘Well, in that case, I’m going to have to take you out dancing while I’m home, Miss Denver.’

‘Oh, yes please, Charlie! I’d love that.’

‘It’s a date.’ He cocked his head. ‘That is, if you want it to be a date?’

‘I would love nothing more than a date with you, Charlie Wilson.’

Her smile was so cute, he wanted to lean in and kiss it from her lips. ‘And do you like movies?’ he added boldly.

‘Yes, I love going to the movie theatre.’ She touched his arm, sending heat racing up to his heart. ‘And the scarier the movie, the better.’

‘I love scary movies too.’ It would mean he could cuddle her protectively while she sat on the edge of her seat – with any luck, on the edge nearest to his. ‘So, that’s another date.’

She offered a cheeky sideways glance. ‘You might have to stay longer than four weeks, Charlie, because we have lots of fun to have.’

Smiling like a won-over man, Charlie had an intense feeling he’d found a purpose in life other than fighting for his country – and it was Grace Denver. He almost told her that he was seriously thinking about staying home indefinitely, but stopped himself before he promised something he might not be able to follow through on. His grandfather had instilled in him that a man of honour always kept his promises.

Instead, he flashed her a dimple-clad smile. ‘You and I are going to have some fun, Grace. That, I can promise you.’ And he meant it, from the bottom of his swooning heart.

# CHAPTER

## 5

**October 1975**

The newest addition to Grace's beloved vinyl collection spun beneath the needle of her Kenwood record player, Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love' resounding in crackling clarity as she rushed to get ready. It had been so thoughtful of Charlie to buy the album for her.

Grabbing her mood ring from the bedside table, she slipped it on, and then standing in front of her mirror she adjusted the straps on her sequined top. Hands on hips, she looked to her shoe rack and tried to decide between her kitten heels and platform sandals, opting for the latter, given they weren't going out dancing tonight.

A knock sounded at the bedroom door right before her mum popped her head in. 'Gracie, darling, Jen's on the phone,' she called over the music.

'Oh, okay, thanks Mum.' Grace met her at the doorway with a grimace. 'How's Dad?' He hadn't taken the news that she and Charlie had officially become an item particularly well.

'Well, he's not pacing the hallway any longer.' Her forehead puckering, her mother rubbed Grace's arm. 'He'll come round, love. Just give him time.'

'I hope so, Mum, because I really like Charlie a lot.'

'I know, love, and word is the army straightened him out, and he's not the rascal he was anymore, so we just have to get your father to see that.' With Grace looking doubtful, she added, 'He's only protecting you because he loves you, Gracie. Remember that while you're broody with him, okay?'

‘Yes, okay,’ Grace huffed. ‘I know he means well, but I’m not a little girl anymore. I’m almost twenty-three.’

‘And don’t we know it,’ her mother chuckled. ‘You better get the phone, or Jen will think we’ve forgotten her.’

‘Oh, oops, yes.’ Grace scooted past her, grabbing the phone on the stand in the hallway. ‘Hey, Jen, are you still there?’

‘About time you came to the phone! I thought you’d forgotten about me.’

‘I could never forget you, Jen, you loon.’ The phone cord curled around the doorway of her bedroom and, stretching it to its limit, Grace held the receiver between her ear and shoulder as she tugged her bell-bottom jeans on while stumbling over the pile of clothes she’d tossed to the floor in her bid to look cute for Charlie. ‘So, how did your lunch date go with Marty?’

‘Aw, it was fabulous, Gracie, he made me feel so special, opening doors and pulling my chair out. He walked me to the front door when he dropped me home.’

‘Yay, Jen! I’m so happy for you two, and about time, given that you’ve liked each other for almost a year now.’

‘Yeah, well, he took his time asking me out, and I was just about to give up all hope of him ever getting the courage to, but I’m so glad he finally did.’

‘Did you get a little kiss?’ Grace couldn’t help but ask.

‘Of course I did, just on the cheek.’ The phone line crackled along with Jen’s cackling. ‘And I’m so excited for you, too, Gracie, with you and Charlie making it official.’

‘Thanks. I keep having to pinch myself. I mean, of all the girls in town, and he’s chosen *me* to be his girlfriend! I never thought I’d see the day, after he ran for the hills after kissing me in high school.’

‘Of course he picked you. You’re a hottie, Grace Denver. And it’s so cool he’s decided to stay a few more months, to

spend more time with you.’ Jenny’s excitement travelled down the line.

‘I was so pleased when he told me he was staying longer.’ Grace plonked down on the end of her bed. ‘But then, I’m also really nervous about what’s going to happen when he does have to leave. Because even though I haven’t told him ... I think I’m falling in love with him.’ Grace bit back a rise of emotion.

‘I get it. He’s a pretty easy guy to fall for. Just make sure you protect that big heart of yours and take it steady, okay?’

‘I’m trying to, Jen, but he has this way of making me fall for him more and more every time I see him. It’s like I just can’t get enough of him, no matter how much time we have together.’

Jenny sighed. ‘Well, just try and enjoy it for what it is. If something comes from it, great. If not, I’m here to wipe your tears, my beautiful friend.’

Grace smiled sadly. ‘Thank you, Jen. I don’t know what I’d do without you.’

‘No problemo, and I want to hear all about your date tomorrow,’ Jenny said, added, spiritedly, ‘especially if he finally gives you a proper kiss. I mean, come on, Charlie, it’s been over a month of courting! Give the girl a damn good pash.’

‘Go easy on him, Jen,’ Grace said, giggling. ‘He’s trying to be a gentleman, but I’m hoping tonight will be the one we finally kiss like lovers do. And I promise if it happens, I’ll fill you in on all the details.’ Heading over to her dressing table, she swiped on some strawberry gloss over her lips, and then smacked them together. ‘Just as soon as I get to work tomorrow.’

‘Goody.’ Jenny’s cackle sounded down the line. ‘I can’t wait.’ There was a short pause, then a sigh. ‘I do have to ask, though, what are you going to do when Rodger gets back into town?’



‘I don’t think I have to do anything,’ Grace replied. ‘We only went on a couple of dates, and he’s the one who went on holiday to Europe for a year.’

‘I was making sure you were thinking straight, so good answer, Gracie.’ There was a short pause, followed by the sound of a closing door. ‘I just hope Rodger sees it that way too and doesn’t cause any upset for you and Charlie.’

‘Nothing really happened between us. I wasn’t even sure if I liked him any more than a friend, Jen, so there’s no way I’ll let him do anything of the sort.’ She huffed a breath. ‘I just hope he can handle the situation like a gentleman.’

‘Yes, we can only hope.’

The growl of a V8 engine sounded from down the street. ‘Anyhoos, I better run, Jen, I think I can hear Charlie’s car coming.’ Switching off her lava lamp, Grace grabbed her bag from the cupboard door handle and her platforms from the floor. ‘I don’t want to give Dad the chance to get to the door first. I’ve told him he’s not allowed to grill Charlie, but that’s not to say he won’t if given half a chance.’

‘You worry too much, Grace, I’m sure Charlie will be able to handle himself if your dad does give him a fatherly lecture.’ Jenny chuckled softly. ‘He did fight in the war, your man, don’t forget.’

Grace half grimaced and half laughed. ‘Have you met my dad?’

‘Ha, yes, true, he can be a little ... let’s say, intimidating, when he’s cross.’ Jenny heaved a breath. ‘Regardless, I’m sure they’ll figure it out. They’ll have to, given that you’re going to be loving them both in the near future.’

Grace instinctively shrugged. ‘Time will tell.’

‘Indeed, it will. Anyway, I better let you get to his rescue, before Mr Boxing Champion flexes his muscles.’ Jenny giggled. ‘Bye for now, little-miss-head-over-heels-in-love’

‘Okay, bye, little-miss-know-it-all.’ Grace laughed as she headed out of her bedroom and hung the phone back on the receiver.

The grumble of Charlie’s Chrysler Valiant Charger now reverberated outside, and Grace quickly made her way down the staircase. Charlie had arrived right on time – his punctuality was endearing.

She was really looking forward to going to the movies with him again, although this time it was at the drive-in rather than the theatre. After reading the book by Joan Lindsay, she couldn’t wait to see *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. She was also looking forward to Charlie slipping his big strong arm around her shoulder, as he had the last two times, so she could cuddle into him while they shared some popcorn. His touch felt so familiar, so comfortable, as if she’d been in his arms many times – maybe because she’d fantasied about it over the years.

Detouring through the lounge room, where the shag carpet was soft beneath her feet, she saw her parents were glued to their new colour television, where their favourite show, *Happy Days*, was playing. Thankfully, her father appeared to have missed the growl of Charlie’s car. The scent of her mum’s latest culinary delight, apricot chicken, made her stomach turn. Packet soup and a can of fruit juice, whacked together with some chopped-up chicken breasts, didn’t make the slightest bit of sense.

Leaning over the back of the couch, she poked her head between them. ‘I’m off.’

Her mother looked up from her dinner, sat atop a TV tray. ‘Have fun, just make sure you’re home by curfew, won’t you?’ She leant in and kissed Grace on the cheek. ‘Because you know what your father is like, he’ll be out searching for you if you’re ten minutes late.’

‘Too right I will be, with my shotgun,’ he said with conviction.

‘Dad, behave yourself.’ Grace tapped his shoulder.

He replied with a decisive ‘Hmph, just try me.’

Her mother shot him a cautionary look.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll be home on time.’ Grace rolled her eyes, chuckling as she headed toward the front door.

‘Have fun, ‘her mum called out to her, ‘and make sure he deserves that first kiss, won’t you!’

Grace flushed, and was lost for words, given the fact her mother had just said that in front of her father, so she just called back, ‘Love you.’

A combined ‘Love you’ was chorused from the lounge room.

With the thought of kissing Charlie passionately, Grace’s body heated as she stepped onto the front porch. As she slipped her platforms on, the cool evening breeze was a welcome reprieve from the internal blaze kindled constantly by the way he made her feel with a simple touch or a lingering glance. Looking to where Charlie had parked his shiny silver Charger, Grace all but skipped down the pebbled pathway.

‘Hi there, my beautiful lady.’ Charlie met her at the front gate, looking very handsome in his jeans and jumper. ‘You look wow, as usual.’ His gorgeous blue eyes were as wide as saucers.

‘Thank you, Charlie.’ Grace’s already buoyant heart flew higher. ‘And you look mighty dapper, too.’

‘Why, thank you, Miss Denver, I aim to please.’ He flashed her a charming dimple-clad grin then turned and opened the passenger door for her. ‘Your chariot awaits,’ he said cheekily.

She hopped in, and he closed the door behind her, before coming around the front and sliding behind the wheel.

With a distinctive cheeky sideways glance, he revved the engine back to growling life, but did not pull away from the kerb.

‘I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all day, Grace.’ He brought his gaze to meet hers and it did not falter. ‘I’ve literally counted down each minute since dropping you home after the beach yesterday.’

‘Me too.’ Her heart pounded as she imagined him leaning in and kissing her for the very first time.

To her dismay, he didn’t. Instead, he offered another of his charming smiles and pulled onto the road, heading toward the drive-in. What was talking him so long? Maybe she needed to make the first move. But she didn’t want to pre-empt him.

Burnt orange embers of the sunset licked the sky as they pulled into the third row back from the giant screen. Although they were a little early, the outdoor theatre was already beginning to fill up.

Jumping out, Charlie took the speaker from the metal pole and hooked it up on the top of the window. Then he dashed around to her side. ‘I’ll go and get us some dinner, before the movie starts.’ He leant his forearms on the sill. ‘What would you like?’

‘I’m not sure.’ Grace pulled the door handle and slipped out. ‘How about I come with you?’

Hand-in-hand, they weaved their way through the parked cars to the concession stand. Grabbing a cheeseburger each, along with some fries, a bucket of popcorn and two chocolate bars, they made their way back and got settled just as the previews started.

An ad for an upcoming romance flick had Grace gushing. ‘Oh Charlie, we have to come and watch this one when it comes out.’

‘I thought you liked scary movies?’ Charlie gave her a little nudge.

‘Yes, I do, but you can’t beat a good love story, too.’ Grace hoped he agreed.

‘If you say so,’ Charlie replied indifferently.

A little taken aback, Grace frowned at him. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Charlie chuckled. ‘I think they make people believe in a kind of love that doesn’t exist.’ Spotting her dismayed expression, he was quick to add, ‘I mean, come on, Grace. Real love doesn’t prevail over all, not when things get extremely hard. Life just doesn’t work like that.’

‘I firmly disagree.’ Grace instinctively folded her arms. ‘True love can conquer anything, Charlie Wilson.’

‘You really believe that?’

Grace gave him a firm nod. ‘One hundred per cent.’

Charlie offered her a sad smile. ‘I wish I could believe in it like you do, it’s just ...’ He trailed off and Grace wondered what he was going to say. Then, swivelling a little in his seat, he took her hands in his and sighed. ‘There’s things you don’t know about me, Grace. Dark things that I’ve buried deep down in my soul from my time in Vietnam. I lost so many of my friends ...’ He closed his eyes, and dropped his head. ‘I hope I can keep the shadows tucked away forever, because I’m not sure that if I ever let the darkness out that you would feel the same way about me.’

This wonderful man had fought for their country, and endured so much in doing so. Grace blinked back tears. ‘Oh, Charlie, nothing would ever make me feel less about you.’ She gave his hands a squeeze. ‘If anything, opening up to me and sharing your pain would only make me want to care for you more.’

He brought his desolate gaze back to hers. ‘I’m not so sure about that.’

‘Well, I am.’ She tipped her head, eyeing him tenderly. ‘Tell me something about your time there.’ She could see the apprehension in his eyes, and the determination to push through it for her sake. So scooting along the vinyl seat, leaving not an inch between them, she hoped her closeness

would help him to continue. ‘You can trust me, Charlie, I’m never going to hurt you.’

Charlie took his time, his mouth opening then closing a couple of times. ‘I don’t like to talk about it,’ he whispered finally, his mouth barely moving. Heaving a sigh, he broke her gaze. His jaw tensed as he looked up at the movie beginning on the screen. ‘I’m sorry, Grace. I just want to try and move past it.’

Nodding, Grace swallowed down her instinct to nurture his broken heart – he would speak if and when he was ready, and not a second sooner. She knew that without a doubt. ‘That’s okay. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.’ She cozied up beside him, resting her head upon his shoulder. ‘Let’s just enjoy the movie, shall we? And take the rest one day at a time.’

That’s when Charlie placed a finger beneath her chin, tilting her toward him ever so gently. Uncertain of what was to come next, she met his stare. The car grew hot as his gaze searched hers. Her breath caught a second before he brought his lips to hers. Her heart raced as, to her delight, he left them there. At first he was gentle, cautious, but once Grace parted her lips and allowed him in deeper, the passion that had been building for the past five weeks burst in a plethora of stars. It was better than she had imagined, could have ever imagined. The magic of his kiss sent waves of heat rolling through her, fanning her blaze into an inferno. Hungry for him, to feel his skin pressing against her own, she sought out the hard planes of his chest beneath the V-neck of his jumper before she trailed her fingers up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. His breath heavy against her cheek, Charlie pulled her closer still. Hypnotised by his magnetism, completely lost in this glorious moment, she daringly climbed onto his lap. He growled in appreciation, and she savoured his uninhibited desire as his arms came around her waist, possessively so.

Their tongues dancing, she melted into him, feeling the heavy beat of his heart against her breasts. His hands explored her, touching her with such burning intimacy, as if he was

ravenous for the skin hidden just beneath her clothes. A yearning she'd never experienced before burned between her thighs, making her feel womanly, wild, and oh so free. Something inside her heart shifted and then fell into perfect place. She did love him, with all her heart and soul. And she knew she would, forever, no matter what happened after this moment. She needed him. Wanted him. Ached to be at one with him. Longing burnt inside her, and she moaned into his lips. He exhaled with pleasure and she seized his breath. Inhaling him inside of her felt intensely sensual. Caught up in the raging heat, she lost herself to him, and her usual willpower evaded her as she dropped her hands to his trousers and, with trembling fingers, began to unbuckle his belt.

Breaking their kiss, Charlie sucked in a sharp breath and brought his hands to hers, halting her. 'Grace, stop. We can't do this.'

Shaken, Grace straightened, frowning. 'But I want to.' She placed her hands on his chest, giving him the demurest look she could muster. 'You and me, we feel right, Charlie, don't you agree?'

'We may feel right, but ...' Charlie took hold of her hips. 'What's happening right now doesn't.' He helped to ease her off his lap and back onto the passenger seat. 'Not here. Not like this.'

The rejection stung, and Grace wrapped her arms around herself, fighting off tears of humiliation. 'Can you take me home, Charlie, please?' Her cheeks on fire, she dared not look at him, for fear of breaking into uncontrollable sobs.

'Oh, Grace, please don't cry.' Sliding over to where she'd pinned herself against the passenger door, he wiped at her tears with his fingertips. 'It's just, well ... heck this is hard.' He huffed. 'I love you, and I want us to save ourselves for if and when we become husband and wife,' he said with absolute conviction.

*He loved her?*

*He wanted her to be his wife? And he, her husband?*

Her tense body softening, Grace turned and met his beseeching eyes, her hand coming to cover her gaping mouth. 'I love you too, Charlie. So very much.' She felt her heart tumble then flutter, as if she'd just leapt off a mountain only to find she was soaring higher still, with Charlie right beside her, making her feel safe and loved.

Appearing dazed for a few breaths, Charlie cupped her face as if she were made of the frailest of porcelain. 'You don't know how much it means to hear that, Grace.'

Lost in his eyes, Grace felt like the happiest, luckiest woman alive. The smile on his face was one she hadn't yet seen, one she wanted to bear witness to each and every day for the rest of her life. It made her feel so deeply loved, so deeply treasured, and so deeply desired that she could barely draw a breath. What came next in their love story was anyone's guess, but she was ready for the adventure and when it came to Charlie Wilson, something told her she was in for the ride of her life.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Charlie looked to the passenger side of his Valiant, where Grace had regarded him with such tenderness as she'd told him she was in love with him, and his heart sunk. He should be elated – dancing on air, over the moon – and he *was* so very happy, but he was equally afraid now. Afraid of failing her, of somehow unwittingly breaking her beautiful heart. There was something scratching at his soul, cautioning him to tread carefully. The second she'd stepped from the car, he'd longed to pull her back within the confines and make love to her. However, he had to do this right. Grace Denver was different from any woman he'd ever met. She was vulnerable yet fearless, womanly yet so innocent, sweetly winsome yet passionately sultry, and wise beyond her years. His instincts were telling him to do everything he could to love her as she should be loved, to protect her no matter the cost, to give her his life so they could make each day theirs.



It was an extremely odd sensation, but he could feel the hand of fate pulling him in a very different direction to the one he'd honed in on before coming back to Sapphire Bay.

And the idea of losing his way terrified him, in more ways than one.

Four weeks ago, the army had been his whole reason for existing. It gave him order and direction, something he desperately needed, with the demons that lurked from his time in Vietnam. The nightmares and haunting memories had gained traction and power since being back here; drinking had helped keep them at bay. Never would he have considered leaving, to live a civilian life. Being an infantry soldier was all he knew. The very thought of giving it up made him panic – he still had so much to accomplish. But he was equally terrified at the idea of losing Grace, and there was a huge chance of that happening if he remained a soldier. Living more life away with a pack on his back and a gun in his hand than by her side would eventually take a toll. Especially when they would be out of contact for months on end. He wasn't a believer in absence making a heart grow fonder; all it did was teach people to live a life without each other.

Never before in his life had he wanted to give up everything that made him who he was, and to remove the armour shielding his tortured heart. Never would he have believed he'd meet someone who'd make him feel safe to do so. He knew it would mean the world to Grace if he opened up and told her about his battle scars, and all the times he'd seen his brothers-in-arms, Australian and American, blown up, or dying in his arms from a bullet. It would be a sight better than turning to the bottle to dull the pain. But he was too frightened to release his demons; what if they devoured him, like they'd devoured his father?

Pulling into Moonflower Acres, Charlie rested his forearm on his windowsill as he waited for the black wrought-iron gates to swing open. The salty scent of the sea drifting through helped to alleviate his angst. He inhaled a few deep breaths, and a sense of contentment nestled into him. There was

something to be said for coming home. This was his safe haven, the only place in the world he could pretend that the war was well and truly over.

Easing his way up the winding driveway, past the avocado and macadamia trees and toward the double-storey house he and his grandmother called home, he gazed at the rolling landscape, softly lit by moonlight. He was a blessed man to call such paradise home, even though the sprawling five-acre property now felt emptier without his grandfather, as if it had somehow lost its heartbeat. He longed to find a way to revive it, at least for his grandmother's sake. Max Wilson might have seemed a headstrong man with a cold heart to the locals he'd policed for forty-three years, but behind closed doors, he was the kindest, wisest, most loving man Charlie had ever met. His sudden death had left another gaping hole in his already battered heart, one that Grace was helping to fill.

Pulling into the carport, he killed the engine, gathered his jacket and wallet then made his way across the lawn to the front porch. Kicking off his shoes, he stepped inside and padded down the shadowy hallway with a nightcap in mind. Yesterday, he'd made a promise to himself that he'd go a day without the respite of liquor, but right now he needed it to sleep. Just one drink, just enough to take the edge off.

Grabbing a bottle of his grandfather's whisky from the cabinet, he wandered back out to the porch and slumped down on the settee. Cracking the lid, he hesitated before throwing caution to the wind and taking a guzzle. Looking to the star-dusted black velvet sky, he rested back, continuing to have mouthfuls of the warming amber single-malt. Each gulp felt as if it were dulling the voices, numbing the pain. So he took another. Then another. He was well aware that drinking his demons away never worked – that they were only bigger, darker and stronger when coupled with a hangover. Right now, though, he didn't care. Right now, he didn't want to feel, nor think. He was so happy, but by god, he was equally as sad.

'Charlie, is that you?' A soft, cautious voice carried from the doorway.

Charlie quickly stashed the bottle beneath the settee, hoping to god he could hide the stench of alcohol on his breath. ‘Yes, Grandma.’ He watched her pull the shawl around her frail shoulders as she shuffled toward him. ‘Why are you up so late?’

She sank down beside him. ‘I can’t sleep without your grandfather beside me.’ Sniffling, she blinked faster, but the tears she was clearly trying to hold at bay fell.

Charlie’s heart squeezed agonizingly tight. ‘Oh, Grandma. I’m so sorry.’ Placing an arm around her shoulder, he hugged her to him. ‘I miss him too.’

‘I hope it’s true that time heals, Charlie, because I don’t know how I’m going to get on with life without him here to share it with,’ she sobbed against his shoulder. ‘My Max was my absolute world. It feels so empty without him.’

Overcome with raw emotion, Charlie didn’t know what to say, so he remained silent, hoping his embrace was enough to bring the woman who’d raised him with such gentleness and love some sort of comfort. She deserved that, and so much more.

Her weeping eventually subsiding, his grandmother unravelled from his arms. ‘Thank you, Charlie, for coming home. I’m so happy you’ve decided to stay a little longer.’ Wiping her tears with a tissue plucked from her pocket, she offered him a wispy smile. ‘Speaking of which, how are things going with you and Grace?’

Charlie cleared the emotion from his throat as best he could. ‘I love her, Grandma.’

‘Oh, how wonderful. She’s a beautiful young woman, inside and out.’ Delight filled her blue-grey eyes. ‘Have you told her how you feel?’

‘Yes, tonight.’ His heart cartwheeled with the memory.

‘Good for you.’ Josephine patted his knee. ‘And what did she say?’

‘She told me she loves me too.’

‘Oh, Charlie. I’m so happy for you.’ Josephine sucked in a breath, her smile giving way to an expression of utmost importance. ‘You know that have a very important decision to make now, though, don’t you?’

Charlie tipped his head. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If you go back to the army, you know you could lose her.’ Josephine’s shrewd gaze was all-knowing. ‘A woman needs the man she loves beside her, not in some far-off country he might never return from.’ She made the sign of the cross. ‘Please god, never let that be so,’ she added hastily

His grandma had suffered so many years of not knowing if he’d make it home alive, and while he hated making her feel that way, it was part of being a soldier. ‘I know what you’re saying is true, and I wish it were that easy.’ Charlie swallowed hard. ‘You know how much I wanted to join the reconnaissance mission to try and find Joey, or god forbid his remains, so his family can find peace. It feels wrong of me to even consider not going back there, like I’m letting down the brave soldier who fought beside me, and saved me from being blown up that terrible day.’

Josephine placed a motherly hand on his bouncing leg, steadying it. ‘I know you do, but you need to look ahead, Charlie, not behind you, if you want to be able to look back on your life as a happy, fulfilled man.’ She drew in a breath. ‘After all this time, Joey Baker might very well be untraceable. It’s heartbreaking, I know, but it’s the cold hard truth, and you know it.’ She sighed softly. ‘Grace is your future, and from what you’re telling me, you are most certainly hers.’

‘I don’t know how I’ll live with myself if I don’t go back to Vietnam to look for him.’ With the weight of it all bearing down upon his shoulders, Charlie dropped his head into his hands. ‘I want to bring Joey home to his family in Alabama, not leave him in that hellhole, missing in action.’

‘I know, Charlie.’ Josephine looked to her hands, now folded in her lap. ‘But tell me this.’ She brought her gaze back to his. ‘How are you going to live with yourself if you go and break Grace’s heart?’

Unable to find the right words, he nodded, then heaved an almighty breath.

Josephine patted his arm. ‘Like I said, you have a decision to make.’ Bending, she plucked the whisky bottle from where he’d hidden it beneath the settee. ‘And while I’m preaching to you about doing the right thing, this stuff, my boy, will be the death of you, and of your ever entertaining a happy future.’

‘How did you know?’ He was extremely embarrassed to see the empathy in his grandma’s concerned regard.

‘I raised you. I know you better than you know yourself, Charlie.’ She offered him a gentle, all-seeing smile. ‘You have to take care of yourself, and ...’ She placed a hand on his chest, ‘... your heart.’ Her expression turned a little sad. ‘Because take it from me, there is nothing worth fighting for more in this world than true love.’

Her words hit home, incredibly hard. Charlie nodded. ‘You’re a wise woman, Grandma. Thank you for loving me like you do.’

‘To know you is to love you, my darling boy.’ She leant in and kissed his cheek. ‘Now, I’m off to bed, to try and get some sleep, and you should do the same.’ The whisky bottle clutched in her hand, she rose and passed her other hand to him. ‘Because tomorrow, unlike your wonderful grandfather, you and I have the gift of a brand-new day.’

With her frail hand gently clasped within the strength of his, Charlie came to his feet and, step by step, imagined walking away from the man he believed he was predestined to be and into the house he’d found so much comfort in over the years.

Climbing the staircase, he bid his grandma goodnight before heading to his bedroom. He dressed in his pyjamas,

climbed into bed and, closing his eyes against the wooziness of the quarter bottle of whisky he'd drunk, thanked god for the angel he'd brought into his life – the very woman who was going to alter his path like no other had the power to. Charlie was sure of it. And then, with his breathing slowing, he tumbled into dreamland, where Grace's mesmerising face seemed to fill every second of slumber.

# CHAPTER

## 6

**February 1976**

Cruising the leafy suburban streets of Sapphire Bay to the tunes of ABBA, Charlie smiled to himself as he breathed in every peaceful detail of civilian life; a group of free-spirited kids riding their chopper bikes, a house with giggling youngsters playing under the sprinkler with their golden retriever. The sleepy seaside town was a world away from the one he'd grown accustomed to in his khakis, and he found it hard to believe he'd spent one hundred and sixteen days back here. He wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

That wasn't to say he didn't feel guilt every waking day for not following through with his plan to return to Vietnam, but on the flip side, the guilt he would have felt had he left Grace behind was unthinkable. He was both nervous and eager to see how he was going to settle into life now that he'd officially been discharged from the army. He'd waited until his request was authorised so he didn't get Grace's hopes up, and now he couldn't wait to see her face when he told her the news. And that wasn't the only thing he was going to surprise her with. He just hoped, after braving a visit to her father at the high school that morning, that everything went to plan, and he wasn't about to make a total fool of himself.

Pulling into the Denvers' driveway, his heart vaulted towards the charismatic woman who'd stolen it. He couldn't believe it was possible to be so in love in a little under five months, but with Grace, he was head-over-heels, ridiculously, unequivocally lovestruck.

'Charlie!' As if floating on the same air her sweet voice carried on, Grace flew toward him, skidding to an excited stop at his window. 'Hey, handsome, are you going my way?' she

said, leaning in and planting a kiss on his lips before he'd even had time to answer.

Her vivacious energy was exhilarating, as was her crimson tassel-hemmed sequined dress, kitten heels and red lipstick, so much so that Charlie found himself momentarily flabbergasted.

'I'll go any way you want me to, Miss Denver.' He stepped out and strode around to do the gentlemanly thing. But he didn't open her door straight away. Instead, he took her hands in his, then stepped back a little to drink her in. 'You look absolutely captivating.'

'Why, thank you, Charlie.' She curtsied playfully then eyed him up and down, her finger trailing a path over his chest. 'In that white shirt and sexy leather jacket, you're giving Fonzie a damn good run for his money tonight.'

'Exactamundo.' Chuffed Grace had just likened him to the Fonz, Charlie gave his collar a flick as he playfully imitated his favourite *Happy Days* character. 'Lightning bolt, right here.'

Her eyes sparkling, Grace laughed at his antics. 'Look out, I think I might be up for a crazy night, given the playful mood you're very clearly in.'

Charlie flashed her a charming grin. 'You have no idea just how crazy, my darling Grace.' Pretending not to see her questioning glance, he opened the door and grandly gestured her toward it.

As she settled in, Charlie took a fleeting look toward the front porch, which had him meeting the eyes of Victor Denver. The towering man's thoughtful expression gave way to a smile as he gave Charlie a meaningful nod. Grateful for the magnitude of what any onlookers would see as simple acknowledgment between men, Charlie returned the gesture – Victor's approval meant the world to him.

Lighter on his feet, he climbed back behind the steering wheel. Grace's floral perfume had filled the car, along with her



vivacious spirit. ‘So, are you ready for a night of dinner and dancing?’

‘Am I ever?’ She jiggled in her seat. ‘I’ve been counting down the minutes all day long.’

‘So have I.’ Charlie revved the growling engine to life and, having chosen Grace’s favourite band to accompany them in the tape player, he backed out and headed toward their customary date-night Italian restaurant.

‘Oh, Charlie, I love this song. Can we turn it up?’

With Grace having converted him into an ABBA fan, Charlie didn’t need to be asked twice. ‘Your wish is my command.’

With unbridled passion and gusto, they sang the lyrics to ‘Dancing Queen’, way out of tune. Charlie felt so happy within this moment, he thought he could almost burst. Grace had shown him a side to life he’d never experienced before, one filled with optimism and hope and so much joy.

Minutes later, they pulled up in one of the only parking spaces left along Romance Avenue – the disco era was in full swing, and Saturday nights were all about food, music and dancing.

‘You wait right there, beautiful.’ After racing around to her side, Charlie opened the door and helped Grace out then, hand-in-hand, they headed into the packed restaurant, where they were ushered past couples gazing lovingly at each other to their usual table, nearest the window, by their usual waiter, Luigi.

The scent of roasted tomatoes, garlic and basil mouth-wateringly lingered, and Dean Martin’s ‘That’s Amore’ played in the background. It was a fitting place to fall even deeper in love with the amazing woman at his side. He felt such pride to be the lucky man accompanying her, to be the man she blushed for, the man she adored, and Charlie couldn’t help but kiss Grace’s cheek right before he pulled her chair out.

‘scuse me, lovebirds.’ Luigi flashed a toothy grin. ‘Will it be the usual drink order tonight?’

‘I might be a little wild this evening, Luigi, and order something different.’ Candlelight flickered over Grace’s features as she ran a dainty finger down the cocktail list then asked the lively waiter for a grasshopper, and a whisky sour for Charlie.

‘Good choice.’ Luigi looked to Charlie. ‘And would the gentleman like to order the meals?’

Charlie looked to Grace, his grin feeling as if it were permanently planted there. ‘Are you going to be a rebel with the meals tonight, too?’

‘No, Charlie.’ She smirked spiritedly. ‘I might stay safe on that one.’

Charlie ordered their standard dinner to share: fettuccini carbonara, a Pavarotti pizza and a garden salad, which they would inevitably share. Luigi scribbled it down and shot off like a bullet toward the back of house. Once they were alone, Charlie took the moment to lean in, take Grace’s hands across the table, and draw in a steady breath.

He couldn’t wait a second longer.

‘Grace, I ... uh ...’ He’d rehearsed what he was going to say all day long, but now he was utterly tongue-tied. Why was it so hard for him to tell her the news she’d been praying for?

Her warm smile fading, Grace eyed him warily as her fingers tightened around his. ‘What is it, Charlie?’

Desperate to ease the worry from her eyes, he quickly said, ‘I’m a free man, Grace.’

‘A free man?’ Her head tilted as she momentarily considered his words. Then she sucked in a sharp breath. ‘Oh my, you mean ...?’ Her hand went over her beautiful heart. ‘You’ve left the army?’

A lump of emotion suddenly lodged in his throat, robbing Charlie of the ability to speak. Instead, he nodded. ‘Mm-

hmm.'

'I didn't think you were going to do such a thing, not ever. Oh Charlie.' Grace shot to her feet. 'You've honestly just made me the happiest woman alive.'

Charlie fought to return Grace's wide smile, but his lips were quivering and his heart was suddenly galloping like a wild horse's hoofbeats. Everything around him blurred. And what was the swirling sensation in his stomach, as if he were plummeting to his demise? He blinked faster, but reality seemed to shift, splinter ... then shatter. All he could smell was incense, fairy floss and ... hospital disinfectant?

*Oh god.*

It was as if a vortex had unlocked beneath the carpet and was about to suck him into another dimension. He grabbed the edges of the table to save himself from collapsing to the floor. It was the strangest feeling he'd ever encountered, and that was saying a lot, considering he'd been shot at, concussed, and experienced the suction of air being stolen from his lungs when bomb blasts had gone off.

*For god's sake, Wilson, pull yourself together.*

Grace's pretty face came into sharp focus once again. 'Charlie, are you okay?' Her eyes teary, she was now where he always liked her to be – by his side.

Mentally, he seized the nervous tension spiralling through him, wrapped it into a controllable ball and pushed it down. Then he finally managed to force a smile. 'Sorry, yes, Grace. I'm more than okay.' He stood now, taking her into his arms. 'I'm just overjoyed I've made you so happy, because that's all that matters to me.'

Breathing her scent in, he treasured the feeling of her arms wrapped around him and her cheek pressed against his chest.

Grace looked up at him from beneath her long, dark lashes. 'You really are one in a million, Charlie Wilson, I'm a very lucky gal to have you give up your passion for me.'

Charlie cupped her cheeks. ‘You, Grace, *are* my passion.’ In his heart, he knew this was where he belonged, with her. Always.

He just wished his head would get the memo.

\* \* \*

With the rotating disco ball sparkling flickering diamantes across the packed dance floor of the Confetti nightclub, the strobe light creating cool effects and KC and the Sunshine Band’s song, ‘(Shake, Shake, Shake) Shake Your Booty’, belting from the sound system, Charlie spun Grace in dizzying circles as they grooved like nobody was watching. Pulling his best disco moves, he enjoyed how he could make her smile just by allowing himself to feel effortlessly free. It wasn’t hard – it was so easy to be lighthearted around her. And by god, he loved making her happy.

As the song came to an end, Grace waved her hand over her face. ‘I think I need a drink and a little sit down, Charlie, before I pass out.’

His throat parched, Charlie was more than happy to oblige, so he took her by the hand and they all but skipped toward the bar. ‘I’ll have a Tom Collins, please, and a tequila sunrise for my lady,’ he hollered over the music to the barman leaning in his direction.

Grace slipped up on the only vacant barstool, and he stood protectively beside her. ‘I’m having so much fun.’ She leant in and kissed his cheek. ‘Thank you for always making me feel so special.’

He went to respond with, *my pleasure*, when a hand reached through the crowd and grabbed Grace’s arm, and her undivided attention. She appeared shell-shocked, but recovered quickly. ‘Holy moly, Rodger!’ She slipped off the chair while staring at Charlie’s high school nemesis. ‘You’re back from your adventure.’

Charlie stood, speechless, as Rodger slipped his arms around Grace’s waist and lifted her from the floor. What in the

hell? Jealously gripped him like a vice. Had he missed something significant in the six years he'd been away? They seemed very *friendly*, to say the least.

As Grace's kitten heels came back to the floor, she spun to Charlie. 'Rodger, you remember Charlie Wilson, don't you?'

'Of course I do, how could I forget him?' A smug smirk at the corners of his lips, Rodger offered his hand. 'Nice to see you again, Charles.'

Rodger knew exactly how much he hated being called Charles, but Charlie bit his tongue as he gripped Rodger's hand excessively firmly and said, 'You too, Rodger.'

He looked from Rodger Burrows to Grace, noting the slight quiver in her lips. She hadn't told him something important – he could see it in her darting eyes. So, before he said anymore, to either of them, he needed to calmly evaluate the situation, be it harmless, or hazardous. It was an inbuilt trait, learnt from all his years hunting the enemy, and one that came in handy even in civilian life.

As if sensing Charlie's cautious examination of him, Rodger gingerly shoved his hands into the pockets of his bell-bottom jeans then offered a strained smile. 'You good, Wilson?' His Adam's apple bobbed unnaturally. 'You look like you've just seen a ghost.' He chuckled but sounded as though he were being strangled.

Charlie wasn't ready to respond. Had something happened between the two, after he'd left town? Charlie didn't like the thought, not one little bit.

A lengthy silence ensued.

Back on her stool, Grace fidgeted with the strap of her handbag, looking terribly uncomfortable, so Charlie chose to break the awkward silence before he embarrassed her any further. 'Where have you just gotten back from, Rodger?'

Rodger's gaze was transfixed on Grace, who was now staring at the floor as if it were an object of great fascination,

and he took a second to snap his steely gaze back to Charlie's. 'I arrived home yesterday, from my year travelling Europe.'

Charlie was fighting the urge to show Rodger just how easy it was to keep his eyes to himself by giving the man a firm clout across the jaw. 'Right, and how long are you back for?' Charlie's tone was stone cold.

'Permanently.' Rodger smiled now, but not in a friendly kind of way. 'I've gotten the travel bug out of my system, and am ready to put down roots here.' He looked to Grace, as if keen to hear her thoughts on this.

Sensing both men's attention on her, Grace offered a slight smile. 'That's wonderful news, Rodger. Your mother will be so relieved.'

'She sure is, and Dad's pretty happy too.'

The odd connection between the two was like a sucker-punch to Charlie's chest. Why did he feeling so threatened? 'What are you going to be doing for work, now that you're home to stay?' Charlie really didn't care, but wanted to steer the conversation.

'I'm going to be helping Dad out at his office.' He offered Grace a sideways glance. 'There's a lot of money to be made in insurance.'

Grace nodded. 'I see.' Her drink arrived on the bar, and Grace clutched it and took a long sip.

Charlie grabbed his glass and did the same.

Rodger rocked back on his heels. 'So how about you, Wilson. What's on the cards for you?'

Charlie drew in a slow breath. 'Not sure. That's a little up in the air.' It wasn't. Not in the slightest. He had plans on how he was going to spend his savings and what he might like to do for work, but it all depended on what happened tonight.

'Well, I hope everything pans out for you.'

Charlie raised his glass. 'Cheers to that.'

A woman in a skin-tight miniskirt arrived at Rodger's side. 'Have you got my drink yet, babes?' A little unsteady in her heels, she clutched his arm as if trying to remain upright.

Charlie had to fight from fist-punching the air – Rodger had a girlfriend, one who was vaguely familiar. If his memory served him right, she'd been a couple of grades below them at school. He looked to Grace to gauge her response just as she flashed the tipsy woman a bright smile – too bright for it to be genuine, but he also knew he could be reading into things that weren't even there.

'I'd best order our drinks, then,' Rodger said before turning to Grace. 'Nice to see you.'

'Yes, you too.' She turned her back to Rodger now, taking hold of Charlie's hand. 'Let's finish these then head back to the dance floor.'

Charlie wasn't about to destroy what had been a perfect night by asking her about Rodger – something told him it was a sore subject – so he nodded, and turned his focus back on what he was planning to do. There was always tomorrow to ask the hard questions, if he still felt the need, but for now he wasn't going to let anything ruin this moment.

An hour later, the thump of the disco music echoed in the men's bathroom. Charlie washed his hands and quickly checked his reflection in the mirror, cursing beneath his breath when he noticed one sideburn was a little longer than the other. It wasn't like he could fix it now, though. And besides, he had a gorgeous woman to sweep off her feet before the night's end. He'd promised Victor that he'd look after her. So back out he went, straight over to where he'd reluctantly left Grace boogying on the dance floor. The Bee Gees song was fast and he swung into it without missing a beat. Grace bopped around him, looking pretty as a picture, as always. He grabbed her hand, spun her under his arm and around him, bringing her hard up against him as he did. They remained like this for a few beats then, once again, they were jiving.

‘This is going to help us work off all that pizza and pasta we ate,’ Grace shouted over the music.

‘It sure is,’ he hollered back.

Charlie was smooth as he continued to twirl her, making sure to never let her hand go. Each time she spun back toward him, he’d either catch her with her back to him, so he could lower his head to her shoulder and hold her to him as they moved in time to the music, or he’d bring her back to face him, so he could connect with her through the sparkling windows of her eyes to her spirited soul. Then he’d release her again and she’d float as if on air, her head tilted back as she laughed, and her eyes filled with nothing but him. Never in his life had he felt so desired, so worthy, so loved. She was the reason for his reluctance to return to the only other thing that had ever given him purpose. She was the reason he’d chosen to stay. She was his reason. Somewhere between deliberately running into her at the café, to now, he’d fallen madly, deeply, unconditionally in love with her, and he couldn’t imagine a day without her by his side.

As the tempo slowed, he pulled her closer, possessively so. She inhaled a sharp breath and, with a wisp of a smile upon her glossy lips, moulded into him. Swaying her around the dance floor with her head pressed up against his chest, he made sure there was not an inch between them. Her hair smelt of wildflowers and her skin was silk beneath his fingertips. He wanted to stay like this for a lifetime, to never leave her side.

Nearing the end of the melody, he dipped her in one smooth motion then brought her back to him, bringing his lips to hers. Her kiss was as sweet as it always was. Reaching up on her tippy toes, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and deepened their kiss, their connection – it felt so good, so right. It was in this magical moment, beneath the sparkle of the disco ball, he realised the certain something that he had always felt was missing for all of his life had fluttered through his heart, landed and fallen into perfect place.



This dreamlike moment was the right one, so he took a breath and dropped to his knee.

Grace froze, then her hand came to cover her mouth.

People around them realised what was happening and stopped dancing. A circle began to form. Behind Grace, Rodger stepped from the gathering crowd, his arms folded and his brows deeply furrowed. If looks could kill, Charlie would have been dead. But he didn't give two hoots what Rodger Burrows thought. Grace was his, and he was about to make it official. There'd be no way Rodger was ever going to steal his girl. He was going to make damn sure of it.

'Grace Denver.' Pulling the lilac velvet box from his back pocket, he flipped the top open, revealing the diamond ring his grandma had helped him choose. 'Will you marry me?'

The tender look on her face caressed his shadowed soul.

Grace stared for a few breath-held seconds as tears sprang to her eyes, then threw her arms high. 'Yes, Charlie Wilson, of course I'll marry you.' Her eyes wide, she squealed as she leapt on him, her arms and legs wrapping around him as they fell backward, with Charlie making sure to be the one to take the brunt of the fall. 'I didn't think this night could get any better,' she said, right before kissing his cheek what felt like a hundred times.

Holding her close, Charlie felt like the luckiest man alive, and then some.

She sat up and he slipped the ring onto her finger. She held it up and admired the princess-cut diamond from every angle. 'Oh my goodness, Charlie, this is absolutely beautiful.' Straddling him, she beamed to the crowd gathered around them. 'Hey, everyone! It looks like I'm going to be Mrs Charlie Wilson.'

All but one of the partygoers erupted in cheers. Wrapped up in the moment, Charlie hardly registered the wild look on Rodger Burrow's face, and couldn't make out the heated words growled beneath the man's breath, but Charlie didn't

care. Consumed by the happiness written all over Grace's pretty face, Charlie thought about what was to come next – her smile was going to be that little bit wider when he gave her the gift he was planning for their wedding day. As long as everything fell into place, he was going to make all of this amazing woman's dreams come true.

# CHAPTER

## 7

**July 1976**

Saturday morning dawned a radiant pink and orange around the same time Grace had slipped from the tousled bed, with only a few hours' sleep under her belt due to her unbridled excitement. Like a thief in the early-morning light, she'd gone in search of an extra-strong coffee and poached eggs on toast, but had found herself constantly sidetracked. Five chaotic hours, a toasted cheese sandwich, two coffees and one glass of bubbly later, she savoured the few minutes she now had to herself after Jenny and her mum had gone to do the final checks of the hotel's ballroom – they wanted to make sure everything was perfect and she adored them for it. What she'd do without the two women who always had her back, she didn't know. Having kept her finger firmly on the pulse of the wedding planning, she had no time for such things now – all that mattered today was seeing, and marrying, her darling Charlie.

Gazing from her top-floor balcony at the powder-blue sky devoid of a single cloud, then to the crystal-clear sea lapping at the white-sand shore of the recently renovated Seadrift Inn, she smiled – it was the perfect day for a wedding. A renewed flurry of butterflies stirred in her stomach as she imagined walking down the aisle, toward her everything. The giddy sensation intensified the longing consuming her heart and the desire surging through her body. Today was the day she'd give Charlie every single piece of her. The very thought both elated and terrified her – what if she didn't know what to do in the bedroom?

Closing her eyes against the bright sunshine, she took a deep, calming breath – Charlie would guide her, she was certain of it. Five months hadn't given her much time to plan

the lavish wedding, but she didn't want it any other way. She hadn't wanted to delay a day longer than necessary to become Mrs Charlie Wilson, nor could she wait to finally be able to make love to the man who'd shown her time and time again how deeply he cared for her. His patience was an absolute virtue, and made her love him all the more.

Wandering back into her room, she sat on the edge of the bed, slipped the exquisite satin platform slingbacks on, then stood on shaky legs. Having counted down the sleeps from the night Charlie had asked her to be his wife, she had felt like their wedding day would never come, and yet here it finally was.

Pausing at the full-length mirror, she repositioned a few loose curls, liking how the smoky eye make-up made her eyes pop. She'd chosen the ruby-red lipstick to match her bouquet of roses. Turning slowly, she admired from all angles the wedding gown her mother had made for her. The fitted strapless dress was a seamless flow of vintage lace, silk and sparkling beads. The teardrop pearl earrings her grandmother had loaned her added an extra touch of elegance.

She couldn't wait to see how handsome Charlie was going to look in his tailored suit, nor could she wait to hear she was officially his wife.

A knock at the door had her turning. 'Come in.'

Her father stepped into the room. 'Oh my, Grace. Look at you, you look incredible.' He closed the distance, hugged her and then held her at arms-length. 'I can't believe my little girl is all grown up, and you'll be moving out of home to become a wife, and eventually a mother.'

'I'm not moving far, Dad, just ten minutes down the road.' The scattering of silver hair gave her father a distinguished air. 'And you and Mum can visit us at Moonflower Acres any time.'

'Yes, I know. That little cottage at the back of the main homestead will be a good start for your married life.' His

forehead puckered with emotion, and he drew in a breath. 'It was lovely of Josephine to give it to you and Charlie.'

'Yes, it's a very generous wedding present.'

He sniffed, blinking faster. 'It just makes me so proud to see the wonderful young woman you've become, Grace.' He cupped her cheek. 'You're a spitting image of your mother, on our wedding day.'

Her emotions welling and threatening to engulf her, Grace fanned her face. 'Don't.'

He tipped his head. 'Don't what?'

'Make me get all teary.' She cleared her throat and smiled. 'I'll ruin my make-up.' But on a day like this one, it was impossible not to feel the emotion. 'Thank you for always being the best dad ever.' With tears prickling, she laced her arm into his and rested her head on his shoulder. 'I love you so much.'

Her father kissed her forehead. 'I love you too, sweetheart.'

The door swung open and her mum flurried into the room with Jenny in tow, the veil that had been passed down three generations in hand. 'Right, everything is ship-shape and your handsome husband-to-be is at the altar, fighting jitters, so let's get this show on the road, shall we?'

'Yes.' Her belly flip-flopping, Grace nodded enthusiastically. 'Let's do this.'

Jenny rushed over and held out a clasped hand. 'Here's your something blue, Gracie,' she said quietly. 'I'll help you put it on, if you like?'

Grace gasped as Jenny dropped a blue garter belt into her open hand. 'Oh my goodness, Jenny.' She threw a sideways glance toward her father and was relieved to see he was busy fixing his tie in the mirror.

Jenny pranced on the spot. 'Well, come on then.' She wriggled her brows. 'Charlie is going to love taking it off with

his teeth, I bet,' she whispered, flashing a wicked grin. 'As will you.'

Grace gave her friend's hand a playful slap. 'Stop it.'

They slipped into the bathroom like a pair of naughty schoolgirls, and Jenny helped Grace to slide it up her leg, and to her thigh, both of them giggling as Grace lost her footing and Jenny saved her in the nick of time.

'What are you pair doing in there?'

'Nothing,' Grace called back. 'I'm just peeing, and Jenny is holding my train up.'

'Okey-dokey, well, don't be too much longer, will you?' her mother replied.

Reappearing moments later, Grace sat at the dresser and her mum positioned the antique lace veil – her something old – and then slipped the comb in behind Grace's chignon, dotted with baby's breath and tiny red roses.

'There we are, sweetheart.' Her mother came around to face her. 'You, my precious daughter, are the apple of my eye.' She then turned to her husband, who was pacing beside the doorway. 'You're going to wear holes in the carpet if you don't stop, love.'

'Sorry.' He grimaced then flashed Grace a smile. 'So, are you ready to become Mrs Wilson?'

'Am I ever.'

The four of them together made their way out of the room, down the hallway of the historic building and out into the glorious day.

Strong and steady, her father walked with quiet assurance, his composure helping to settle her nerves. If Charlie turned out to be half the husband and father this man was, she'd die a very happy woman.

As they turned the corner, the seaside chapel they'd chosen to proclaim their vows came into view. The sea breeze stirred

her lengthy veil to the side as they climbed the four front steps. Grace's stomach performed a crazy summersault as she stopped at the beginning of the aisle strewn with rose petals.

A hush fell over the congregation. Her mother made her way to the front row, where she joined Josephine.

Jenny went first, and it felt like an eternity as her friend took her place at the front, where the wall of glass allowed the ocean to join them inside.

Then everyone stood and Grace took her first steady step down the aisle to the lyrics of 'Love' by John Lennon, feeling her past fade away, and her future unfurl before her. That broadshouldered man, with his killer smile honed in on her, was all she'd ever dreamt of, and more.

She reached her groom, and her father placed her hand into Charlie's. 'You make sure you stick to your promise, and take good care of her, won't you?'

Charlie nodded. 'I most certainly will, Mr Denver.'

The two men exchanged another nod before her father went to her mother's side. Giddy on the moment, Grace took a few quick breaths as she passed her bouquet to Jenny. With Charlie lifting her veil, their eyes finally met and locked ... and the whole world disappeared. He always had a way of making her feel like his everything.

'You are breathtaking, Grace,' he whispered as he took her trembling hands in his.

His touch was reassuringly tender. 'Thank you, and you look very handsome.' Her heart stopped beating for a moment as she drank all of him in, then took off in another wild gallop as the formalities began.

Charlie's deep voice carried through the chapel, strong and genuine, as he pronounced his vows. Then it was her turn. There were never purer words spoken from her lips as she echoed the pastor's – she would gladly love, honour and cherish this amazing man for the rest of her life.

Before Grace knew it, they were right where she and Charlie had longed to be ...

‘You are now husband and wife.’ The pastor beamed from ear to ear. ‘Charlie, you can kiss your bride.’

His face a picture of elation, Charlie took her into his arms and lingered a kiss on her lips that spoke of the depth of his love. Her toes curled and heat flooded her – she couldn’t wait to be alone with him in their honeymoon suite.

The festivities flew by in a blur of good food, wholehearted laughter, funny toasts, heartfelt speeches, and the cutting of the cake. Between the photos and thanking each guest for coming, the afternoon had quickly rolled into the magical moment when they got to share their first dance as husband and wife.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, Grace was wandering past the blazing torches lining the pathway from the reception, her hand clutched in Charlie’s and her happy heart soaring up among the star-studded sky.

Moments later, she found herself in front of her husband, candlelight flickering over his fetching features.

As he ran a finger down her cheek, Charlie’s gaze sought hers. ‘Well, Mrs Wilson, here we are.’

‘Yes.’ The fire in his eyes told her how he wanted her as badly as she wanted him. ‘What now?’ she said, a little shyly.

‘Now, I get to *really* show you just how much I love you.’ Unhurriedly, Charlie pulled the pinned flowers from her hair, allowing her chignon to fall and tumble down her back.

‘I like the sound of that, very much, Mr Wilson,’ she said, her voice rasping.

A blissful hour later, spent, sated and connected beyond words, Charlie rolled to the side, taking her with him. Burying her head into his chest, she took the time to catch her breath. She was now a woman. She was now Charlie Wilson’s wife. What more could she ever want?



‘Grace.’ Charlie’s tender voice swam into her thoughts.

She tipped her head to gaze up at him, resting her chin on his chest. ‘Yes, my handsome husband?’

The lips she’d kissed with heated passion broke into a warm smile. ‘I have a surprise for you.’

Excitement skittered through her gratified heart. ‘You do?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Gently slipping her from his arms, he climbed from the bed and padded over to the dresser, opened the top drawer and plucked something out. ‘I really hope you like it.’ Joining her again, he held out his hand. A key dangled from his index finger.

‘What’s it?’ Taking the cotton sheet with her, she sat up, and gracefully took the lone key from him. ‘You know I haven’t got my driving licence yet, right?’

‘It’s not a car.’ Leaning closer to her, he brushed the hair from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. ‘That’s a key to your future.’

She turned it over in her hand. ‘You bought a house?’ She glanced back at him. ‘But I thought we already had our cottage, at Moonflower Acres?’

‘It’s not a house, my darling,’ he said, smiling.

Then it dawned on her. She sucked in a breath, and blinked back hot tears. ‘You didn’t?’

Charlie nodded. ‘I did. You can have your teahouse now.’

‘Oh my god, Charlie, I can’t believe the fishermens’ shack is all ours!’ Never would Grace have believed that this day could become any more of a dream. ‘You, Charlie Wilson, are the most amazing man I’ve ever met.’ She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he pulled her to him. ‘Thank you for giving me my dream, and for loving me like you do.’

‘Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done in my life, Grace.’ He pulled back and seized her gaze with his baby

blues. ‘And as for your wedding gift, you deserve every ounce of happiness it’s going to bring you.’

\* \* \*

For the following seven weeks, Charlie woke up to his wife’s beautiful sunshiny face, and each and every morning he still pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. How his life had turned the corner, from a war-ravaged existence into the most wonderful of places, was still beyond him. He’d never lived so passionately in the moment, nor had his heart ever felt so full of love. Their wedding day had been like a fairytale, and filled with soul-deep love.

Grace couldn’t have looked more breathtaking in the gown her mother had made for her. Watching her take steps toward him had almost brought him to tears, and when he’d lifted her veil and their eyes had met, he’d almost fallen to his knees in thanks to the powers that had brought her to him. Grace was his earth angel, his wife, the mother of his yet-to-be-born children, his everything. He had no idea what he’d ever done to deserve a woman as amazing as her, and he was never going to let himself become complacent about being one lucky son of a bitch.

And now, they were actively making her dream of the teahouse come true.

‘Earth to Charlie.’ Grace snapped her fingers an inch from his face. ‘Are you here to help me, dreamy head, or what?’

Admiring the dusting of freckles on her rosy cheeks, he chuckled, shaking his head. ‘Sorry, I got carried away thinking about how exquisite you are.’ Passing her the hammer, he watched her bash another nail into the wall – his go-getting wife was determined to do things herself. ‘But that’s a good thing, right?’ He carefully picked the painting up from the floor and passed it to her.

Grace took cautiously. ‘I’m going to have to meet this wife of yours, Charlie, because she’s distracting my hired help way too much,’ she said with a smirk.

‘You’re a sexy distraction, Mrs Wilson. I just can’t help myself.’ Wrapping his arms around her waist, he picked her up from the floor and swung her around.

Her laughter abruptly stopped and Grace’s hands came to grip his shoulders. ‘Oh, my goodness, Charlie, I think I’m going to be sick.’ She covered her mouth and jiggled free from his arms.

She ran for the toilets and he followed her into the cubicle, holding her hair back as she brought her breakfast up. ‘Are you okay, Grace?’ He hated seeing her so pale, feeling so helpless.

‘I ... I think so.’ She nodded, wiping her lips with the handkerchief he’d just plucked from his pocket. ‘Maybe it was something I ate?’

He thought about it. ‘We ate the same thing this morning, though.’

‘We did, didn’t we?’ She pulled her hair into a high ponytail. ‘Maybe I have a stomach bug, or I’ve touched something nasty and got it into my mouth?’

Charlie grimaced. ‘Either way, you need to put your feet up for the rest of the day.’ He helped her up and placed a gentle hand on her back. ‘Come on, let’s get you home.’

The drive back to Moonflower Acres required two stops for Grace to vomit at the side of the road. By the time they got home, Charlie was beside himself with worry. ‘I think we should make an appointment with the doctor, Grace.’

Nodding, Grace settled herself into the couch. ‘With the way I feel, I think that’s a good idea.’

‘Good.’ Sitting beside her, he placed a wet washcloth on her forehead. ‘I’ll give the surgery a call now and see if they can fit you in sometime today.’

Grace clutched his arm, momentarily halting him. ‘Thank you, Charlie, for taking such good care of me. You’re the best husband ever.’

‘You don’t have to thank me, darling. I love you.’ Bringing her hand to his lips, he placed a tender kiss. ‘I’ll make you a nice, sweet cup of tea once I make the call to the doctor. That might help to settle your tummy.’

Relieved the doctor could fit Grace in at three, Charlie flicked the kettle on, got the teabag ready in Grace’s favourite china cup and returned to her with a blanket.

‘It feels so strange here, without your grandma around. I really miss her.’ Grace pulled the blanket up and under her chin. ‘When do you think she’ll be back from the city?’

‘I think she’d be enjoying the time with her sister, but she’ll be missing home, and us too, so I’m sure it won’t be too much longer.’ He plonked down beside her and started rubbing her feet. ‘I know she told us she wanted to have a little holiday away from Sapphire Bay, but I think she’s just trying to give us some privacy while we’re getting the cottage renovated.’

‘Yeah, you’re probably right.’ Grace sighed softly. ‘Josephine’s a wonderful person, always thinking of everyone else.’

‘I’m so blessed she and my grandfather raised me.’ Charlie rolled his eyes. ‘Because god only knows how I would have turned out if I’d been sent to an orphanage.’

‘You’re a good man, Charlie, they did a great job raising you.’ Grace placed a supportive hand on his leg. ‘I’ll be sure to bake her my peach flan when she gets home. And my beef stroganoff, I know how much she loves it.’

‘That will be lovely, Grace. You and Grandma are so alike, taking care of people.’ Hearing the kettle whistling, he rose and strode toward the kitchen. ‘Be back in a jiffy,’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Charlie, are you home?’ A voice carried through from the front door. ‘It’s me, Mary Jasper.’

‘Yes, Mary, I’m coming.’ Charlie dropped the sugar into the teacup and rushed to the door. It wasn’t usual for Mary to pop by with his Grandma away. ‘Hi.’ Mary’s grave face

shocked him, and he took a split-second to recover as he pushed the screen door open. ‘Is everything okay?’ he asked, stepping out onto the porch.

Mary’s bottom lip quivered. ‘No, Charlie, it’s not.’ Her voice trembled. ‘But I don’t want to talk about it out here.’ Clutching her handbag as if her life depended upon it, she managed a sad smile. ‘Can we please sit?’

Mary looked as if she were about to faint. ‘Of course, sorry, come in.’ Charlie’s heart kick-started into a wild gallop as he led her down the hallway and into the lounge room. ‘Grace, Mary’s here.’

Flicking her eyes open, Grace sat up a little straighter. ‘Oh, hey Mary.’

‘Hi, my dear,’ Mary replied. ‘You don’t look well.’

‘I’m a little under the weather, but Charlie is taking me to the doctor this afternoon.’

Mary regarded her thoughtfully. ‘That’s good, dear.’

Charlie gestured to the armchair as a place for Mary to sit, then got himself settled opposite her, alongside Grace, who sat up beside him and looped her arm into his. Charlie gave her hand a pat – a silent gesture of thanks.

He was doing his best not to overthink the impromptu visit. Even though Mary was his grandma’s best friend, and a kind-hearted lady who meant well, she was also the town gossip, so it could be any number of things.

‘So, Mary, tell us what’s happened?’ He took a breath as he watched her fidgeting, as if trying to find the right words.

‘It’s your grandmother, Charlie.’ She blinked faster. ‘I’m afraid she’s had a stroke.’

Charlie shot to his feet. ‘What? How, when?’ He shoved his hands through his hair.

‘This morning.’ Mary looked to Grace, now standing at Charlie’s side, then back to Charlie. ‘Your aunt called an

ambulance, but ... she didn't make it, Charlie.' Tears fell, and she dabbed at her cheeks with a hanky. 'They tried to get in touch with you, but couldn't, so they called me. I'm ever so sorry.'

*Sorry...*

The word just didn't cut it. Devastated, heartbroken, crushed, was more fitting. Besides, he was the one who should be sorry, not being by his grandma's side as she passed from this life into the next. His mind spinning out of control, Charlie fought to draw a breath. He simply couldn't fathom his grandma's tender heart not beating anymore. He couldn't imagine never hearing her voice again, or her contagious laughter, or feeling the touch of her hand on his cheek as she gave him her wise advice.

Grace said something he didn't take in as her arm came around him, as if to somehow hold him up. He felt as if he were slipping, about to tumble off a cliff into the unknown. And that terrified him way more than facing bullets.

*She didn't make it, Charlie...*

Mary's shocking words circled his mind, like a shark homing in on its prey. The world as he knew it crumbled into a million tiny little pieces as his heart split completely in two. This couldn't be happening, especially not so soon after losing his grandfather. How cruel the world could be.

He had no idea how he was ever going to say goodbye to the woman who'd taught him what unconditional love was, or if he'd ever come back from the pain of that. His beloved grandmother, taken way too soon. Just like his grandfather. Just like his mother. What kind of god would do such a thing, again, and again, and again? He would never, ever pray again.

# CHAPTER

## 8

**April 1977**

Killing the engine and winding his window up, Charlie climbed from his Valiant and strode through the wrought-iron gates of the cemetery. It had been almost eight months since Mary had delivered the news of his grandmother's sudden death and he'd never let a week pass without making a visit to her grave.

Her death had been a sucker-punch to his world, blowing all the happiness out of him. Even working himself to the bone at the car yard wasn't taking his mind off the heartache, nor was being awarded salesman of the month recently.

No matter what he did or how deeply Grace loved him, or how hard he tried to pretend he was managing, he just couldn't seem to unshackle himself from the heavy pit of his grief. He knew, deep down, there was way more to his sadness, but he equally understood that there was nothing he could do about it. He'd made his choice to quit the army and he had to find a way to live with that.

He traipsed across the pristine lawn of Sapphire Bay's only cemetery, holding his hat against the gusty wind. His grandma's final resting place was one of ambivalence for him. It was where he had to face his grandparents' eternal absence from this life, but it was also a place where he could voice his innermost thoughts and worries without fear. And he needed that release. There was so much going on at the back of his mind, things that even his sweet Grace didn't know of – couldn't know of – and, so help him god, never would know of.

If only his grandma could answer him, though. He could do with some of her loving guidance, because in less than two

weeks, he was going to be a dad, which both elated and terrified him. What if he couldn't cut it? What if he turned out like his father, a deadbeat who did nothing but hurt his child? What if his shortcomings made Grace fall out of love with him? He couldn't bear the thought.

He followed the winding stone pathway lined with a multitude of colourful summer flowers, watching as the ominous clouds ravenously swallowed up the blue. Mother Nature's temperament was volatile at the moment; one day warm and bright and promising, and the next day broody and melancholy.

He could relate. The only thing keeping him somewhat even-keeled of late were sneaky nips from his hipflask. Although, he had to admit that the mouthfuls of whisky were becoming more frequent, more necessary, to curb the tremor in his hands. No longer was it a drink with dinner, or a few drinks afterwards, to get him relaxed enough to sleep. It was becoming harder for him to cover up his hangovers, and the smell of alcohol on his breath. And he hated the fact he was hiding all this from his beautiful wife, as if he was living a lie. If he didn't find a way to quit drinking soon, Grace was going to find out.

He knew in his heart that his vice was going to lead him down a very dark path if he didn't find another way to numb his heartache or erase the lingering fear of his resuming nightmares.

*He was a fool to keep telling himself, tomorrow. I'll stop tomorrow.*

He knew it was a lie.

Reaching the peak, with sweeping ocean views, he held his baker's hat against the gusty wind as he traipsed across the pristine lawn of Sapphire Bay's only cemetery. Reaching his grandma's final resting place, he knelt upon the grass and placed the bright yellow sunflowers he'd picked from her garden at Moonflower Acres into the vase at her headstone. Then, turning to the left, he ran a hand over the smooth stone



of the neighbouring gravestone, tracing the etching of his grandfather's name, followed by the verse his grandma had chosen: *The righteous shall go into life eternal*. It was fitting for his grandfather, but Charlie couldn't help wondering if he would be so lucky.

Coming back to his feet he shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at his grandma's granite headstone, his vision blurring as he read the words he and Grace had chosen: *Now dancing in the heavens*.

Grace believed wholeheartedly that his grandparents were now reunited and swaying each other across the heavenly skies to the tunes of Charley Pride and Johnny Cash. If only he could find the same strength of faith. He wasn't sure he ever would again. That only added to his frustrations, and to Grace's. Only yesterday, they'd had another heated discussion when he'd once again refused to go to church with her.

The urge to spill what was weighing heavily upon his heart welled up, tightening his throat. There were so many things he wanted to say, to share. Where should he start? Dropping his head, he took out a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, slipped one between his lips, cupped it against the wind and lit up. Inhaling deeply, he blew smoke rings skywards as he thought about his life.

'I'm really messing up by drinking again,' he finally said. 'I know I should be happy, with a wife as loving as Grace and a baby on the way, but ... there's just something inside of me, always reminding me that I turned my back on the man who had my back so many times in Vietnam. I can feel it, scraping on my soul.'

A seagull flew overhead, squawking, and he paused to watch it fly out of sight. 'Everything just feels so ... meaningless. And that's crazy, because I'm a husband, and soon to be a father.' He heaved a weary sigh. 'I thought, being a lover of cars, I'd enjoy selling them, but I don't.' He looked to the graves as if waiting for a response, feeling a little silly for doing so. Nonetheless, he continued with his one-way

conversation. ‘Grace is doing so well with Serendipity. People are coming from far and wide to eat her amazing food, and I’m happy for her. She often asks me to come help. She wants to include me. But that’s her passion, not mine.’

The sound of the sea breeze stirring the tree canopy protecting him from the early-morning sunshine was his only response. ‘Maybe when I see my child’s eyes staring back at me, when I feel little fingers wrap around mine, I’ll find my purpose. I hope I do.’ He drew in a breath, nodded, then crouched down to pluck a few weeds. ‘Anyway, I’ll be back in a week. You take care of each other up there, won’t you?’

He straightened, his gaze lingering over the graves before he turned and made his way back to his car. He revved it to life, and when the song he and Grace had first danced to came over the radio, he had an epiphany. Today was Grace’s first day off from the teashop in over a week, and he was going to take her to the local markets. It had been too long since he’d put that sunshiny smile he loved so much upon her stunning face.

They used to share every intimate detail of their days, but now, like two ships passing, they found it hard to find the necessary time to nourish their connection.

He missed her.

He missed *them*.

When he arrived back at the homestead and suggested an afternoon out together, Grace was thrilled. By the time they’d pulled up at the markets two hours later, the dark clouds had relinquished their right to the bright blue sky, and it was a perfect autumn day. It felt as if half the township was doing the same thing. Even the pooches were out in force, big and small, fluffy and shorthaired, prancing and strutting on leads, all craning their necks to sniff one another as they passed.

Wandering the stalls hand-in-hand, Charlie savoured the feeling of Grace’s delicate fingers interlaced with his. Never a second passed where he didn’t feel blessed having her love

him, and he was genuinely happy for her happiness in achieving her dreams with the teashop. At the same time, he couldn't quite squash a dark feeling deep down that he'd been short-changed, going from the military to being a mere car salesman.

Passing a cake stand with a delectable array of mouth-watering goodies, followed by a handmade candle boutique with exotic smells, Grace paused at a jewellery stall. Her hand came protectively to the pronounced curve of her belly as she regarded the dainty pieces arranged on an ivory tablecloth with furrowed attention. Charlie couldn't help but smile as he kept his gaze upon her – *his* jewel – as she bit her bottom lip.

Her thoughtful expression giving way to delight, her protective hand went to her chest. 'Oh, Charlie. This is the prettiest brooch I think I've ever seen.' She pointed to a glimmering sapphire surrounded by shimmering diamonds, and then turned to meet his gaze. 'Don't you think it's beautiful?'

'I think *you're* beautiful.' He closed the few inches between them and looked to the man opposite who was eyeing them like a hawk. 'Could we please have a look at this piece?' He pointed to the brooch.

'Yes, of course, sir.' The middle-aged man picked it up, placed it on a cloth, and handed it over to Charlie.

Grace took a closer look. 'Oh, it's absolutely perfect.'

'You're perfect, Grace,' he said firmly.

'Oh stop it, you charmer, or you're going to make me blush like a beetroot.' Her soft laughter made the corners of her eyes crinkle.

'Well, if you love the brooch so much, it's yours.'

Grace's face lit up. 'Really?'

Charlie's heart burst – oh how he loved seeing her happy, all because of him. 'Yes, really.'

She glowed beside him as he took out his wallet and paid the gentleman a pretty penny for the pretty piece. ‘Consider this a token of how much I love you, my sweet wife.’ He carefully pinned it to her blouse.

‘Thank you so very much, my darling husband.’ Reaching up on her tippy toes, Grace kissed him on the lips, and lingered there for a few moments. ‘I will treasure this, just like I treasure you, for all of my days.’

Her words caressed his strained heartstrings, as if tuning them back into melodic place. ‘That means the world to me, as do you.’ He regarded for a little longer, relishing the intensity of her returned gaze, then took her hand in his. ‘Now come on, let’s go and get you that fairy floss you’ve been craving.’

‘Yes, let’s.’ She almost skipped beside him. ‘But only if it’s pink.’

For the next few hours, wrapped up in their bubble of contentment, Charlie forgot about their marital disagreements and the shadowy demons from his past, and he also lay down the pain of his grandma’s passing and the fear of what might lie ahead for him as a father. Instead, he wholeheartedly savoured the precious time he had with his mesmerising wife. Living in the moment was the way forward – he knew that – but as with so many things, it was easier said than done.

\* \* \*

It was close to five when Grace decided to put her ledgers away and call it a day. The wages were done for another week, and the shop figures were looking more than good. Her hard work had paid off, as had Charlie’s at the car yard, giving them the ability to step back and take time to bond with their baby. Handing the reins of the teashop over to Jenny and Marty for a little while was both scary and exciting. She’d given so much of her time and effort to Serendipity over the past ten months, she felt as if she were letting a big piece of herself go. On the other hand, she hadn’t had enough time and energy to give to her marriage, which she felt guilty for. It was going to be nice to give Charlie the attention he deserved.

As she tidied her desk, she squinted out the office window, through the glorious afternoon sunshine to the far-reaching paddocks beyond the confines of the room. The world appeared so free, so infinite, out there. If only she and Charlie could throw caution to the wind, like they would have years ago, if they'd been in a position to do so, and head off on grand adventures. She longed to set foot on the shores of Santorini, where she could spend her days reading and wandering and loving the man she couldn't ever live a day without. One day. Maybe. For now, though, life was becoming more confined, more pressured, less about dreaming and more about practicality – the wistful, free-spirited part of her had slipped away, and she pined for it. It's what had always made her feel alive. It was what had drawn Charlie to her.

Maybe once the baby was born and she spent some time away from the pressures of Serendipity, she would be able revive that dormant part of her.

*A girl can dream.*

Grace sighed. As much as she would like to believe such things, a huge part of her knew she had to be a realist, because in the grand scheme of her life, things were only going to get trickier. She was going to be a mother, and as excited as she was about welcoming their baby into the world, she wasn't sure how she and Charlie were going to cope without her parents around to help. Given the fact her parents had always wanted to travel, she couldn't begrudge her father for taking the high-paying job his old colleague got him at the university in London – it meant weekends trips to dreamy foreign places was easy – but now she was left dealing with their sudden departure from Sapphire Bay. Having chosen to take leave without pay, her sweet husband was so sure he'd be able to handle being a stay-at-home father when she had to go back to work, but she wasn't convinced. He'd gone from being a soldier who lived on adrenaline and spent his days protecting their country, to selling family sedans, to soon staying home to take care of a child. She loved him deeply for putting her dreams ahead of his. He didn't say as much, but he didn't need

to – she knew him inside and out – and she felt the toll the sacrifice was taking on him.

Was she to blame? Had she allowed him to give up too much, for her?

Would he resent her for it eventually?

*Does he already?*

Blowing a weary breath, she shook her contemplations off, and went in search of Charlie and some dinner. As she waddled down the hallway, the aromas of his delicious bolognese sauce wafted from the kitchen, making her mouth water.

Finding him on the couch, his face buried in his latest military magazine, she plonked down beside him. ‘I smell you’ve made us something delicious for dinner.’

Charlie’s handsome face popped over the top of the magazine. ‘Indeed, I have, my love.’ He closed it and tossed it to the coffee table. ‘I hope you’re hungry because I’ve made enough to feed an army.’

‘I’m famished and eating for two, so we’re in luck.’ Her belly rumbled at the thought of tucking into a big bowl of pasta. ‘Thank you for taking care of dinner, Charlie.’

‘I don’t mind, it gave me something to do while you were catching up on the bookwork.’ He offered her a skewed smile. ‘Idle hands are the devil’s tools, as Grandma would say.’

She sat back as the worrying thoughts that had plagued her in the office returned, but she wasn’t about to broach the subject of Charlie’s waning happiness, not when they’d enjoyed a rare magical day together. Instead, she glanced around the enormous room, the emptiness of it echoing through her. ‘I don’t know how we’re going to fill a house so big with enough to make it seem like a home.’

‘It already is a home, Grace.’ Charlie’s arm slipped around her shoulder. ‘Besides, we’ll just have to have lots of children, so the pitter-patter of feet and giggling fill it to the brim.’

A rush of panic fuelled Grace's pulse – Charlie had never mentioned having lots of kids before. 'I ... I hadn't really thought we'd want more than two children, Charlie.' Witnessing his smile fade, she tried for a lighthearted tone. 'This pregnancy has been so difficult, and with Serendipity taking so much of my time ...' She trailed off, and the awful silence stretched out. 'Charlie, are you okay?'

'Yes, sorry.' Shooting to his feet, he took her by the hand. 'Come, before it gets too dark outside.'

Rising to her weary feet, Grace did her best to hide a grimace. 'Where are we going?'

'I want to show you why my forefathers named this place Moonflower Acres.'

'Oh, okay.' She allowed him to lead her out the back door, where he helped her to slip her shoes on. 'I've never stopped to think about where the name came from.'

'I think it's important you do, Grace.' Dropping to his knees, he cradled her belly and placed a tender kiss upon it. 'Then you and this little one will know the heritage of my family.' He glanced up at her. '*Our* family.'

A soft breeze rippled the material of her maternity gown as she stepped up and into the passenger seat of her father's old ute, now used for trips around the property. Revving the old beast to life, Charlie followed the path past the vacant stables and up the gentle rise. In all the months she'd called Moonflower Acres home, Grace hadn't ventured this way.

Just over the hill, Charlie pulled up beside a weathered bench. 'Wait there, and I'll come and help you out, my darling.' He opened the passenger door carefully and guided her over to the bench. They sat, and waited.

'What are we doing, Charlie?' Grace whispered for no good reason, except that in the moment, it felt right.

He held a finger to his lips. 'Shh.' Then he pointed to where the vines had clambered along a trellis a few metres away from them. 'Just watch and behold.'

Intrigued, she took his offered hand and, when only a hint of sunset remained behind the mountains, an enchanted performance began. Her eyes widening with wonder, Grace watched as the trumpet-shaped flowers as big as her hand unfurled blackcurrant-dusted petals.

‘Amazing, aren’t they?’ Charlie’s voice was a sigh against her cheek.

‘Yes, Charlie, I’ve never seen anything quite like it.’ She slowly shook her head in disbelief. ‘They’re absolutely magical.’

‘Moonflowers are nocturnal plants, so they’ll only stay open until the sun rises.’ He looked to her, his nose to the air. ‘Can you smell their perfume?’

She sniffed the air. ‘Oh yes!’ She grinned. ‘They smell like Mum’s homemade lemonade.’

‘Aha, they most certainly do.’ He tipped his head. ‘But don’t let their prettiness deceive you. Moonflowers are extremely poisonous, which is why they’re planted so far from the house, to keep any little ones and pets safe.’

‘Wow, I never would have thought something so magnificent could be dangerous.’ She nestled further against him, her head going to his shoulder. ‘How long have the flowers been here?’

‘My great-great-grandfather planted them for his wife, as a sign of his love.’

‘I think that’s very romantic.’ She glanced up at him. ‘Now I know where you get your romantic heart from, Charlie Wilson.’

‘I don’t think my heart’s romantic, Grace, but I’m glad you do.’ His chest moved with his gentle sigh. ‘I just love you is all, and I want to make you happy, every single day. So I do what I have to, to make sure of that.’

Grace was about to respond when a gush of heat rushed between her legs. ‘Charlie ... I think my water just broke.’



Wide-eyed, she glanced down.

Charlie followed her gaze to her now sodden dress. ‘Holy moly! We better hurry and get you to the hospital.’ He helped her to her feet and back to the ute as quickly as they could manage.

In the flurry of activity, Grace’s mind went into overdrive as she ticked off her mental list. Her first sign of pain came half an hour later, as they were making their way through the hospital doors. It stopped her cold and had her crying out. Gripping the wall with one hand and Charlie’s hand with the other, she gritted her teeth and groaned through it, just like she’d learned in her antenatal classes.

‘Wait here, I’ll grab that wheelchair.’ Charlie dashed away and was back with the wheelchair. Grace settled into it as best she could before he raced her down the hallway. ‘Don’t you worry, I’ve got you, Grace.’ He jabbed the elevator button repeatedly.

Grace couldn’t help but giggle a little at his urgency. Trust her husband to keep her heart light through an intense time. Within two hours, though, mirth was the farthest thing from her mind. She was squinting at Charlie through sweat-stung eyes, silently vowing that they were never having sex again.

The midwife told her the contractions were now four minutes apart and ninety seconds long. Forever felt more accurate to Grace, with each one becoming more extreme. Gripping the sheets, warm tears sprang once again as she felt their baby inching its way into the world. Propped up by pillows with her legs astride, she tried not to think about the view from where the midwife and doctor were standing. The pain ebbed and flowed as the rhythm of labour took over her body. The next contraction started almost as soon the last one ended. Groaning through each one, she did her best to breathe, wondering how on earth humanity had survived with women having to go through such excruciating agony.

‘Your cervix is dilated ten centimetres now, Mrs Wilson, so it’s time to push through those contractions, okay?’ The

midwife's voice carried from the end of the bed.

'Here we go, Grace,' Charlie said with an eager squeeze of her hand.

'What do you mean, here we gooooooo?' she cried out as a contraction had her straining every muscle.

And the next hour went on like this – pushing, stopping, breathing, gritting, groaning, crying and panting. Never had Grace felt so primal.

'You're doing so well, Mrs Wilson.' The midwife's soothing voice lulled Grace into a false sense of it almost being over. 'Now let that one go and breathe through the next. You're over the hill and on the downward slope.'

Nodding, Grace bit down on her lip as she gripped Charlie's hand. 'Ooohhh god.' She writhed beneath another wave of discomfort as she pushed and pushed until she just couldn't anymore and fell back against the bed.

Charlie mopped her head with a cool cloth. A little off-colour, he looked so out of his comfort zone she almost felt sorry for him. *Almost.*

Somehow, she managed a tiny, appreciative smile before another contraction hit, stronger this time, and she panted through it until the need to expel the baby from her body became uncontrollable.

'The baby is crowning now, so with your next contraction, I want you to push as hard as you can, okay?'

*Push harder? Was this woman serious?*

Completely overwhelmed and exhausted beyond anything she'd ever experienced before, Grace shook her head. 'I can't. I can't do this anymore.' She wanted to forget this whole thing, go home, and sleep for weeks. 'Please don't make me do this anymore.' She was sobbing now. 'Make the pain stop, please.'

'You have to do this, and you will, my darling Grace.' Charlie squeezed her hand. 'You're the bravest, strongest

woman I know, you've got this.'

Looking into his kind eyes, his belief and gentle strength helped her to face the impossible. With one last primal grunt, she pushed with every fibre of her being, and then some.

There was a swift gush and then utter relief as their baby came into the world.

'Oh my gosh, it's a girl, Grace.' Charlie's voice was filled with elation.

Beyond the haze, she heard the very first cries of her baby girl, and that gave her all the hope she needed to believe that, as a family, they would make it through anything and everything life might throw their way.

A nurse placed their baby against Grace's chest and with her tiny fingers wrapped around Charlie's pinkie, the little bundle found her mother's gaze with eyes that matched the blue of her father's. 'Hello there, little one. It's so nice to finally meet you.' In that second, Grace felt more love than she'd ever thought possible. And that's when their little girl's name came to her. 'I want to call her Hope. Do you like that, Charlie?' She glanced up and was overcome with emotion when she saw the look of adoration planted on his face.

'Hope.' The name rolling off his tongue, he pondered this as he tenderly held the baby's tiny hand, then he smiled. 'I think it's absolutely perfect.' He kissed Grace's forehead, then Hope's. 'I'm a very lucky man, having two girls to love now.'

Grace's heart swelled to bursting. All her worries about the future dissipated. In this moment, her universe consisted of her, Hope and Charlie.

*It's over, I've done it. All will be well now.*

# CHAPTER

## 9

1980

It took a few years for Grace's rose-coloured glasses to fall off, and her unbridled optimism to all but disappear...

The new day was hinting at its arrival with the rising sun radiating a soft-hued glow into the dawn sky when Grace woke to discover Charlie had fallen asleep on the couch. Again.

Twenty minutes later, clad in her robes and slippers, she was a woman on a mission, storming from the shed, three half-empty bottles of whisky she'd found hidden behind some boxes of old magazines in her arms. Emptying the bottles down the kitchen sink, she cursed every single drop before tossing the empty bottles into the garbage bin, the last one shattering on impact. With disappointment and rage stealing her ability to think straight, she slammed her hands onto the bench, taking a few tortured breaths. What more did she have to do to get Charlie to see the harsh reality of what his drinking was doing to them? Was he even going to the AA meetings? What else was he lying about?

*Maybe I should do it. Maybe I should leave him ...*

Squeezing her eyes shut against the burning threat of tears, she shook her head against the thought. Walking away from the man who knew all aspects of her heart would be the hardest thing she'd ever have to do, but she'd cried so much, begged so much, fought so much for them, for him, for her, for their baby girl's sake. She was mentally and emotionally exhausted. A part of her wanted to run away from Charlie and his debilitating nightmares. The niggling thought that he couldn't shake the night terrors because he'd never got closure in Vietnam taunted her every damn day. He'd given up

military life for her. He'd given up going back to save Joey Baker for her. Was she now paying the price for those sacrifices? If so, how could they ever move past this?

*Maybe our marriage was doomed from the get-go.*

Once again, she contemplated telling him to go back to the army; let him return to Vietnam and look for Joey. But then she'd spend her days worrying he'd never return to her. A rush of overwhelming panic came over her. She was damned if she did, and damned if she didn't.

She needed to talk to her mum before she made any rash decisions. Looking to the clock above the stove, she quickly worked out the time difference. They might still be up. Plucking the cordless phone from the holding dock, she dialled her parents' UK number, hoping to god one of them picked up at the other end.

In three rings, Edith's comforting voice travelled across the oceans. 'Denver residence, Edith speaking.'

'Hey, Mum,' Grace said with a surge of relief.

'Grace, oh darling, how are you?' The phone line crackled.

'Not great.' Grace looked over her shoulder to make sure no ears were listening. 'Charlie has slept on the couch again, and I just found booze in his shed.' She sniffed back a sob. 'I thought he'd stopped, Mum.'

'Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry,' Edith sighed. 'Do you want me to get your father to call Charlie, and have a man-to-man chat?'

Pulling a dining chair out, Grace sat. 'I don't think that's a good idea, Mum.'

'Okay, well, if you change your mind, I know your father would be more than happy to. In fact, it's taking me a heck of a lot of persuading to stop him from doing so.'

'Yeah, I know.' Grace could only imagine how hard her father had been biting his tongue. 'I miss you and Dad so much.' Grace plucked a tissue from a box on the side table and

dabbed her tears. 'I wish you didn't live so far away. I could really do with one of your hugs right now.'

'Aw, I know, sweetheart. We miss you too.' Edith's voice was filled with tenderness. 'We'll be home for Christmas, though, and I can hug you nice and tight, so hold onto that thought through this tough time, and pray for guidance too, won't you?'

'Yes, I will. I have been.' Grace curled a strand of hair around her finger and lowered her voice. 'I honestly don't know how Charlie and I are going to make it through this, Mum.' She made sure to keep her voice low as the last thing she wanted was for Charlie to overhear. 'I'm scared I'm going to fall out of love with him if he can't find a way to quit drinking.'

'Alcohol is the root of all evil, in my opinion,' Edith tutted. 'But remember, Grace, he is your husband, and you did say for better or for worse, as hard as that might sometimes prove to be.'

'I know, Mum, and I remind myself often, but there has to be a cut-off point.'

'I know, love.' Edith sighed, like she understood; like she'd been there too. 'I suppose the best advice I can give you is that in a marriage, you have to fall in love with a person again and again, because we are all human and we all make mistakes, sometimes ones that will cause heartbreak to those who we hold most precious.'

Grace took a moment to let this advice sink in. She was about to respond when footsteps approached down the hallway and Charlie entered the kitchen, looking worse for wear.

'Charlie's just wandered in, so I better go and get breakfast started, Mum. Thanks for the chat.'

'Okay, then. I'm always here, any time of the day or night. I love you, Grace.'

Grace steadied her voice. 'I love you too.'

‘Say hello to that sweet granddaughter of mine, and tell her Nanna is sending her a little package for her third birthday.’ Her voice quivered. ‘I’m so sad we won’t be able to be there for the party.’

‘There’s always next year.’ Grace choked back a sob. ‘Please say hi to Dad for me.’

‘I will when he gets home from work, he’s on night shifts at the moment.’ Edith’s warmth cradled Grace’s ear. ‘Ta-ta, love. Take care and talk soon.’

Grace hung the phone up, using the few seconds as she did to get her thoughts straight. She didn’t want what she was about to say to turn into another useless argument.

‘Good morning, Grace.’ Charlie’s voice was hoarse.

‘Morning.’ The sink was spick-and-span, but she grabbed the cloth and wiped it down anyway.

‘How’d you sleep?’ His spoon clanged as he stirred two sugars into his coffee.

‘Okay, I suppose.’ She fought to keep her voice steady. ‘Why did you sleep on the couch again?’

‘I don’t want to wake you up with my nightmares any longer, Grace. You’ve got too much on your plate to go and add lack of sleep to the list.’

Grace swallowed a curse word. *He has no idea just how high my plate is piled.*

There simply wasn’t enough of her to go around. Hope needed her. The teashop needed her. Charlie needed her. Damn, even the purring cat curling at her ankles right now needed her. When was she meant to find time for herself? When did she ever get to experience the happily-ever-after with Charlie that she longed for, that they’d talked about as young lovers? With every beat of her heart, she still loved him so, but she couldn’t – wouldn’t – live like this any longer. Unable to bite her tongue any longer, she spun to face him,

sure the fierceness she felt in her heart was written all over her face. 'I thought you'd stopped, Charlie.'

Charlie's red-rimmed gaze widened. 'Stopped what?'

Grace folded her arms. 'Drinking.'

He was momentarily taken back, but recovered quickly. 'I have.'

'Please don't lie to me, Charlie.' She heaved an almighty sigh. 'I found the bottles of booze, and just so you know, I have tipped them down the sink.'

Realisation flashed across his face. His mouth went to form a reply, but then he must have thought better of it. Casting his gaze out the window, he raised the steaming mug to his lips, and took a tentative sip before responding. 'You're right. I am drinking again.'

Grace shook her head. 'It's always one step forward, two steps back with you, isn't it Charlie?'

He flicked indignant eyes her way. 'That's not fair, Grace. I'm trying my hardest.' He shifted his weight from foot to foot. 'I'm not drinking like I used to, just a nip here and there to take the edge off, that's all. To get me through the day, and to help me sleep'

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'A load of nonsense, and you know it. One drink is too many for you, Charlie, and ten isn't enough.'

His eyes widened before he dropped his gaze to his socked feet. 'I know. You're right, and I'm sorry.' He drew in a breath as he squeezed the bridge of his nose. 'I've tried everything, Grace. The counselling, the medication, heck, even the damned hypnosis, and nothing's helping. The drink, it's the only thing that stops those damn nightmares.'

'How about coming back to church with me?'

'I've told you a million times, that's not going to help me, Grace.' He half shrugged in pitiful apology. 'I just don't know



what to do anymore, and I'm scared, really scared.' He broke down and wept, his head buried in his hands.

Like that bottle she'd tossed away, Grace's heart shattered. How was she meant to stay angry with him? This broken man was her husband, and she needed to comfort him.

Closing the distance, she wrapped her arms around him. He pulled her close, and held her tight, as if hungry for her love. Grace couldn't recall the last time they'd made love. A couple of months? More? They remained wrapped in each other's arms until Charlie's tears subsided and he stepped back, shamefaced and unable to hold her gaze.

'I'm so worried about you, Charlie.' In all their years together, she'd never seen him so lost and distraught. 'I honestly don't know what to do anymore.'

'You can't do any more than you already are.' Pulling a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, he wiped his cheeks. 'I'm so sorry for putting you through this, I really am.' He cleared his throat. 'I don't know how you can still love me when I'm only half the man you fell for.'

'Oh, Charlie, stop that now.' She took his hand and squeezed it. 'We will make you whole again. There has to be a way.'

Finally, he met her gaze and, cupping her cheeks, kissed her ever so gently. 'Thank you for loving me like you do, my darling Grace, because I really don't deserve it.' He searched her eyes. 'I will try and find a way to deal with my demons, once and for all, I promise you that.'

Grace wanted to believe him, so very much, but time would tell if he could break the cycle they'd been living in. Placing her hands over his, she nodded, biting her lip to try to stop herself from sobbing, but she couldn't halt the few stray tears that fell.

Charlie wiped them away, the hurt in his eyes tugging her heartstrings. 'I have to get to work. I'll see you this afternoon?'

‘Yes.’ She straightened her shoulders. ‘Me too.’

‘Would you like me to wait so I can drop Hope off to day care on my way?’

‘No, she’s still asleep, but thanks, I’ll take her today.’ She wrapped her arms around herself while wishing they could get back to how they used to be. ‘How about I make us a pot roast for supper?’

‘That sounds delicious.’ A rare soft smile etched lines at the corners of his baby blues. ‘I love you, with all my heart, Grace, and I always will, no matter what.’

‘I love you too, very much.’ As if seeing him for the first time in forever, Grace noted the dimples on his cheeks that used to make her heart flutter. ‘Have a good day, won’t you?’ She watched him disappear out the doorway.

‘I’ll try to. You too,’ he called back.

Climbing the staircase, Grace paused at Hope’s doorway. Their little girl was still fast asleep, with her teddy bear cuddled to her chest. She looked so peaceful, her petite features softly lit by the sunlight peeking through the split in the curtains. Grace didn’t want to wake her, but if she wanted to get to the teashop on time, unlike yesterday, she had to get a move on. Between Hope’s wardrobe meltdown while trying to decide between her fairy dress and rainbow skirt, her refusal to eat her breakfast and a last-second trip to the toilet the minute they went to walk out the door, Grace had been almost an hour late. Jenny hadn’t minded, of course, but she felt terrible being tardy – a boss was meant to set an example. If only she could take the day off. She’d let Hope sleep in – heck, *she’d* sleep in – and then they could go to the park together and swing to and fro, build sandcastles on the beach and swim in the sea, then follow it all up with a banana split sundae at the ice creamery.

Grace sighed. Charlie’s shortage of sales over the past six months had meant low commissions, which meant she simply couldn’t afford to take any time off. It wasn’t his fault that the

automobile market had bottomed out, but six days a week, ten hours a day, was beginning to take its toll on her.

Padding over to the single bed, she sat on the edge and placed a gentle hand on her daughter's arm. 'Hope, darling. It's time to wake up.'

Stirring, Hope blinked her blue eyes open. 'Hello, Mummy.'

'Good morning, sunshine.' Leaning in, Grace brushed dark locks from Hope's face and kissed her cheek. 'Did you have a nice sleep?'

'Yes, thank you.' Hope sat up and wrapped her arms around Grace. 'I love you so much, Mummy.'

Grace took her in her arms and brought Hope with her as she stood. 'Aw, sweetheart. I love you so much too. To the moon and back.'

'That's a really long way.'

'Ha, yes, it is.'

Grace helped Hope to change out of her pyjamas and into a polka-dot two-piece – and was very pleased it only took five minutes – then took her downstairs for some scrambled eggs. Unlike yesterday, Hope was agreeable to everything and eager to help.

Leaving her to watch some cartoons, Grace headed back upstairs and rifled through her closet until she found her favourite dress and slipped it on. She surveyed herself in her duchess mirror – her eyes were a little bloodshot and her cheeks a little pale, but it was nothing some eyedrops and blush wouldn't hide. She was getting good at papering over the cracks of their life. Too good, in fact; so much so that the very thought made her want to burst into tears.

Fifteen minutes later, her footfalls echoed on the hardwood floors as she made her way to the front door with Hope's tiny hand clasped within hers. Every day she left Moonflower Acres, she had to let go of the woman she was while here – a

mother, a wife, a housekeeper – so that when she walked through the doors of Serendipity, she was totally focused on her role there. It was a balancing act, and some days the scales would heavily tip one way. She hoped this wasn't going to be one of those particular days.

The morning went quickly, and sometime during the lunchtime rush the phone rang. 'Hello, Serendipity Teashop, Grace speaking.'

'Is this Mrs Wilson?' an official-sounding voice asked.

'Yes, speaking.' The phone gripped between her shoulder and ear, she continued beating the lemon and vanilla cake batter. 'How can I help you?'

'This is Doctor Hunter from the Sapphire Bay hospital.' There was a short pause. 'Your husband has had an accident, but don't worry yourself, he's recovering and is going to be fine.'

Grace forgot to breathe. 'Oh my god, what's happened?'

'Well, it appears he was walking along Riley's Ridge and has somehow fallen over the edge.' The doctor's tone was cautious, almost as if he as didn't believe a word he was saying. 'He seems a little ... shall we say, intoxicated, which I think helped him land a little softer, which in turn prevented any broken bones.'

The doctor's words struck her like a thunderclap. 'He was drunk? At Riley's Ridge? In the middle of the day?' The hullabaloo of the tearoom faded into the background as she tried to get to grips with the situation. 'What was he doing there? He's meant to be working ...'

*He promised. Only hours ago, he swore to me that he was going to find a way.*

'I don't know, Mrs Wilson.' The doctor's voice snapped her from her thoughts. 'Perhaps you will have to talk to Mr Wilson about that when you collect him.'

Grace sucked in a sharp breath. ‘Oh, yes, sorry. I will most certainly be giving him a very good talking to.’ She tried to shrug off her anger and bitter disappointment. ‘I’ll be there as soon as I can, to pick him up.’

‘Okay, no rush.’

The phone line went dead and as she put the receiver down, so did Grace’s heart.

\* \* \*

Hungover, badly bruised, with thirty-two stitches across his chin and eighteen above his right eye, and now unemployed, Charlie was trying his best not to feel sorry for himself. He had no right, no right at all.

He knew he’d been dormant this past year, letting life pass him by in an alcohol-induced blur – if only he wasn’t so numb, so empty. He’d stupidly kept telling himself he would stop drinking, could stop whenever he chose. There was always tomorrow. But as always, tomorrow never came, and his every today brought renewed challenges.

This morning’s talk with Grace had started the ball rolling, but then he’d arrived at work only to be told he was being laid off due to lack of business ... well, that had been the straw that had broken the camel’s back. He’d gone to Riley’s Ridge to contemplate his next move, to come up with a solution, but after downing almost a bottle of booze, he’d decided that ending his life would be the only way. His life insurance would help Grace raise Hope. His absence from their lives would be a blessing.

Thank god he’d had a last-second change of heart and grabbed hold of the branch. That had saved his life. And the old bloke who had come across him, and taken him to the hospital, he wouldn’t be able to thank him enough. Never would he tell Grace what his intentions had been; that was something he’d take to his grave.

‘I love you, Grace. You know that, right?’ Sitting across from her at the dining table, he watched as she pushed her

food around with her fork. 'I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you.' He was falling more in love with her as each second passed them by, but he knew the same could not be said for her. Nor could he blame her. Hell, even *he* didn't love himself. 'Please, say something, anything.'

Her body tensing further, she stared down at her plate and said nothing. Charlie could've cut the tension of the room with a knife. Thank goodness Jenny was minding Hope tonight. He didn't want his baby girl seeing them like this.

'I didn't choose to get fired, nor did I deserve to be,' he said, desperately trying to get her to see this was way out of his control. 'I wish ... I wish you could spend a day in my shoes and feel what I feel. No, I take that back, I wouldn't wish you to feel like this, not ever.'

Again, she remained silent, but this time lifted her gaze to meet his.

'I just constantly feel like I'm sitting in a deep dark hole and I don't know how to get myself out of it.' Charlie took a breath. 'And now I'm unemployed. I'm an utter failure in every single way.'

He jumped as Grace smacked her fork down on the table. 'Enough, Charlie!'

'But Grace, I ...'

'I've tried to help you out of that damn hole, over and over and over again.' She shot to her feet, her hands gripping the edge of the table. 'You really are your own worst enemy, you know.' Her gaze burned with such loathing, he was taken aback. 'You have so much life around you, so much to be happy and thankful for, and yet you only focus on what you *don't* have.'

Charlie regarded her, wanting, needing to understand her. 'What do you mean, I only focus on what I don't have?'

Grace pointed accusingly at him. 'I know how much you regret leaving the army, way more than you've led me to

believe over the years.’ Tearing up, she momentarily paused. ‘And I also know you resent me for it, deep down.’

‘That’s not true,’ Charlie insisted, even as he knew she was right. He just didn’t want to admit it, to her, or himself.

‘It’s the truth, and damn you for making your choice then making our lives hell because of it. I never asked you to leave. That was *your* decision.’

With that, she turned and stormed out of the dining room, the air of rage lingering in her wake.

Charlie sat in stunned silence. He’d never seen his loving wife so furious. He wanted to run after her, to hold her and tell her it was all going to be okay, but how could he bring comfort when he was the one causing her such deep anguish?

Grace was the very last person he wanted to hurt. Yet he was doing just that.

On his tenth piece of nicotine gum for the day, he could really murder a cigarette right now, but he’d promised Grace he would quit. And he’d broken enough promises. On the other side of the coin, he felt so much pressure to change so much about himself. Quitting felt like the defining quality of his life – quit the army, quit drinking, quit smoking, quit swearing. It was as if he had to quit being himself for Grace to be able to love him. A bubble of resentment rose, and he tried to fight the sensation off – he had no right feeling this way. He was being a fool, acting irrationally.

*Damn it.* He needed some fresh air. Now.

Storming through the kitchen, he skidded to a stop at the refrigerator door to admire the drawing Hope had made for him last week. Her swirls of colourful crayon helped to soothe the ache in his soul. His darling little girl was just like Grace, and his grandmother; so strong, much stronger than he’d ever be. He would not allow himself to turn out like his deadbeat father. Hope deserved a father to be proud of. He owed her that, and so much more.

He took a calming breath, followed by another. He couldn't run from himself any longer. One step at a time, he was going to have to finally find a way to make this right.

His little girl needed him to be fully present and, most importantly, sober. He may not be able to do it for himself, and he might not measure up to what Grace expected from him as a husband, but the very least he could do was step up to his role as a father. He took a somewhat calming breath, followed by another. He couldn't run from himself any longer. One step at a time, he was going to have to finally find a way to make this right.



# CHAPTER

## 10

1983

The clown Grace had hired was busy making balloon animals, and most of the children's faces had been painted by the tooth fairy – Jenny in a sequined dress with a pair of wings strapped to her shoulders and glitter spray all over her. Marty was manning the barbecue, handing out the last of the sausages wrapped in buttered bread with a hearty dollop of tomato sauce. Charlie had also been doing his fair share by playing party games throughout the afternoon – the kids' favourite had been musical chairs. With her parents arriving from England for an impromptu visit, which Charlie had secretly planned to surprise her, Grace's heart felt full to the brim, which was a nice change. All in all, it had turned out to be a wonderful day, one she'd gladly add to her memory bank.

Taking the cake box from the fridge, she watched her mother rummage through the kitchen drawers. 'If you're looking for a lighter, I'm guessing there'll be one in Charlie's coat pocket.' Her hands full, she gestured to the coat stand with a tip of her head.

'Really?' Her mother straightened, brows furrowed. 'I thought he'd quit?'

'Me too, but I caught him sneaking one in the garden the other night.' Grace shrugged her irritation off – today wasn't the day for grievances. 'I've given up nagging him.'

'Argh, men! They can be so infuriating.' Her mum's lips tightened as her frown deepened. 'Smoking will be the death of him if he doesn't stop.'

'He's a big boy, Mum, who can make his own choices, as stupid as they might sometimes be.' She stepped back and waved an arm over the cake. 'Ta-da!'

‘Oh, love, it’s absolutely divine!’ Grace felt a rush of emotion as her mother wrapped an arm around her. ‘You are so clever. Hope’s a very lucky girl, having an awesome mum like you.’

‘Aw, thanks, Mum. That means a lot coming from you.’ She pecked her mother’s cheek. ‘You’re the best mama to ever walk this earth.’

Her mother blinked faster. ‘Oh, stop it, love, or you’ll make me cry. I’m an absolute sook since I got the menopause.’ Going to the jackets, she found a lighter in the third pocket she searched. ‘Voila!’ She held it up. ‘Now, let’s go make Hope’s party even happier than it already is.’

‘Yes, let’s,’ Grace said, matching her mother’s massive smile.

The guests began to gather around the table as Grace made her way across the back verandah, her latest masterpiece in hand. Carefully placing down the Minnie Mouse cake she’d spent the better part of yesterday making, she enjoyed the look of absolute delight on Hope’s face as she rose on her tippy toes to see it – she’d do anything to see such joy on her little girl’s face.

‘Here, sweetheart, why don’t you let Daddy help you up on your chair?’ Charlie’s expression was full of pride as he got Hope settled – she really was daddy’s little girl.

Loving the bond between father and daughter, Grace brushed stray locks of hair from Hope’s face. ‘Are you ready to blow your candles out, and make a wish?’

Hope clapped her hands excitedly, and her face was a picture of absolute glee as she jiggled on her chair. ‘Yippee, yes I am!’

Overcome with love, Grace cupped Hope’s cheeks and pecked her tiny lips. Their baby girl was growing up right before their eyes, way too fast for her liking. Before she knew it, she’d be waving her off to school, then university, then a life of her own and Grace would be left behind, wondering

where all the years had gone, questioning if she could have done things differently and had more priceless time with her child. It made her wonder if all the hours she had to spend in the teashop were worth it. She was missing out on so much. It was funny, how priorities changed as she got older. All she'd ever wanted was to run a teashop, but motherhood had changed everything.

Nonetheless, it wasn't something for her to ponder over right now. She'd spent plenty of time doing that this past year, and would no doubt have many more hours of deliberation in the future.

Positioning six candles, she lit each one. 'Wait until I tell you to blow them out, okay, sweetheart?'

Hope nodded enthusiastically, her long dark ponytail swinging as she did. 'Okay, Mummy.'

Charlie's singsong voice enticed the rest of the guests into a rousing chorus of 'Happy Birthday'. Moving back a little, Grace stood beside her husband, a man she loved with every fibre of her being, but at times found hard to like. Being married to a recovered alcoholic with what the doctor had described to her as 'post traumatic stress disorder'. was a bumpy road. She kept telling herself that the worst was over and the best was yet to come, they'd be perfectly fine if only they could get through the next challenge, leap over the next hurdle ... But nothing was perfect, and their marriage was far from fine. Real life was nothing like all the romance books and movies she used to have time to read and watch, then daydream over.

'Hip, hip, hooray' resonated around her, and she joined in wholeheartedly.

Then, camera at the ready, she nodded at Hope. 'Okay, sweetheart, and remember to make a wish when you finish blowing.' Hope, fists clenched as tightly as her eyes, blew with all her might and Grace clicked, capturing the sweet memory.

With all the candles out, Hope mouthed silent words, looked to the heavens, then grinned. ‘I really hope my wish for a puppy comes true.’

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Grace chuckled.

‘You’re not supposed to tell everybody what you wished for,’ one of the little boys yelled out, laughing.

‘Oh no.’ Hope’s smile all but disappeared. ‘Does that mean I’ve ruined it?’

Grace’s heart squeezed as she shook her head. ‘No love, not at all. Just remember to keep it a secret next time.’ She helped Hope off the chair and crouched to her height. ‘Now how about you go and play with your friends while Dad and I cut the cake up?’ She straightened. ‘We’ll call out when we have it ready for you.’

‘Okay, Mummy! You’re the bestest.’ And off Hope skipped, smiling from ear to ear.

Ten minutes later, the cake was all handed out, Charlie was busy talking sports with Marty, her mum was catching up with some of Grace’s old mates who were now school mums, and Jenny had ducked off to the bathroom to de-glitter, and Grace took the chance to slip away. Her feet were aching and her headache was back. She needed to sit and have a quiet moment to herself. Rounding the corner of the house, she spotted her dad doing the exact same thing.

‘Like father like daughter, hey, Dad?’ she called over the verandah railing.

He flashed her a fatherly smile. ‘Hey, my love, come, sit with me.’ He patted the seat next to him on the swing chair. ‘Let’s hide out here, where it’s nice and quiet.’

Grace smiled; any time together was treasured. The hum of conversation faded behind her as she made her way down the steps and over to him, where she saddled up beside him and hooked her arm into his. They sat like this for a few minutes, swinging to and fro, saying nothing because no words were needed to fill their silence.

Then her father drew in a weighty breath, drawing Grace's dreamy attention to him. 'What is it, Dad?'

He regarded her with sharp eyes. 'I can see things aren't great between you and Charlie again, love.' He paused, waiting, before adding, 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'There's nothing to really talk about, Dad.' Grace shrugged. 'We just seem to be drifting apart, little by little. No matter what I do, I can't seem to get back that feeling back he used to give me.'

'I see.' He nodded as if weighing this up. 'Is he still off the drink?'

'As far as I know.' Her lips set in a grim line as she thought about all the lonely evenings and nights she spent now Charlie was working night shift as a prison guard. 'He's away so much for work, and when he's home catching up on sleep during the day, I'm usually at the teashop, so who knows what he's up to when I'm not around.'

'It sounds to me like you don't trust him.' Her father patted her hand when he was met with silence. 'I hope you don't think he's cheating, because Charlie might not be the best husband in some ways, but I know he'd never do that to you, Grace. He loves you deeply.'

'Oh, I do trust him in that sense, but not when it comes to alcohol.' She sighed sadly. 'He's lied too much in the past for me to ever truly trust him.'

'Oh, love, I understand how you feel, but if you want your marriage to work, you have to find a way to let the past go. There is never anything to be gained by holding grudges.'

Grace realised how much she had missed talking to her dad. She'd forgotten how he always managed to put everything into perspective. 'Yes, I know you're right, Dad.'

A short silence fell as they watched two sunbirds fluttering in the bushes.

‘I haven’t been a saint in yours and my mother’s marriage,’ he said, his gaze now directed back at her. ‘And trust me, I’m not proud of it.’

Her curiosity piqued, Grace straightened. ‘What do you mean?’

‘There was a time I was in a very bad place, and I did something I shouldn’t have. Your mother, being the wonderful woman she is, stood by me when I didn’t deserve it. I made sure she knew how sorry I was, and I did everything to make amends, every single day. And now, we’re more in love than ever before.’

Grace never would have believed her parents had hit hard times – they’d always appeared so happy. ‘What did you do?’

Her father cast his eyes to the ground. ‘I got very drunk at a work Christmas party about fifteen years ago, not that being inebriated is any excuse, and I stupidly kissed another woman.’

Grace couldn’t help her sharp inhalation. ‘Oh, my goodness, poor Mum. That must have broken her heart.’

‘It sure did, for quite some time.’ Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands tightly. ‘I don’t keep anything from your mother, so when I told her, I thought I’d lost her for good. It almost killed me.’ He dropped his head, shaking it slowly. ‘God only knows how she found a way to forgive me, but she did, and we slowly moved past the hurt.’

‘Oh Dad, I’m so glad you worked through it together.’ She rubbed his back. ‘I can’t believe she never told me about it.’

‘She was protecting me, and my honour, not that I deserved her protection, and she didn’t want to upset you.’ He sat back and rubbed his face. ‘Your mother is the most amazing, selfless woman. I’m an extremely lucky man, having her love me like she does.’

A soft smile tugged at Grace’s lips. ‘She is wonderful, isn’t she?’

‘Yes, and you’re just like her, my sweet Grace.’ He rested a hand over where hers sat atop her knee. ‘Don’t give up on Charlie and your marriage, because I know you two could live a lifetime of soul-deep love.’ He smiled ever so tenderly. ‘I know I’ve had my grievances with Charlie in the past, and only because I love you and didn’t want to see you hurting, but the way he looks at you is exactly how I look at your mother.’

‘Oh, Dad.’ Tears gathered, halting her words, and she quickly retrieved a tissue from her bra.

‘Ha, your mother hides her tissues there too.’ His laughter carried on the afternoon breeze.

‘Mummy, Grandpa, there you are!’ The pitter-patter of running feet quickly approached them. ‘What’s wrong, Mummy?’ Hope’s sparkling eyes filled with endearing concern. ‘You’re crying.’

‘Nothing’s wrong, my darling, your grandpa was just telling me a really special story, and it made me cry, that’s all.’ Grace lifted Hope from the ground and cuddled her to her.

‘Stories shouldn’t make you cry.’ Hope frowned and shook her head. ‘I don’t want to know any that make me cry, Grandpa, no way, Jose.’

Her sweet innocence made Grace and her father chuckle.

‘Come on then, little one, let’s get you back to your party, shall we?’ She stood, and placed Hope back to the ground. ‘Are you coming, Dad?’ She held out her hand, gesturing to help him out of the swing chair.

‘You two go.’ Her father looked from her to Hope, love and pride written all over his face. ‘I’ll be there in a minute.’

‘Okey-dokey.’ Grace leant in and hugged him. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you, Gracie.’ He tapped Hope on the end of her nose. ‘And love you too, my little pumpkin.’

The rest of the afternoon flew by in a flurry, leaving nothing but sugar-high children on a downward crash and

exhausted parents trying to wrangle them into cars. By the time Grace said her final goodbyes, twilight was descending on Moonflower Acres. Leaving Charlie and her parents to finish with the cleaning, she led a very tired Hope upstairs. Stripping her out of her clothes splattered with food and god only knew what else, she put the plug in the bath and turned the taps on before grabbing the hairbrush. Grimacing at the state of Hope's hair, she got to work on the bird's nest.

'I'm sorry I got sherbet in there, Mummy.' Hope pressed her hands over her face as Grace tried her best to detangle. 'But it really wasn't my fault that Johnny thought it would be funny to tip it in there when I wasn't looking.'

'I know, sweetheart.' Grace stifled a chuckle. 'He should have known better than to do that.'

Hope pondered this, then said, 'Boys can be really silly sometimes.'

'Yes, they sure can be.' With Hope's hair in a somewhat more manageable order, Grace turned the taps off and checked the temperature of the water. 'Your bubble bath awaits, my little princess.'

Hope got in with her help, laughing hysterically when Grace plonked a handful of bubbles on top of her head while pulling a silly face. 'You're so funny, Mummy.'

'You clever girl! That rhymed.' Grace grabbed a handful of bubbles, but this time plonked them on her own chin. 'What's so funny?' she demanded lightheartedly.

Hope pointed at her. 'You are, Mummy, because you look like Santa Claus.'

Enjoying the uninhibited laughter for a little longer, Grace finally gathered herself and got back to more serious motherly duties. 'Come on, let's get you smelling like a bunch of roses.'

Hope stood, ready to be bathed. 'I want to smell like lollies and fairy floss.'



‘Well, they are two of my favourite things! Other than you, my sweet girl.’

Washed, dressed and tucked into bed, Hope listened to a short story about a bear and his magical slippery slide before it took all of sixty seconds for her to be fast asleep with her teddy cuddled to her. Captivated by her daughter, Grace sat there for a little longer, overawed with undying love.

Deciding she better get downstairs to spend some quality time her parents, before they headed back to the UK tomorrow, Grace padded out of the room and toward the cheery chatter carrying from the kitchen.

Her father was right – she needed to stand by her husband, for better or for worse, with the faith that they would one day be lucky enough to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary, with their children and grandchildren alongside them.

Pausing at the bottom of the staircase, she ran her gaze over the collection of framed photographs. Front and centre was her favourite picture from their wedding day; the look of adoration in her eyes as she gazed up at a smitten Charlie was one she knew was still there, deep inside her, hiding behind the harsh reality of what they’d been through. Beside that was one of her and Charlie on the day they’d brought their baby girl home – Charlie looked so delighted with Hope cradled in his arms. Another was of them as newlyweds, honeymooning in Bali, their smiles brighter than the sun shining upon their faces. She couldn’t wait to be able to travel with him again, with Santorini at the top of her list. The next was Hope riding a bicycle with training wheels, and another of all three of them huddled over a birthday cake, with four candles lit and ready for Hope to make a wish. So many happy moments, so many fleeting memories. Some were bittersweet reminders of what their marriage was now lacking, but others made her hopeful for regaining that joy and friendship.

# CHAPTER

## 11

1984

Night had begun to envelop Charlie and his men. The scent of rain threatened a heavy downpour, the suffocating humidity pressing down like a heavy blanket, but the weather was the very least of their problems. Raising his head out of the dirt, he bellowed orders to his brothers-in-arms as the Viet Cong fired their weapons in the far-flung distance.

Crawling along on their bellies, he and his men successfully surrounded the enemy village. Then they stopped. Waited. Some prayed. Others had no faith left after what they'd seen. There was sudden movement only ten metres away. Charlie's muscles tensed and the hair rose on the back of his neck as he positioned his rifle at the ready. He signalled to hold fire. It was a good call. The clock was ticking. Fifty-eight seconds to go. He didn't want to go too soon and blow their cover.

Way above, the echoes of choppers reverberated as the blades sliced through the thick air. Bullets whizzed and pinged overhead, the wind altering their trajectory. The blasts of bombs detonating nearby sent shockwaves along the ground. Charlie was all too aware that they were balanced on the edge of hell; one wrong move and they'd end up in the fiery pits.

He checked his stopwatch again. Twenty-five seconds.

His heart raced faster. His palms became sweatier. He took a calming breath, quickly followed by another. His comrades were depending on him. He had to keep his wits if he was to keep his men safe. Not a single soldier was going home in a body bag. But the enemy was silently closing in, fast. He could feel it deep within his bones. And he could do nothing about it.

In the best position they could be, given the terrain, he and his men were as ready for battle as they'd ever be. Beads of sweat built on his forehead and rolled into his eyes.

Ten seconds to go.

He tensed. Exhaustion gripped him. So did adrenaline. It was a wild combination. Could send a man crazy.

Five.

Two.

One.

He looks to Sergeant Joseph Baker, lying in the trench beside him, and gives the nod for go time.

An explosion detonates only metres away. The air is sucked from his lungs. His ears are ringing, eyes are stinging, and Joey is dragging him out of harm's way ...

And through the gunfire, he hears Hope's sweet voice, calling for him.

*No, no, no, no.*

His baby girl appears amid the haze, carrying a plate piled high with pancakes. No! She can't be here. Where's Grace? He tries to call to her, but she can't hear him over the barrage of bullets. He tries to run, tries to reach her when suddenly pinging sounds overlap with booming echoes only metres from him. Then, to his horror, Hope is gone.

*Oh my god, no!*

Charlie woke in a pool of sweat, crying out something he couldn't quite fathom, with his heart trying to punch its way out of his chest.

'Charlie, are you okay?' Grace sat up beside him, bringing her hand to his back. 'Another bad dream?'

'Yes.' Desperate for a drink, he climbed from the bed and, despite the summer night, tugged his robe on. 'I'll be okay. You go back to sleep.'

Grace flicked her bedside lamp on. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Just to grab a glass of water.’ Charlie tried to offer her a reassuring smile. ‘I’ll be back before you know it.’

‘Would you like me to come downstairs with you?’ She went to climb from beneath the sheet. ‘I can make us a nice cup of tea and sit with you, if it would help.’

‘Thank you, no,’ he said gruffly, immediately regretting his tone when he saw Grace’s pained expression. He moved to her side of the bed. ‘I’m sorry. I just need a few moments to gather myself.’ He leant in and kissed her cheek.

‘Okay, but only if you’re sure.’ She reluctantly sunk back against the pillow.

‘I’m positively positive.’ He managed to summon a smile.

‘Okay. I love you, Charlie.’

‘Love you too, Grace,’ he said softly.

Tiptoeing past Hope’s bedroom and over to the staircase, he felt his way along the banister until he’d counted twenty-two steps. Now downstairs, he flicked the light on and stood, trying to decide which way he was going to go – left, to the kitchen, or right, to the outside shed. God help him but he wanted more than water or tea or coffee. He needed something strong and punchy, something to ease the anguish, to rid the claws dug deep into the flesh of his heart. He hadn’t had a drop of alcohol in almost a year, but right now, after his worst nightmare in twelve months, it was all he could think about. Maybe just a nip? That would do the trick. He could make it classy and have a whisky on the rocks. Sit and sip it on the verandah, like a normal person would. Surely he had his impulses under control now?

He went to take a step to the right then, as if his feet were boulders, stopped. What was he thinking? Hadn’t he learnt his lesson, too many times before?

*Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.*

Anger, guilt and frustration coiled deep inside him. He turned around and headed left. Storming into the kitchen, he looked to the tap and pounded his fist against the kitchen counter. Water wasn't going to cut it. Damn his PTSD. Damn this incessant call to go return to soldiering. *Damn it all.* Why was he still here, breathing and living, when Joey was just a name among the thirteen hundred American soldiers still missing in action in Vietnam? It was almost as if Joey was calling him, begging him to come and save him. He knew his military life was over, and he needed to focus on his present purpose in life – Grace and Hope, the sweetest of souls. But why was that so hard?

Exasperated, he flicked the kettle on and grabbed a mug from the overhead cupboard. Coffee was going to have to suffice. Grace deserved a husband who was strong, resilient, loyal. He owed her so much for sticking by him all these years.

Coffee in hand, he padded outside and slumped down on the settee. The moon was full, glowing silvery light over the rolling land – his family land, Grace's home, and Hope's future. He was a blessed man. Sitting back, and now past the worst of it, he mentally gave himself a pat on the back for fighting off the urge for a drink – baby steps, but forward steps. There'd be no going backward for him ever again. He knew it would mean the loss of Grace and Hope, and everything he loved so dearly.

Maybe, seeing it was his night off tomorrow, he should get Jenny and Marty to babysit and take Grace out dancing, like they used to. She'd been so worried about him, and he wanted to show her he was making progress, that he was on the mend, even if at times it felt as if he wasn't. Yes, that's exactly what he needed to do – reassure her, reconnect with each other. And then he might be able to bury back down the dark that was resurfacing.

\* \* \*

Grace was over the moon with his suggestion, and Charlie's heart warmed at the sight of her wide smile. Luigi greeted them as old friends at their favourite Italian restaurant and after a romantic dinner, they moved on to the Confetti nightclub to get their groove on. With their bodies edging together as natural as breathing, they lost track of time as they bopped to the faster tunes then waltzed to the slow songs, with Charlie holding her nice and tight. They laughed and sang to each other as he seamlessly twirled her around the dance floor, the two of them completely focused on the music, and each other. Finally, their choppy world had melted away, if only for this one magical night, leaving them floating in calmer waters. There was so much to be said for date nights. They needed to do this more often. Just be together. Just him. Just her. Perfectly as one.

The song changed and picked up the tempo. Squealing with delight, Grace pirouetted, her arms wide as she spun in dizzying circles. Charlie watched her in total awe, the nightclub a watercolour blur. Her vivacious energy lifted his spirit higher than it had been for a very long time. Beneath the glimmer of the disco ball, they moved and jived, pulled together and whirled in each other's arms, then let go and grooved some more. Spurred on by unbridled enthusiasm, Charlie lifted her high into the air at the crescendo of the hit Bee Gees song. When he eased her back to her feet on the sparkling dance floor, she laced her fingers behind his neck, rose on her tippy toes and kissed him beneath the glimmer of the disco ball with so much passion, so much hunger, his body responded in turn, and he fought not to whip her off to some dark corner and ravish her. When they got home, he was going to make the sweetest of love to her.

With the thought of slowly stripping her and being skin-on-skin, a low growl escaped him. Grace looked up beneath her long dark lashes and smiled sassily. Their gazes locked and time paused, and they stopped dancing. Stopped moving. Just ... stopped. In that powerful moment, the world could have ended and neither of them would have noticed.

Charlie felt a surge of undying love – she belonged within his arms. He brought his hand to her cheek and traced the soft line of her jaw then, little by little, he trailed a finger down her neck and over her collarbone. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she tipped her head back, inviting more of this, of him. Not needing any further invitation, he slowly brought his mouth to her lips, enticing a shiver of anticipation from her. Longing spread through him, sparking his soul, igniting his heart – she wanted him just as much as he wanted her. Virility fired his manhood, and he realised he hadn't felt like a man for way too long, nor had he made her feel like the desirable woman she most certainly was. Somewhere, somehow, they'd lost each other and, in turn, lost *them*. He had a deep sense that from this moment on, their lives were going to be equivocally changed in the most powerful of ways.

He lightly kissed her neck, right where he knew it drove her wild. 'I'm madly in love with you, my gorgeous wife,' he whispered against her ear. 'And I can't wait to get you home, so I can show you just how much.'

'I'm deeply in love with you, my handsome husband,' she whispered against his chest. She glanced up. 'And I can't wait for you to show me.' Her smile was slow and sexy then, turning her cheek, she pressed closer to him.

With his hands pressing into the dip of her lower back, Charlie rested his chin against her hair as he savoured the scent of her hair and the feel of her against him – she belonged in his arms. They belonged together.

When the slow song ended, it took a moment for him to slip back into reality. 'I'm just going to nip to the bathroom.'

'Okay.' She nodded, her face flushed. 'I'll be right here, waiting for you.'

Not wanting to let go of her hand, he took steps away, but teetered, leaving just their fingers touching. Their fingertips slipped away as he sauntered from the dance floor, through the crowd gathered at the bar and behind the floor-to-ceiling fish tank. He'd forgotten just how fun his and Grace's relationship

could be, and he wanted more of this. From now on, he'd make sure they had a date night once a month. It wasn't a luxury, it was a necessity – their marriage deserved it.

To his frustration, he was met with a line of men needing the toilet just as much as he did, and it was ten minutes before he returned, weaving through the thick of the crowd. The sight he was met with stopped him dead in his tracks – his sworn enemy on his home territory. Rodger Burrows moved quickly – he'd give him that. Charlie watched, temper flaring, as the wretched man twirled *his* wife around the dance floor. And Grace's smile, that radiant smile she'd only ever saved for him, was shining on that worthless scum. Jealousy gripped his insides as he saw Rodger lean into her ear and whisper something. Her head tilting back, Grace met Rodger's predatory gaze for a breath then, with a blink of her lashes, swirled around, laughing.

Charlie's hands balled into fists at his sides as red rage shot through him. This was meant to be a night for *them*, for him to prove to Grace he was still the man she married. He felt as if he'd just been given a swift kick to the gut. The world beneath his feet tilted on its axis as he tried to piece the puzzle together. Grace and Rodger's relationship had not always been platonic, even Blind Freddie would be able to see that. And he didn't like being made a fool of. What hadn't Grace told him? What was she hiding? What did Rodger know that he didn't? He'd never asked because he'd always been so wrapped up in their other problems, or wanting to avoid adding to them. But in this very moment, he felt cheated, insignificant, rejected. And instead of dealing with those unwanted emotions, he did the only thing he knew and ordered a shot of tequila. Followed by another. And another, all the while fuming that Grace hadn't even noticed he'd been gone for almost twenty-five minutes.

When somebody's elbow knocked his fourth shot down the front of him, he cursed out loud and decided he wasn't going to stand there and watch them carry on any longer. With the burn of the alcohol fuelling him into recklessness, he pushed



off from the bar and stormed toward them. Bumping a few people along the way, he didn't even think to apologise – his entire focus was on his detonation point. Gritting his teeth, his jaw muscles clenched, it was all he could do not to give Rodger a left hook to his jaw. Instead, he grabbed Grace's arm, yanking her out of Rodger's reach.

'What do you think you're doing, Charlie?' Grace demanded, her cheeks aflame. 'Well?'

His alcohol-fuelled bluster disintegrated under her glare. 'I want to dance with my wife,' he finally grouched. 'Is there something wrong with that?'

'Too bad, because I don't want to dance with you.' She pulled her wrist from his grasp and, leaning into him, sniffing his shirt. 'Have you been drinking?'

He felt like an absolute chump, but he wasn't about to own up to drinking in front of Rodger. 'No.'

Grace regarded him intently. 'I can see it in your eyes, Charlie.' She huffed and shook her head. 'You're drunk. Go home and sleep it off, before you make an even bigger fool of yourself.'

'Grace, please ...' Dread fuelled his pulse to a wild frenzy. 'I'm not going home without you.'

She folded her arms tightly. 'Why, don't you trust me?' Her slitted gaze warned him not to test her.

Even though he trusted her with his life, Charlie stubbornly remained tight-lipped. If only he could rewind the last half an hour.

'Come on, Charles, everything's above board here.' Rodger's voice carried over Charlie's shoulder. 'I'm a married man, too, mate.' He wagged his wedding finger in Charlie's face. 'No need to get all antsy.'

Charlie couldn't believe what he was hearing. *Mate... antsy.*

*What the hell?*

Charlie turned and fixed his steely gaze on Rodger. ‘Stay away from her, you hear me, Burrows?’ He prodded a finger into Rodger’s chest to hit his demand home. ‘Because I don’t care if you’re married or not, I don’t bloody trust you.’

‘You don’t need to trust me.’ Rodger offered his usual sly smirk and lowered his voice. ‘I would never do anything Grace didn’t want me to, Charles.’

‘It’s Charlie, you shit-stirring bastard.’ Charlie shoved him backward. ‘Now bugger off before I wallop you one.’

Recovering quickly, Rodger rose to the challenge, his fists at the ready. ‘Come on then, Wilson. It’s about time we got this over with.’

‘Rodger, for god’s sake, stop it.’ Grace dived in between the two men. ‘Charlie, that’s enough of this nonsense.’

‘I’ll say when enough is enough, Grace.’ Charlie’s temper raised another few notches – why didn’t she understand what this was doing to him? ‘He’s had this coming for years.’

‘You’re unbelievable! And just when I thought we’d turned a corner.’ Flashing him one last look of disappointment, she stormed toward the exit.

Disregarding his foolish battle with Rodger, Charlie took off after her. The cool air hit him like the firm slap to the face he probably deserved, the sensation somewhat sobering him. Grace was already halfway up the street, nearing where they’d parked, her heels clip-clopping on the cobblestones of Romance Avenue.

‘Grace, stop, please.’ He had to apologise. Had to try and make this right.

When he reached her, she held out her hand. ‘Give me the car keys.’

Her expression wasn’t hard to read but he knew he was in dangerous waters. Retrieving the keys from his pocket, he gingerly passed them over to her. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I don’t want to hear it. Just get in, Charlie.’ She climbed behind the wheel and slammed her door shut. ‘And don’t say a word for the entire drive home.’ She revved the Valiant to life, the tyres skidding as she pulled out of the parking space.

Twenty uncomfortable minutes later, Charlie was following her through their front door. ‘Please Grace, say something.’

She flew up the staircase like a bullet fired and he anxiously trailed her. How was he going to make this right? *God damn it...* He slumped on the edge of their bed, struggling to find words.

Wrestling the clips from her hair, she threw them at him from across the room then kicked off her shoes. ‘How dare you embarrassed me like that, Charlie Wilson.’ She thundered past him and into their ensuite. ‘Everyone at that nightclub will now think you’re a brute.’

‘I don’t care what people think.’ He shrugged. ‘I only care what you think.’ He went to the doorway, leaving a little distance between them as she stripped off and tugged her robe on.

Turning away from the mirror, her hands now on her hips, Grace shook her head. ‘Well, maybe you should care what other people think, Charlie, because it might have stopped you making a complete and utter fool of yourself, and of me.’

‘You’re right. I’m sorry I made a scene.’ Watching her brush her teeth into oblivion, he went back to the bed and sank down to the edge, his gaze to his tightly clasped hands. ‘I’m such a jerk.’

‘Yes, you were.’ With a resounding sigh, she padded over and dropped to her knees in front of him, taking his hand in hers. ‘Listen to me, and listen good.’ Her touch was reassuring and her eyes were now filled with concern. ‘You have to open up and tell me what’s going on inside that head of yours. Because if you don’t, we’re doomed, and I mean it this time.’

He blinked back tears – men weren't meant to cry. 'You don't want to know.'

'I have to know, or it's going to be the death of us.' Her expression filling with pain and misery, she rose and sat down beside him. 'You've been increasingly distant. Do you regret marrying me?'

He desperately wanted to reassure her. 'No, Grace, please believe me, I'm not regretting anything with you.' He dug deep, beneath the layers of guilt and regret to the profound love he harboured for her. 'I'm actually happier than I've ever been in my life.' A white lie, but there was truth behind it – he was happy being her husband, and Hope's father. He just wasn't happy within himself. And he wasn't sure that he'd ever been, or would ever be.

'Is that so?' She gave a sarcastic laugh. 'You could have fooled me.'

'Seriously, you and Hope are my absolute world,' he said with absolute conviction.

Her gaze darted over his face before she turned to the starry view out the window and sighed sadly. 'What am I supposed to think, Charlie? Year after year, I'm helplessly watching my husband shrink into himself.' She brought her tear-filled gaze back to his and stared at him, as if trying to see within his soul.

'What can I do, Grace? I want to make us right again.'

'Once and for all, you have to be honest with me.' She cleared her throat and sat up straighter. 'I want to know everything. After six years of marriage, and some of them quite testing, believe you me, I think you owe me that much.'

'Yes, you're right, I do.' He drew in a deep breath. 'No matter how much I try and move past it, I keep reliving that sickening moment, Grace. The bomb goes off, and my men ...' He tried to choke back a sob, but was helpless to stop it. 'I've tried to let the horror of it go, but I still feel like I should

be back there with my battalion, making them bastards pay for what they did.'

She didn't say anything for a few heartbeats. Then, tipping her head to the side, she asked, 'Making who pay, exactly?'

He didn't have a straightforward answer for her. 'I don't know, Grace, *them*.'

'*Them* who?' Her tone was curt.

'The sick bastards who detonated the bomb that killed some of my men.' His tone bristled with fury that had nothing to do with Grace's line of inquiry, and everything to do with the haunting memories.

Grace shot to her feet and paced over to the window. 'You promised me you were done with the war, Charlie,' she said to the view outside.

'I can't help how much it has scarred me.' He heaved an almighty sigh. 'I'm not sure I'll ever be done with it.'

Her reply was soft. 'I see. Thank you for being honest with me.'

Charlie stood and, going out on a limb, came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. 'You know I'm no good with words.' He indicated with the slightest of pressure on her hips for her to turn and face him, and it gave him all the hope that he needed when she did. 'How about you let me show you just how much I love you?'

\* \* \*

Even after their turbulent night, Grace found herself wanting nothing more as she tumbled into that baby-blue gaze. As hard as their marriage could too often be, and as much as she sometimes contemplated a life without him by her side, Charlie owned her heart. And right this minute, she wanted to show him that. The hunger behind his kiss rendered her speechless, and her robe dropped from her shoulders as she instinctively melted into the hard planes of him.

Charlie's mouth was hot and insistent as he trailed kisses all the way from her collarbone down to her navel and hips, between her thighs then finally, as Charlie went to his knees, to the very place she longed for him to savour. His sensual touch unleashed her wild side, and she bit her lip to stop from crying out in pleasure.

Resting back on the window ledge, she closed her eyes and gave in to the delicious quivers throughout her body. After such a terrible ending to their first romantic night in ages, this shouldn't feel so good, so right, so natural. It had been so long since she'd allowed him to touch her in such an intimate way, and now she was allowing herself to freefall into him. It felt like coming home to the softest of landing places. Moans escaped her parted lips as he circled and suckled, plunging his tongue then pausing to tease her, every single movement precise, meaningful, momentous. This man knew her, inside and out. He knew exactly what she liked and what drove her wild, and that incredible insight into her deepest yearnings made her want him all the more.

With Charlie's acquainted touch rekindling the dying embers of their love, her heart, mind, body and soul fired to blazing life as he built her to a rising climax. On the verge of ecstasy, she pressed against his mouth, gasping in the salty sea air drifting through the open window. He didn't stop until she shuddered shamelessly against his hot mouth, her fingers gripped in his hair and her head high in the clouds. As she came back to earth and caught her breath, he lingered one last kiss against the heat of her most secret of places.

'I want you inside me, Charlie. I want to feel at one with you.' Her ravenous demand came from a place deep inside of her, one that longed for far more than just a physical release.

He said nothing as he rose, lifting her from the ground and carrying her over to their bed. His gaze filled with profound longing, he laid her down gently, stripped off and climbed on top of her. Soft light spilled from the lamp on the bedside, igniting his features, making his already chiselled jaw seem more angled, his dimples deeper. Her hands explored the fine

scattering of hair on his chest, over his broad shoulders, and down to the muscular ripples of his stomach.

They found each other's lips again as he slid deep inside her, and then stopped. His eyes searching hers, the blue seemed to deepen and darken. 'With every single beat of my heart, I love you all the more, Grace.' He moved a tendril of hair from her face. 'Always have, and forever will.'

The heat and need in his eyes matched hers. 'Oh, Charlie. I love you too.' Her voice was raspy as she almost lost all control.

Moving slowly, he tenderly stroked her insides, pacing himself as he gave her time to catch him until they were moving in perfect union. The way he held her, the way he possessed, the way he was making love to her, made her feel so feminine and powerful and safe, and so loved. If any doubts remained about just how much she loved him, about whether they were going to make it together in this life, they were conquered by his tenderness, affection and attention. Taking one of her legs, he angled himself so he could go even deeper. Then, rocking forward, he increased the pressure where he knew she needed it most, his chest brushing up against her breasts with every measured stroke. Curling her hands into the sheets, she arched in euphoric pleasure, gasping and writhing beneath him as he transported her into a plethora of stars. His muscles tensed and she knew he was nearing the ledge she'd already tumbled over once, and was about to again. Groaning, he buried his head into her neck as he neared the threshold. He was close; she was even closer. Their fingers intertwined as they soared that little bit higher then, losing herself to all that was him, they plunged over the edge of rapture together, rolling waves of pleasure stealing her breath as he cried out in gratification.

Their hearts and souls bound together, Charlie rolled to the side, taking her with him, and they nestled into one another as they caught their breath, their legs entwined, and the sheets tangled around them.

Luxuriating in the afterglow of rediscovering one another, Grace smiled softly as Charlie placed a tender kiss on her back. She snuggled closer, wanting not an inch between them. Satisfied, silent and comfortably snug, she didn't want him to ever let her go. This was the *them* she'd reminisced over, and now distinctly remembered. And as her heart's rhythm evened out and Charlie's arms tightened a little more around her, she felt herself drifting into the most blissful sleep, where their life as a family was effortless, their future was peaceful, and their love was the only thing they needed.



# CHAPTER

## 12

1985

Weddings did weird things to people. Especially the lucky ones who'd felt the throes of passionate can't-breathe-without-each-other kind of love.

*Well, we certainly had that.*

The Saturday night she and Jenny had been planning for almost a year had been a picture of perfection. Sitting in the sparkling clean lavatory of the swanky hotel, Grace wished she was twenty-three again, waiting for the moment when Charlie would pull in and whip her off to somewhere private, where they'd kiss and laugh and tell each other how in love they were. Before they made all the promises they had broken.

She sighed sadly. Hindsight was doing her no favours. Hips and back aching, Grace waddled out from what felt like her tenth pee in the past hour when a swift kick brought her hand to the monstrous mound of her belly. As she rubbed it in a bid to soothe her babies, she imagined her two boys snuggled inside. Only five more weeks. She was excited to finally meet each bundle of joy, and to hold them against her bosom. Charlie was excited too, as far as she could tell. She couldn't remember the last time they had sat down and talked. Her business was booming and Charlie was climbing the ranks at the prison, going from a corrections officer to prison shift manager. It meant more pay, but also more hours. They had a goal to build a future that would give their children financial stability, and they were both giving their all to make it so, but it had its downsides. A relationship needed nurturing, and they just never seemed to find enough time. Grace often found herself lonely and lost without him. She couldn't help but feel that, once again, little by little, they were helplessly drifting apart.

The bass of the five-piece band carried throughout the hotel and echoed into the ladies bathroom. Pausing in front of the mirror to wash her hands, she glanced at her reflection. Her make-up was doing a fine job of covering up the mixture of high emotions and utter exhaustion. So much had happened the past eight months – it had been a whirlwind of highs and lows. With the underlying tension between her and Charlie, she was relieved to be able to focus wholly and solely on Jenny and Marty’s special day. Their moving declarations of love had brought her to tears, even more so with the hormones that were raging throughout her body. Times two. She’d learnt of late that once she started tearing up, she found it almost impossible to stop, and today had been an emotionally charged day.

Toddling from the toilets and past the chattering guests, Grace found her seat at the bridal party’s designated table and sat rather clumsily. Gracefulness wasn’t an option for an almost-eight-months-pregnant woman.

With precious time to herself, after an extremely busy day, she found herself reflecting over the past year. She had no idea where the time had gone – the days, weeks and months had rolled into each other. Some of the times were easy and effortless, others were bewildering and hard, and in between it all, snippets of sweetest of memories were made as she, Charlie and Hope weaved their way through life.

A waiter offered her a glass of champagne. She looked from him to her rotund stomach and grinned. ‘This isn’t from too much food, so I don’t think that would be a good idea.’

The young man followed her gaze and smiled sheepishly. ‘Oh, yes, sorry.’ He turned a bright shade of red. ‘Would you like me to get you an orange juice, or maybe a nice cup of tea?’

Grace felt sorry for his awkwardness – she’d been hoping to entice a chuckle. ‘An orange juice would be lovely, thank you, but only when you get a minute.’

‘No problem, I’ll be back soon.’ And off he dashed.

Glancing around the elaborate ballroom, Grace looked for Charlie, trying to make sure he wasn't anywhere near Rodger Burrows. She tried to block out the memory of the rehearsal dinner, where Rodger and Charlie had been at each other's throats. She wouldn't allow their petty feud to ruin Jenny's special day. Their battle was getting old and everyone was tiring of it, especially her. One said something, the other responded, neither ever wanted to accept it was their fault. She was equally mad with Rodger, but she didn't have to live with him. That was his wife's job.

Candelabras and roses adorned each table, and long silk drapes hung as a backdrop to the dance floor. Jenny's wedding day was even more beautiful than they'd envisioned. Their entrée had consisted of prawn cocktails and warm baked bread, and the main course had been an absolute winner – an alternating drop of juicy roast beef with all the trimmings and a creamy chicken Kiev with honeyed carrots, green beans, and potatoes dauphinoise. All very elegant and trendy. As for the cake, she'd been in charge and created a spectacular four-tiered masterpiece with a different flavour for each layer – vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and Jenny's favourite of caramel for the top. It had taken her two days to make and the guests only half an hour to devour, but her efforts had been worth it. The smiles on Jenny and Marty's faces had been priceless.

The compere announced it was time for the bridal waltz. To the tune of Foreigner's 'I Want To Know What Love Is', she watched with a buoyed heart as Marty spun his wife around the dance floor, the pair of them looking more in love than ever. Grace's joy was punctured by the realisation that the matron of honour and the best man were to dance next – which meant she was going to be dancing with Rodger.

She looked to Charlie, now back beside her. 'We were like them, many years ago.'

'What do you mean? We're still like them.' His charming smile once would have curbed her niggling doubts.

She offered a tight smile. 'If you say so.'

‘I know so.’ He took her hand. ‘What’s wrong, Grace? You’ve been short with me all day.’

‘Not now, Charlie.’ She wasn’t going to hash out the grievances of her marriage at her best friend’s wedding.

‘Damn it, Grace, you make me feel like I can never do anything right, no matter how hard I try.’

She shot him a narrow-eyed, sharp glance. ‘I said not now, Charlie. Please.’

He threw his hands in the air. ‘Then when, Grace?’

‘Later.’

Charlie shot to his feet. ‘I’m going to get another drink.’

‘Yeah, you do that,’ she replied drily. ‘Just try not to get too plastered. I really don’t want a repeat of the wedding rehearsal.’

He scowled, the hurt written all over his face. ‘You know that wasn’t my fault, Grace.’

‘It was both your faults, Charlie,’ she huffed.

‘Think what you like. I’m done trying to convince you otherwise.’ He stomped away in the direction of the bar.

Then, before she could ponder it any longer, Rodger appeared at her side. ‘Looks like it’s our time to shine, Grace.’ He held out his hand and she allowed him to help her to her feet.

‘I’ve got to warn you, Rodger, I have two left feet at the moment, with these two rascals.’ She patted where her twins were tucked up.

Rodger smiled as he carefully led her to the dance floor. ‘I can handle you stepping on my toes, Grace.’

Placing a hand at her waist, his other hand enfolded her fingers as if she were made of the finest of glass. They swayed around the dance floor and although Rodger appeared to be enjoying the moment, Grace felt her anxiety accelerate. When

she caught Alison Burrows' eye, Rodger's wife smiled from her perch at the bar, but it wasn't genuine or warm. As for Charlie, he would be watching from some dark corner, his fist and jaw clenched tightly.

Then Grace saw Jenny, grinning and radiant, and decided to allow herself this moment, for her friend's sake. She took note of the way Rodger held her hand so tenderly, but couldn't help but wish it were Charlie's instead. Suddenly, with hot tears threatening, she was forced to close her eyes for the briefest of moments. It only took a few seconds to appear calm and collected on the outside. Lucky she'd had so much practice pretending everything was fine.

None too soon, other dancers began to join them, relieving Grace of her duty. She forced a smile up at Rodger. 'I'm going to go and put my feet up.'

Rodger released her and quirked the faintest glimmer of a smile. 'Okay, Grace.'

At the end of the evening, Charlie was swaying on his feet, so Grace drove home. Not a word was spoken between them on the drive, when they arrived home, or when she made her way upstairs to go to bed. If she said anything to him right now, it would be in anger, and she didn't want to go there. Not again.

After tossing and turning for what felt like ages, she finally fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

A sudden wave of nausea pulled her to the surface of her dream, and an excruciating pain slammed her back into reality. Her hands instinctively came to her belly. Dizziness assaulted her as she tried to sit up.

*Oh god no.* Was she losing her babies?

Rolling to her side, she reached for Charlie in the darkness. 'Charlie. Are you awake?' She quickly realised that, as usual, he wasn't even there.

Manoeuvring her feet over the side of the bed, she tried to stand up, but a buckling agony had her crumbling back to the

mattress.

The stabbing pains were becoming more piercing, fiercer. Something was horribly wrong. Grabbing the phone from her bedside, she dialled for an ambulance as she fought to take deep breaths as crippling spasms rippled through her.

‘Charlie!’ she cried out, once, twice, three times.

What felt like forever later, flashing red lights approached then flicked over the walls of the bedroom.

Charlie appeared at last, looking bewildered. ‘What’s happening?’ Blinking into the lights spiralling around the room, he finally noticed Grace was hunched over the side of the bed. ‘Oh my god, Grace, are you okay?’ He rushed to her and dropped to his knees.

Grace panted through the pain. ‘Something’s terribly wrong. I called out for you.’ Smudges of dirt streaked his face, and he reeked of alcohol. ‘Where in the hell were you?’

His expression pinched and he cast his gaze to the floor.

‘For heaven’s sake, go and let the paramedics in,’ she cried out as a contraction gripped her insides.

A few tense hours passed until Grace was wheeled back into her room, after a final round of tests. The pain had eased now, and there’d been no sign of bleeding.

Standing near the window, Charlie waited for the nurse to get Grace settled, and then came to her bedside. ‘How did it all go?’

Grace felt such anger and hurt, she could barely look at him. ‘The doctor wants me to have lots of rest leading up to the birth. He says I’ve been overdoing things.’

Charlie’s hands came to hers. ‘I’m so relieved everything’s going to be okay.’

‘Okay?’ she echoed. ‘Really, Charlie? *Nothing* is okay right now.’ Grace shot a glare at him. ‘We almost lost our babies and once again, you were too drunk to be around to

help me.’ Unable to look at him any longer, she turned her gaze back out the hospital window. ‘If you don’t pull yourself together, I’m going to leave you.’ She choked back a sob. ‘Our children need a stable home, with stable parents. Please don’t leave me with no choice.’

Dishevelled, but sobered up, Charlie dropped his gaze to the floor. ‘I understand.’

His lukewarm response made Grace angrier. Why didn’t he want to fight for them? Why couldn’t he do whatever was needed to make things right? She wanted to scream at him, to hit his chest so he could harbour some of the hurt she carried within hers. She so desperately wanted to be free to love him, free of all this mess and hurt. Instead, she zipped her lips shut tight. She needed to try to stay calm – her unborn babies were all that mattered right now.

‘I’m sorry, Grace.’ The dark stubble shadowing Charlie’s chin grazed against her cheek he leant in and kissed her. ‘I love you.’

Biting back tears, she remained silent. It wasn’t that she didn’t love him – it was that she loved him too much, and she was afraid she would never be able to walk away from him.

\* \* \*

Bullets flew through the darkness, fired from a gun a million miles away. Desperate to protect his family, Charlie raced against the revolving world, over wide oceans and sparse stretches of land, seeking the enemy out. A bomb detonated, spewing earth skywards and limbs of men sideways.

He awoke, shaking and drenched in sweat, thankful to be alive, but forever in the grip of those who no longer were. Rolling to his side, he willed himself back to sleep. Ten frustrating minutes later, he gave up. There’d be no more sleep for him tonight.

He carefully climbed from the bed so as not to wake Grace, and tiptoed out of the bedroom, avoiding certain timber

floorboards. Many nights over many years had taught him which ones creaked.

Although he'd got a firm hold over his days, ten long years after leaving the army, nights were still his weakness. When awake, he had control over his mind, especially at the prison, where he needed to be on point, but asleep, it was completely out of his hands. There was unfinished business hiding in the shadows of his subconscious. But what in the hell could he do to put an end to it?

Padding into the bathroom, he flicked the light on and splashed cold water over his face. Catching his reflection, he grimaced. Bleary-eyed and unshaven, he looked a right mess. He had to find a way, once and for all, to put all his broken pieces back together. But it was way easier said than done.

Heading outside, he found a dark corner of the backyard and sparked his lighter. He took an impatient drag of his cigarette and, thinking better of it, stubbed it out beneath his slipper. Then clawing tension had him lighting another. Angling his head, he sent the puff of smoke skyward in spirals. He was so tired of feeling perpetually lost, exhausted from the fact that all that waited for him on the other side of slumber was another nightmare. But after coming close to losing their babies, and not being in a state to help Grace in her greatest time of need because he'd been drunk, he wasn't about to try and drink the haunting images away this time. He was going to hit it head on, and one way or another, he was going to make himself whole again. Dread tightened his throat and twisted the pit of his stomach as Grace's words from three nights ago circled his mind like a vulture flying above its next meal.

*If you don't pull yourself together, I'm going to leave you ... don't leave me no choice.*

She'd never threatened to leave him before, and the thought of losing her was more terrifying than the nightmares his past brought into his present.

This weekend, he would put on his Sunday best, and join her at church. Having given up on god years ago, maybe it was



time to return to his faith. It was the only thing he had left, a last resort. Grace had given him no choice, and he was glad of the fact. It was time to become the man he'd always longed to be, for her.

# CHAPTER

## 13

**December 1988**

It was a typical Sunday morning in the Wilson household, with both Charlie and Grace trying to beat the clock to take some precious time out together. Charlie had long ago given up begging. There just weren't enough hours in the day, as Grace had always reminded him, and if there was the rare opportunity for an interlude, she was simply too exhausted to enjoy a stolen moment of intimacy. Charlie did his best to understand. He believed it was imperative to their relationship to retain some level of private tenderness, but he wasn't about to pressure her – he didn't want to be another thorn in her side. But god, how he missed their unbridled moments. Their date nights had become virtually non-existent since the birth of their unexpected, cherished fourth child, Ava Lilly. Hell, half an hour spent chatting over coffee was unusual.

Taking a few minutes out in the only room where he got a smidgen of privacy – the upstairs loo – Charlie flushed then quickly veered into the bathroom. He needed to get a move on or Grace would be cross. Again.

The children's happy squeals carried upstairs and Nugget's incessant barking from the backyard only compounded his smashing headache. Sticking his head out the bathroom window, he watched three of their laying hens race along the fence, tailed by the playful golden retriever. Charlie gruffly told their beloved family pet to stop being a scallywag and behave himself before heading over the sink to wash his hands and rinse his mouth out with some Listerine. With no handtowel in sight, he resorted to wiping his wet hands on his shorts.

Catching his reflection in the vanity mirror, he grimaced at the black bags beneath his red-rimmed eyes. If only he could

enjoy a sleep-in ... but life didn't allow for such luxuries. One day, he kept telling himself, when they were older and less under the pump, they'd be able to turn their focus back to one another.

'Charlie, are you coming back downstairs anytime soon?' Grace's soprano voice carried up to him. 'The washing doesn't take that long to grab, and as you know I've got my hands full down here.'

Charlie popped his head over the banister, meeting her frazzled gaze. 'Yes, sorry. I'll be two minutes.'

'You said that five minutes ago.' Her reply was curt. 'I could do with some help down here, right now.' She disappeared again.

Charlie sagged against the banister. He'd had a tumultuous night shift, spent trying to apprehend three prisoners who'd started a brawl in the mess, and stabbed another inmate with a homemade shiv. His father and husband roles shouldn't seem so hard by comparison. He heaved a weary sigh and made his way down the stairs to the laundry. Dumping the basket of dirty clothes he'd gathered from the children's bedroom floors into the washing machine, he tipped a capful of liquid and the same of softener into the designated ampules and turned the cycle to start.

He took a breath, and then another – tired didn't even scratch the surface of how worn-out he was. If only he could hit the pause button on their life, just for one blissful day. Rubbing his temples, he contemplated just how crazy it was that he missed his wife so much when they lived beneath the same roof. The only time she seemed to have for him was whatever crumbs she had left at the end of each day. And he would always find time for her. *That's* what he found most upsetting.

Bending to pick up Hope's Rubik's cube on his trek down the hallway – he had tried and tried to complete the darn thing and couldn't – he placed it on the hallway table beside her Walkman. Post-it notes were stuck to the wall above the key

bowl – *drop videos back, hairdresser Monday 4pm, car service Friday 9am, dentist 4pm Thursday*. So many need-to-dos and must-dos, but no want-to-dos. Charlie almost wrote his own note, *date night Friday 7pm*, but stopped himself. Grace would fly off the handle if he asked Jenny and Marty to watch the kids because, as she firmly told him the last time he did it, four kids were a handful at the best of times, and especially at bedtime.

He strode into the kitchen, a man on a mission, but found himself at a loss as to what job he should tackle – the dishes, feeding the twins, entertaining sweet Ava? MTV played from the kitchen television, and Whitney Houston’s ‘I Wanna Dance with Somebody’ competed with the loud clatter of kitchen noises. The microwave came to a halt and beeped three times. Grace flung the door open and retrieved a bowl of porridge, with their newest addition balanced on her hip. Ava tugged at her mum’s loose hair as Grace blustered around the kitchen, banging and slamming everything she touched. In the twins’ boosters, side by side at the dining table, Hudson and Bryn thumped their spoons against their plates. Charlie was sure there was more scrambled egg in their laps, squashed into their hair and thrown to the floor than in their bellies.

‘Boys, that’s enough!’ Depositing Ava on the floor, Grace fired her warning at her three-year-old sons as she straightened then stormed to the sink, retrieving the boys’ washcloths.

Falling silent, the boys scowled at each other, as if weighing up their next move. Then they began to cry. Grace grumbled beneath her breath as she made a beeline for them.

‘Here, let me do it, love.’ Charlie turned to Hudson and Bryn, pulling funny faces as he wiped them down. They giggled madly, and it warmed his heart to no end to see their happy faces.

The back door slammed and Hope skipped into the room, her face and dress covered in mud, an equally dirty Nugget eagerly in tow. ‘Can I have one of the chocolate cupcakes we

made yesterday, Mum? I'm absolutely starving,' she said right before blowing a massive pink bubble with her gum.

Lifting Hudson from his booster, Charlie stifled a chuckle as the bubble popped and Hope tried to pick strawberry Hubba Bubba from where it had burst all over her face.

Hands on hips, Grace slid to a stop in front of her daughter. 'My god, child, look at the state of you.' She fruitlessly tried to tidy Hope's mop of chaotic hair. 'You know we're meant to be going to town soon,' she tutted. 'You're going to have to have another bath, and get changed.'

'Sorry, Mum.' Successfully getting all the gum back into her mouth, she looked at Nugget, who now sat devotedly at her feet, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. 'Nugget made me do it.'

'Do what, exactly?' Grace tipped her head, her left brow rising in interrogation.

'Slip over in the puddle.' Eyes wide, Hope's expression was deadly serious.

'Did he now?'

'Yes.' Hope nodded exaggeratedly. 'We were playing with the ball and then it landed in the water, and then ...' She threw her hands up in the air, '... you can guess what happened next.'

'Knowing you like I do, I think you *chose* to play in the puddle, Hope.' Grace folded her arms. 'And that was very naughty, given you are in your good dress.' She pointed out the doorway. 'Upstairs, now, and get cleaned up please. Then you can come back downstairs and have some fruit for morning tea. There'll be plenty of opportunity for sugar at the party.'

'Okay, Mum.' Her bottom lip dropping and her chin wobbling, Hope's gaze was downcast as she shuffled past Charlie.

‘She wouldn’t have been able to drag her feet any more if she tried,’ he said, once Hope was out of earshot, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

Grace made a humph sound as she disappeared into the walk-in pantry. ‘Can you please take the boys upstairs and bathe them? Then get them in the outfits I have at the end of their beds, so I can at least try and find some time to look somewhat presentable for the barbecue.’

Halfway through the feat of catching a grape in the air, much to the twins’ delight, Charlie almost choked when it landed in his mouth. ‘What barbecue?’ he garbled.

Grace reappeared with two Tupperware containers and a don’t-mess-with-me glare.

He pulled an oh-crap face.

‘Damn it, Charlie!’ She dumped the containers on the bench. ‘I told you on Wednesday that the Girl Guides are having a barbecue this afternoon to raise money for their field trip.’ She sucked in a sharp breath, her gaze narrowing. ‘And don’t even think of trying to get out of it this time. It’s a family event and we’re *all* going.’

‘Oh, bugger, yes, you did.’ Charlie mentally slapped himself. Between the bedlam of his job and the chaos of their home life, Hope’s Girl Guide gathering had totally slipped his mind. ‘I’m so sorry I forgot. I’ll go and get the boys sorted, and you take all the time you need to get ready.’

‘Thank you, Charlie.’ She breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief as she began plonking delectable-looking chocolate cupcakes and her famous macadamia and white chocolate biscuits into the bright orange containers she’d paid an arm and leg for at Jenny’s latest Tupperware party. ‘I still have to bake a batch of brownies, too, I ran out of time last night. I’ll whip a batch up now and then go jump in the shower.’

‘I can help with the brownies, in between wrestling these two munchkins into their Sunday finest,’ he said, over his

shoulder, as he ushered the twins from where they were now playing under the dining table.

‘No, all good.’ She flashed him a teeny smile. ‘Trust me, you’re going to need all the luck and time in the world, wrangling that pair of squirming worms into their clothes.’ Her playful cadence lightened Charlie’s heart a little. ‘And they’re both so quick now. One minute they’re right under my feet, and the next, gone.’ She clicked her fingers. ‘Like a pair of little magicians.’

‘Tell me about it,’ he agreed with a chuckle.

‘I just did.’ Her smile spread to her eyes.

That’s when he knew she was genuinely happy. Charlie almost danced on the spot – it was so nice to take part in their banter. Buoyed by her unexpected playfulness, he tried to take the opportunity to tell her how much he loved her and missed her. But he missed his chance as a crash sounded. Ava tumbled backward on the floor from where she’d been quietly balancing on the bottom shelf of the fridge.

‘Oh, my goodness, sweetheart, are you okay?’ Charlie rushed to her aid.

Ava thrust forward her chubby little hand to exhibit the cheese stick she had acquired. ‘Baba.’

‘Ava, darling! You have to be more careful.’ Grace gently stroked Ava’s face while checking her head for bumps. ‘I’ve told you time and time again not to climb on things, you little monkey.’

Squishing the cheese through her fingers, Ava grinned a threetoothed smile. ‘Lala.’

‘You’re a tough cookie, just like your mumma, aren’t you?’ Sweeping Ava into his arms, he gave her a cuddle then settled her on his hip.

‘Thank goodness she didn’t hurt herself.’ Heaving a breath, Grace leant against the kitchen bench and rubbed her face. ‘The last thing we need today is a trip to the hospital for

stitches.’ Her voice trembled and she tipped her head back. ‘I seriously feel like I’m at my wit’s end, Charlie.’ Meeting his gaze, hers was filled with unshed tears.

His heart aching at seeing her so upset, Charlie plonked Ava down with her brothers, who were now playing with a very patient Nugget. ‘You’re pushing yourself way too much, my love.’ He placed gentle hands upon Grace’s tense shoulders. ‘You *can* say no to volunteering so much of your time to the Girl Guides, Grace.’

‘Don’t patronise me.’ She shrugged his touch off. ‘One of us has to devote time to the kids’ activities.’

‘I’m not patronising you, Grace, I’m trying to look after you.’ He had to fight not to raise his voice – this battle of who did what was so tiresome. ‘And what’s that supposed to mean anyway? I devote as much time as I can to our kids, and to you, for that matter.’

‘You actually believe that, don’t you?’ Her icy tone cut him like a knife. ‘The black and white of it, Charlie, is that you’re not here a lot of the time, and I’m left keeping the ship afloat. And then when you are here, you might as well not be, because you’re always tired.’

Hating the way she was making him feel like a failure when he was trying so hard not to be, Charlie took a calming breath before responding. ‘My shifts are twelve hours long, six days a week, Grace. It’s a forty-five-minute drive each way, as you well know. You think I like being away so much? I’d give it up in a heartbeat, if we could afford it.’ He huffed an exasperated breath. ‘And forgive me if I’m a little tired on my days off, but my job is very demanding, physically, mentally *and* emotionally,’ he added, regretting it as soon as it came out of his mouth.

‘For god’s sake, Charlie, you don’t have a monopoly on being tired. I don’t get days off. I have a business that’s extremely taxing, as well as trying to keep up with being a mother, a wife, a housekeeper and keeping up appearances with everything else.’ Blinking faster, she turned her back to



him and rested her hands against the sink. ‘This is getting beyond a joke.’ As she cursed beneath her breath, her shoulders slumped and her gaze remained out the window. ‘We don’t even have time to make love anymore, Charlie. What’s happening to us?’

*Is she being serious right now?* He was the one who was constantly knocked back when he tried to initiate intimacy. He’d forgotten the last time it had been her trying to show him any kind of love ...

Charlie pushed down the whirl of irritation and hurt to catch his thoughts, and curb his desire to tell her exactly what he was thinking – tit-for-tat wasn’t the way out of this mess.

‘Do you not have *anything* to say, Charlie?’ She didn’t turn to look at him.

Charlie chose the pathway of blind optimism. ‘You’re right, Grace, we’re both under the pump, but I’m sure we’ll work this out, like we always do.’ Closing the small distance, which felt like an almighty chasm, he went to wrap his arms around her, to comfort her as best he could.

‘Please don’t touch me.’ She spun and stepped out of his reach, her arms wrapping around herself instead. ‘I can’t go on pretending everything is okay between us, Charlie, because in my eyes, and heart, it most certainly is not.’

‘I don’t know what to say to that, Grace.’ He hated how distant and closed-off she was from him. Gone were the days where she would wrap her arms around him when she needed a shoulder to lean on, or cry on, or to raise her up in celebration, with a smile as bright as sunshine, her eyes so full of love for him.

‘I don’t think there is anything you can say that would fix things, Charlie.’ She sighed, shaking her head. ‘It’s going to take actions, not words, for me to see light at the end of this tunnel we’re in.’

‘I think you and I are on different tracks, to be honest.’ His headache felt as if it were about to morph into a migraine. He

squeezed the bridge of his nose. ‘I feel like you’re falling out of love with me, Grace, and it’s terrifying to me.’ There, he’d finally said it. ‘I don’t want to lose you, but I don’t know what I have to do to keep you, not when I’m already doing my darndest to be a good husband and father.’

Grace’s mouth opened and closed, but then she took a deep breath, nodding as if assessing all that he’d just said. ‘You’re probably feeling like that because, at times, I *do* feel like I am falling out of love,’ she said quietly. ‘And I don’t want to feel that way, Charlie. I’m doing my best.’ Her gaze sadder than he’d ever seen before, she dropped her eyes to the floor. ‘I’ve supported you through everything, Charlie. Your battle with drinking, your nightmares, when you lost your job at the car yard, and through a job that takes you away from me and the kids a lot of the time, and now ... well, I suppose I’ve reached my limit of putting everything and everyone else before myself.’ Her voice was faint, and filled with grief. ‘I have to do that with the kids, but then ... I draw the line.’

*Was she going to leave him?*

There’d be no turning back from this. Charlie knew it in his bones. He’d never seen her so broken, nor felt her so distant. ‘I know you’ve been there for me, Grace, though thick and thin, which is why I’m working so hard now, to try and make it up to you.’

‘I know, Charlie. I really do. But with four kids to contend with and my business demanding so much of me, I need you to be here for *me*.’ Bringing her gaze back to his, her eyes shimmered with more tears. ‘I’ve not been my happy self for quite a while now, but that’s only because I’ve had to be the strong one for so long. It’s taken a toll.’

Panic fuelled Charlie’s pulse into a frenzy. ‘I know, Grace, which is why I’ve taken two weeks of leave over Easter, so I can be here for you and the kids.’

‘And I’m appreciative of that, but what happens when you go back? I’m left once again to hold the fort here, and at the

teashop.’ She shook her head, her eyes briefly closing. ‘There’s just not enough of me to go around anymore.’

Charlie felt so helpless – a sensation he’d felt throughout their marriage. ‘I truly am so sorry, Grace, but I’m working so hard so we can all have a good life.’

‘How many times are you going to apologise for the same things, Charlie?’ A deep weariness permeated her voice.

Charlie felt as if he was backed into a corner. ‘I suppose until you accept my apology.’

‘So, it’s my fault now?’ she snapped.

‘No, I didn’t mean it like that.’ Feeling like an absolute failure, both as a husband and a father, he looked to the floor and blinked back the sudden threat of tears. Was she ever going to give him a break and stop holding the past against him? ‘I need you to stop making me feel like a disappointment and start making me feel like the man you fell in love with.’ Frustration hardened his tone, and he instantly regretted speaking to her so harshly.

She looked at him as though he’d just stabbed her in the heart. ‘I’m trying to do just that, Charlie. You don’t make it easy.’ Her expression softening, she moved closer and brought her hand to his arm.

Enough was enough. He was losing out in their relationship too. It was his turn to step out of reach, before he said any more – he’d only regret words said in hurt and anger. ‘I really need to get some fresh air. Then I’ll go and get the boys ready.’ And he hastily made his exit, before the tears that were building fell.

\* \* \*

They made it through the Girl Guides barbecue without another word spoken. The drive home was equally uncomfortable, although the chatter of the kids helped to ease the awkwardness.

After making sure to help to put the little ones to bed, Charlie left Moonflower Acres, and his family, behind just as the sun had begun to set, steeping the palm-tree lined footpath in shadow. Since their quarrel, he hadn't been able to shake the pit of dread in his stomach, nor could he ease the burning desire for a drink to numb the torture of Grace's words. He didn't know how he could try any harder. The pressure she was putting on him was unfair, even as he understood the pressure she was under too.

*I can't lose her and the kids.*

Tightening his grip on the steering wheel, white lines rushed beneath the tyres of the family sedan as he made his way to the only place he could seek comfort in private. Before he knew it, he was at his grandparents' graves, tears streaming down his face as he spilled the chaos of his life to their ghosts.

Through the gloom of twilight, voices suddenly carried across the cemetery. Turning, he spotted two familiar faces. Panic rose within his chest. What in the hell were they doing here, especially at this time of the day? He didn't want to face Rodger and Alison Burrows right now, but it was too late to duck behind the tombstones.

Catching Charlie's gaze, Rodger made a path straight for him, like a seeker bomb hunting its target. His wife chose to stop in her tracks, a bunch of yellow daffodils in her hands.

Rodger stopped two feet from him. 'Wilson.'

'Burrows,' Charlie replied, not bothering to stand. He had no respect for this man.

A short silence permeated the thickening atmosphere. A curlew called out, its eerie cry echoing.

Growing impatient with Rodger's intrusion, Charlie huffed. 'What do you want?'

Arms folding, Rodger glared down at him. 'You made a vow that you'd take care of her, and from what I hear, you're doing a crap job of that.'

Rage fuelling him, Charlie shot to his feet, coming eye to eye with the man he hated with every fibre of his being. ‘What business of yours is my marriage?’

Rodger shrugged. ‘Grace is a friend.’

Charlie wasn’t in the mood for Rodger’s games. ‘Get the hell out of my face.’

‘Or what?’ Rodger gave Charlie a little shove in the chest.

His fists clenching at his sides, and his jaw clenching, Charlie grunted. ‘I’m warning you, Burrows, don’t start anything with me right now. I’m not in the mood for your bullshit.’

‘This isn’t bullshit, it’s me looking out for Grace.’

Charlie’s breath caught in his throat. ‘Focus on your own wife and marriage, and stay out of our lives, you son of a bitch.’

Rodger raised his fists. ‘Come on, let’s get this over with, once and for all.’

‘Rodger, don’t.’ Alison arrived at her husband’s side. She stood between the two men, her back to Charlie. ‘I came to pay my respects to my nanna, not to yet again watch you two work out who has more testosterone.’

‘Sorry, Ali. You’re right.’ Rodger turned his attention back to Charlie. ‘I’ll leave you be then, Charles.’

‘Yeah, you do that.’ Shoving his hands deeply into his pockets was all Charlie could do to stop himself from grabbing Rodger by the scruff of his shirt, and wiping that damn smirk off his damn face once and for all.

The confrontation left a sour taste in his mouth, and Charlie found himself in a packed bar, his second drink in hand and his boiling temper starting to ease. Chucking the shot of whisky back, he smacked his empty glass down. ‘Another.’

Charlie could feel himself spiralling, but he’d learnt the hard way to put the brakes on before he slammed into the

darkness of it – his next drink would be his last. He'd make sure of it. Just one more, then he'd go for a walk along the beach and sober up before heading home.

'You sure about having another, Charles?' Sliding in beside him like the snake he was, Rodger wore a smartarse smile that was more a sneer.

'Oh, for god's sake, not you again.' Rolling his eyes, Charlie deliberately turned on his bar stool so he could look the other way.

'Uh-huh, me again. And don't you worry, I'll be popping past Moonflower Acres on my way home to let Grace know that her husband is back to his old ways.'

Spinning in his seat, Charlie shot the man a cautioning gaze. 'You stay the hell out of my business, Burrows.' He pointed a finger in Rodgers direction, but made sure not to lay it on him. 'Or there'll be trouble.'

'Come on then, Charles. Bring it.' For the second time that day, Rodger shaped up to him.

Fighting the urge to do just that, Charlie felt the crashing impact of something across his shoulderblades, and through the shock and pain, saw part of the pool cue that had just been broken over his back fall to the floor. Before he could recover, some burly guy's fist connected with his jaw. Flying back, his breath was knocked out of him when he slammed to the floor. After the fleeting dizzying stars had cleared, he saw his assailant and groaned in recognition – an ex-prisoner who'd been let out only last week.

'Hey, Wilson, remember me?' Barry the Brute sank a boot into his ribs, and Charlie groaned.

How could Charlie forget the tattooed tower of muscle? All this guy had done in jail was stir trouble, and they'd butted heads countless times.

As he rolled out of the way, Charlie's military training kicked in. He jumped to his feet. Someone called 'Fight!' Patrons scattered left and right.

Rodger was nowhere to be seen. *Coward.*

Charlie didn't want to fight, but he had to defend himself. Adrenaline rushing, he came out swinging. There was no way he was going to let this scumbag get it over him. The ex-con threw another quick, well-aimed uppercut that sent him stumbling to the side. Pain pounded through his head, but he pushed through it. His left fist connected with the man's cheek and his right sank into the guy's stomach. They exchanged a flurry of punches, some missing, some hitting their mark. The crescendo of noise built around them. Then the bastard tried to punch him in the groin.

*Dirty bastard.*

Light on his feet, Charlie was sidestepping the low blow that could have sent him into a heap when a sneaky left hook threw him sideways. He slammed into a table. Stools went tumbling in every direction. Shooting pain seared through his jaw and the strong metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

With the room spinning in dizzying circles again, Charlie turned and threw another punch before the other man could attack again. His knuckles connected with the man's jaw, and he swiftly followed up with another right hook. The other man fell into the punch, and it connected with his left temple. He tumbled backward and hit the ground with a sickening thump.

'Charlie, stop.' Strong hands grabbed him and dragged him back. 'That's enough.'

A sudden hush fell over the crowd.

'Holy hell, is he dead?'

'Someone call an ambulance.'

'Oh my god, he's not breathing,' a woman cried out.

Woozy on his feet, Charlie fought to pierce the mental fog and reshape his racing thoughts. Had he just heard right?

He couldn't have ...

Did he just kill a man?

What had he just gone and done? He fell to his knees and dropped his head into his hands, wishing to god he could block the anxious shouting out. He'd worked in the penal system long enough. He knew how this was going to pan out. This was going to be the end of everything he knew. His life was about to get a whole lot darker.



# CHAPTER

## 14

The waiting game was excruciating.

After pacing the holding cell for what felt like forever, Charlie had forced himself to sit, and then sit some more, the toe of his shoe tapping a staccato rhythm of impatience. His future was now completely out of his control. Lost inside the torment of his head, the reality around him shifted and whirled as he relived the punch that had killed the ex-con, over and over and over. If only he could rewind time, and ... who knew? Maybe it would have been him dead on the floor. Barry the Brute had lived up to his name every second of every day of his life, and Charlie knew from experience that the repeat offender wasn't one to give in or walk away from a fight. He'd done nothing but cause trouble when in jail. And whenever he walked the streets a free man, Barry would do something that would send him back behind bars. The world would be a better place without the oxygen-thief in it.

But Charlie wasn't god, and it wasn't his place to take a life. Grace had said on her visit to him this morning that maybe god had used him to rid the earth of an evil man, but Charlie didn't believe that for a second. He knew it was his beautiful wife's way of trying to support him through this horror.

Heaving himself from his nerve-wracking thoughts, he looked to the gated door. What was taking them so long? Had the pendulum swung his way? It would only take one juror to sit on the fence, and he might, by the skin of his teeth, avoid going to prison. God, he hoped they could see he'd only acted in selfdefence. The fact that he'd never been in any trouble was working in his favour, but only by a smidge.

If they did send him to prison, though, how long would it be for? His solicitor had explained that it all depended on

whether his actions were ruled as manslaughter or murder. *Life without parole*, now that would be his worst nightmare. It wasn't necessarily on the cards, but it certainly was in the deck being played between barristers, and all in front of a dutiful bunch of jurors.

It was all so surreal, it almost felt as if it wasn't happening to him, and he was just watching it unfold from the sidelines. However, he *was* the main character in this emotion-fuelled story, and the villain in the eye of the law. From one agonising twenty-four-hour wait, to the next, and to the next, reality was hitting him hard, and he was feeling himself slipping down a deep dark hole, to one of the blackest times of his life.

An explosion of raised voices carried, and a booming male voice shouted expletives. Seconds later, two beefy guards dragged an equally brawny handcuffed man down the cement hallway – the slam of another holding-cell door was followed by more swearing and the jangling of keys as the guards strode back past, both men looking mighty angry.

His mouth like cotton, Charlie swallowed down hard in a bid to try and clear the insistent emotional lump from his throat. His finest suit was sticking to him with sweat. Overhead, the fluorescent light bulbs were suddenly blinding, the yellow light igniting every dirty nook and cranny of what could have easily been a windowless broom closet. Olive-green paint had been ineffectively used to cover up the graffiti on the cement walls, but nothing would ever be able to hide the stench of stale urine and god only knew what else. A skeletal man with tattoos covering almost every inch of visible skin sat opposite him, his eyes to the ground and his shoulders slumped as if the entire world was upon them. Charlie was thankful the man didn't want to talk, let alone look his way. There was no such thing as a friend in jail.

Interlacing his hands behind his head, Charlie closed his eyes and blew a breath. It was so strange being the one on the wrong side of the blue-steel bars, and the thought of receiving a sentence that would keep him on this side for years to come made his bones shiver. His years spent working in the penal

system had taught him that prison was the last place on earth a person wanted to be. Unlike life outside, where there was never enough time in the day, on the inside, time was all a man had, and it stretched on until it felt perpetual. Never in a million years would he have believed he'd be just like every other prisoner, treated so inhumanely, as if they were guilty before proven innocent – so much for the law, and the media for that matter.

After days of evidence and cross-examinations, it was almost time to face his fate. He was holding out hope for a 'not guilty' verdict, but he knew deep down that his chances of freedom were slim. No matter what led up to him throwing that final deadly punch, he'd taken a life.

With anxiety gripping him, he turned his back to the skeletal guy, clasped his hands tightly, and did what he should have started doing years ago – prayed with all his might. 'Please Lord,' he whispered. 'I know I don't talk to you often enough, but please hear me now. Please don't let me go to prison. I know I've taken a life, which I will forever feel regret and shame for, but I need to be a free man, for Grace, and the kids. Please, Lord, don't let them be punished for my mistakes.' His voice broke with a rising sob, and he paused to steady his self-control. 'I beg this of you, Amen.'

He had to hold it together.

For his four beloved children.

For his darling Grace.

Heavy footsteps echoed and the gimlet-eyed guard who had ushered him in here reappeared, his hefty arms folded tight. 'Wilson. You're up.'

This was a man who very clearly loved his job and took satisfaction at sending the scum of the earth to the pits of hell. And he was looking at Charlie as if he was one of those bits of scum.

Remaining silent, Charlie stood and made his way to the gated door. It buzzed, and then slid open. His fellow detainee

finally lifted his beady-eyed gaze and gave him an apprehensive halfsmile. Charlie acknowledged him with a simple nod as he stepped out and fell in line behind the guard with neatly trimmed hair and an impeccably ironed uniform. With long-legged strides, he dutifully escorted Charlie back through the heavy door that led into the court.

The dankness of the holding area gave way to the showy lights of a sophisticated courtroom. As Charlie took his place between his solicitor and the barrister whose fees had put Moonflower Acres back in the hands of the bank for the first time in decades, murmurs rose like an approaching tidal wave.

His solicitor leaned over. ‘You good, Charlie?’

‘As good as I can be,’ Charlie quietly replied.

‘It’ll all be over soon,’ the barrister muttered with an overly confident nod.

‘Yeah,’ Charlie said. ‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

Picking up a pad, the barrister brought it closer to read the illegible scribbled notes. ‘We’ve given it our best, Mr Wilson. That’s all we can do.’

Charlie remained steely silent. He had nothing left to say.

From out of the corner of his eye, he could see Rodger staring at him from the opposite side of the packed courtroom. Alison stood close at his side, raking her gaze over Charlie with freezing contempt. He couldn’t blame her for judging him harshly. Almost everyone in the room was – he could feel the adjudication seeping beneath his skin.

He shifted a little to try to catch Grace’s eye, three rows back. Straightening his tie, Victor Denver was a pillar of strength beside her. Not once had he or Edith met Charlie’s eye. Their disappointment in him as a son-in-law, as a husband and as a father who should be a good role model was written all over their solemn faces. How could he expect them to feel otherwise?

But his dear Grace had met his fear-filled eyes countless times – the worry and sorrow in hers breaking the already shattered pieces of his heart anew.

She deserved so much better than him. And always had.

\* \* \*

Feeling as if she were frozen in time while everything around her was somehow on fast-forward, Grace clutched the purse in her lap so tightly, her knuckles were as white as her face felt. Forcing her hands to lessen the grip, she placed the purse at her heeled feet and began to fidget with her wedding ring, spinning it around and around her finger. Sat in-between her pillars of strength – her mother and father – she had to keep reminding herself of what the solicitor had told her, to not look mortified, and to remember to breathe. It was a tough ask when everywhere her anxious gaze darted, everything and everyone in this room was in some way confronting. Long gone was the state of denial she'd buried herself in when she'd gotten the call from Rodger that Charlie had been arrested, shortly before the official call from the police station – this courtroom was all too earth-shatteringly real to ignore. She'd never set foot in such a place, nor would she ever have believed she'd ever have a reason to. But now, it was three-thirty in the afternoon, and she was anxiously awaiting her husband's fate, the courtroom was packed with spectators all waiting to hear the judge's verdict, while their four beautiful children were being minded by their adoring godparents, Jenny and Marty. After two days of listening to witnesses being examined and cross-examined and watching Charlie taking the stand and being interrogated to the verge of tears, she was beside herself with nerves. With her belly swirling and whirling, she was fighting the urge to run to the ladies' restroom so she could heave up her coffee and sandwich.

The judge entered.

'All rise,' the court officer announced.

Grace came to her feet, her nausea increasing as she watched the stern-faced judge take his seat behind the ornate

timber bench. This was it. She was about to find out if Charlie was going to be imprisoned. Her heart beat wildly. The room wavered. The ground felt as if it were spinning beneath her feet, and she fought not to buckle to her knees.

How could this be happening to him? To her? To their family? If it wasn't for her mother's arm around her waist, she was sure she wouldn't be able to remain upright. If her husband went to prison, how long would he be gone? What was she meant to tell their children? How was she going to cope on her own? What would happen to him in prison? How was she going to afford the mortgage, now that the bank owned Moonflower Acres? Terrifying questions circled her mind like vultures.

'You may be seated,' the judge announced, his thick eyebrows shading his scowling stare. Shifting in his seat a little, he looked to the jurors. 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?'

A middle-aged copper-haired man nodded. 'We have, your honour.'

The bailiff walked over, took the piece of paper from the solemn-faced juror, and then brought it to the judge, who opened it painfully slowly then read the verdict to himself poker-faced. There was no telling what it was. A hush fell over the room, the ticking of the clock above the judge sounded as if little bombs were dropping.

Tick, tick, tick...

Boom!

Grace's heart slammed against her ribcage.

'Mr Wilson, please rise.' The judge lifted his eyes from the official document and directed his undivided attention to Charlie.

A long shuddering breath escaped Grace as Charlie did as he was told and clasped his hands in front of him. His broad shoulders were slumped, his eyes to the floor. His proud demeanour had all but left him. Grace desperately wanted to

run to her husband, to hold him and tell him everything was going to be okay. But it wasn't, and never would be again; she could feel it deep in her bones. Self-defence or not, Charlie had killed a man with his bare hands. That couldn't go unpunished.

Tick, tick, tick...

She laced her fingers into her mother's and gripped the hand that had soothed cuts, hurts and tears over the years like her life depended upon it. After taking a deep breath to both work up courage and hold back tears, Grace held her breath. Every single fibre of her being wanted to run, to get out of there, or to at least stand there with her hands over her ears, because her survival mode was kicking in full force, telling her that if she didn't hear the verdict, if she didn't see Charlie being led away, if that were to be the case, she wouldn't have to face it.

After a long pause, the judge drew in a noisy breath. 'On the charge of murder, how do you find?'

'We find the defendant not guilty.'

As there was a resounding exhalation in the courtroom, the judge continued. 'And on the charge of manslaughter, how do you find?'

'We find the defendant guilty.'

Shocked to her very core, Grace found it impossible to take a breath, while still hoping she'd heard wrong.

The courtroom erupted in chatter and whispers, and the judge thumped his gravel, one, two, three times, then started going on about sentencing submissions and times and dates. It was all a blur to Grace, sobbing in her father's arms, her head buried into his chest. Her mother was rubbing her back, trying to soothe her with gentle sounds. Gathering herself enough to move without collapsing, she unravelled from her father's protective embrace and turned to see Charlie being led away, a solemn officer either side. Just before he stepped out of sight, their eyes met.

‘I’m sorry. I love you,’ he mouthed before he disappeared through a side door.

She went to offer a reply, but the words died in her throat. He should have never been in that bar in the first place. And because of one wrong decision, Charlie Wilson was going to face his fate. The hopeful flame she’d tried to keep alight blew out with the slamming of the holding-cell door.

Out the back of the courthouse, away from the frenzy of media out the front, Grace watched on helplessly as Charlie was loaded into a van. She watched it drive through a set of gates then grow smaller as it headed out of sight, taking the man she loved with all her heart and soul, the father of her children, away.



# CHAPTER

## 15

1991

Pulling his pen and notebook from beneath his thin mattress, Charlie lifted his glasses to the top of his head and looked to the bars of his cell – iron rods covered anything with even a whiff of freedom in this place. At precisely 8.30 am, that door would slide open and he'd join the swell of men hightailing it to the dining area for a breakfast anyone who had never been incarcerated would turn their nose up at. Lunch was at midday. Dinner was at five. Cells were locked again at seven. Once the nightly counts were finished, it was strictly lights out at nine. Prison life was a repetitive existence.

Sleep was the only reprieve. Slumber had never been his bedfellow, but behind these wretched bars, he'd eventually learnt to make his peace with it. For the first year, his vivid nightmares had brutally thrown him out of fitful sleep and left him pacing the tiny cell in half-darkness. Over time, though, the bad dreams had subsided, as his horrendous reality outweighed the terrors that had once plagued him. It was proof enough for him that miracles did happen in the strangest of ways – because he couldn't drink to drown out the voices anymore, he'd had to face them, head-on. It had been both confronting and curative, with a hell of a lot of soul-searching. He'd even written a letter to Margaret Mary Baker to explain, and apologise. Joey Baker had been his friend, his comrade in arms, but he couldn't go on blaming himself for not returning to Vietnam to find him. Many men didn't return to their loved ones; he had to be grateful that he himself hadn't been one of them.

In some ways, this place had taught him to let go of what he had no control over. If only he'd learnt this lesson before it was too late. Retrospection was a perpetual thorn in his side.

Although, he understood that everything he'd been through up until this point in his life was nothing on what he was about to do in three days' time. It was going to break him, almost destroy him, change him, but he didn't have a choice. Shifting the pair of reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, he paused to reflect on both his time in prison and the life he was missing out on. Pen poised, he eased out his neck – putting an experience most never had into words was proving a challenge, but his gut told him this was something he had to do. It was a biography of sorts, written about his battles fought in the Vietnam War, and the war of his internal battles thereafter, including what had led him to serving time in this hellhole. It was therapeutic to be able to express his deepest inner thoughts, fears and emotions on the page. Maybe he should have written his heart and soul out years ago – it might have saved him from travelling along this horrendous path he was now on.

*Too little, too late.*

At the very least, it gave him something to focus on, other than counting down the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years he had left here. So, drawing in a slow, steady breath, he continued.

On the first day of my three thousand, six hundred and fifty day sentence, myself and five other men were loaded into a prison van, like cattle being led to slaughter. I'd remained impassive as they'd cuffed me, pushed me into a hallway, and then driven me to what was going to be my home, my hell, for ten long years. Now wasn't the time to show any kind of fear, though the slamming of the van door jarred me to my very core. Little did I know it would be my first of many slamming doors, each one leading me further into a life of heavy-handed conformity.

Lost in my distressing thoughts while the tyres had eaten up the distance between home and perdition, what felt like seconds later, though it was

almost an hour, we had arrived at the end of a chain-wire fence that rose twenty-five foot in the air and seemed to go on and into forever. I watched as the guard pulled up at the towering walls topped with barbed wire. I no longer felt an ounce of courage, but I knew I was going to have to find bravery somewhere, or I wouldn't survive.

I fought on the frontline. I witnessed my fellow brothers-in-arms been blown to smithereens, wondering if I was going to be next, when I was going to be next, but never had I been so damn scared as the moment I was led through the front gates of this living nightmare.

The crash of the steel gate slamming shut behind me was the finality to the life of freedom I had known, yet taken for granted way too many times. This atrocious place was now my home, my future, for an entire decade. I would no longer be viewed as a human, but rather as a number.

We were ordered off the van and led down a corridor with high fences. Tattooed, jail-tough prisoners glared at me, others eyed me like fresh meat. I still wonder, each and every day, which inmate might try and stab me. I've come to accept that I may well be wheeled out on a gurney.

In a bizarre way, arriving at Jackson Correctional Complex was like turning up for my first day of boot camp, where I was about to meet my new drill sergeant – an angry man who loathed the sentenced and lived for punishment.

Looking to his watch, he confirmed he had four minutes and twenty-five seconds to go before his cell would be unlocked. Sitting on the edge of his impeccably made bottom bunk, he tucked his notebook and pen away and turned his back to his latest cellmate to give him lavatory privacy.

He waited for the seconds to tick by. Time, ironically enough, was all he had to structure himself by, and he'd learnt to harness the power of that. It gave him some kind of illusory hold on the reins of his life. And by god, he needed that. It had been more than two years in this godforsaken place, and he wasn't even halfway through his sentence. There was no light at the end of his long dark tunnel yet.

Glancing to the wall above his poor excuse for a pillow, he ran his eyes over the photographs of Grace, Hope, Hudson, Bryn and Ava – his smiling, beautiful family, living their lives without him. God, how he missed them. He and Grace had agreed the children shouldn't be brought to a place like this, not ever. The only time he saw any of them was when Grace brought him precious photographs at her weekly visit. It pained him to know he was missing their every milestone, and couldn't help but often wonder if the kids would even remember him when he got out. And even if they did, would they want anything to do with him?

Still, each happy snap was worth more than gold, and also a firm reminder that their world kept on spinning without him in it.

But he wanted that for them – and for Grace.

Which was why he'd come to a decision. He knew this was going to break him, but that was his cross to bear, and bear it he would. With anxiety stretching like a rubber band across his chest, he fought to take a breath as his heart squeezed tightly. Closing his eyes, he calmed his mind and, in turn, slowed his pulse. It was doing him no good, pining for what he'd lost. For now, his life was here, in this prison, in this cell.

He could still recall his first step into this three-by-three-metre chamber, after his dignity had all but been taken during his strip-search. Donning his green prison tracksuit and with his arms full of prison-issued blankets, he'd been escorted up two flights of echoing metal stairs, over a heavily caged flybridge and to his unlocked cell at the very end of a shadowy

corridor. There, he met a man who would eventually stab him, all because of a misunderstanding over a packet of cigarettes. Thank goodness there was a panic button in every cell or he'd be a dead man. He'd never forget the feeling of the ice-cold steel slicing through his stomach, nor would the raised red scar left there allow him to.

The door buzzed and slid open. Chatter sounded. Footsteps echoed.

'Looks like it's time for some fodder, Wilson,' Lester said as he sauntered past without bothering to wash his hands. 'Catch you later.'

Lacking manners, hygiene and half his teeth, the obnoxious guy hadn't endeared himself to Charlie. 'You most certainly will.' He rose to his feet and left his cell with its uncomfortable bunk bed and lidless, stainless-steel toilet behind to join the long line of prisoners.

At nine-thirty, after another tasteless meal of slop and stodge, he was led into the exercise yard. He had half an hour before heading to work in the laundry room until lunch. Lighting his cigarette, Charlie sat on one of the five benches and inhaled deeply. As with every day he got to sit out here, he looked to the sky, imagining all the people living beneath it, thinking of his Grace. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, nor did he deserve for her to wait for him. Yet, being the loyal wife she was, she continued to wait, visiting him each and every week. But their visits were no longer warm or cordial. Slowly but surely, Grace had grown as cold as a winter wind, and her eyes held none of the love she'd once had for him. How could he blame her, after what she'd been through? And all because of him.

Regarding the towering tree at the corner of the exercise yard, now void of leaves, he took comfort in the fact that he would watch it spring to life for yet another season. The ebb and flow of existence still occurred within these walls, if he forced himself from his introspection for long enough to become aware of it – practice was leading him to perfecting

that art. He knew he had to continually find ways to focus on the limited good around him, or the overwhelming badness of the place would eat him up and spit him out as a man no longer able to live in a normal society. It happened to most prisoners who walked out of here, only to find themselves back behind bars before too long. As a prison guard, he'd seen it time and time again, and he refused for that to be his path.

He'd cringed at Grace's daydreams of travelling the world when they retired, but now he'd give his right arm to walk along the crowded streets of New York, Sydney or London with her arm hooked into his, or sail the Mediterranean and wander between the whitewashed buildings of Greece with the warm sun on their faces. He'd never stopped long enough to consider the utter freedom of such things, or how it would make her extremely happy. So caught up in his internal negative web, he'd told her how he'd always hated the confinement of a city, with its buildings all slammed up against one another, leaving no breathing space, and the thought of being in a country where he didn't understand what they were saying or the food they ate, didn't appeal to him in the slightest. It had been so damn selfish of him.

Now, locked up in here, with time both his enemy and his friend, he'd learnt that how he viewed things all depended on what frame of mind he was in, and that he also had the power to change that, if he wanted to. Nowadays, he was determined to be present and conscious as often as possible, so he could make good use of this forced time out from the world he once lived in.

His cigarette finished, it was time for him to go to work.

Three days later Charlie woke to sirens blaring, men screaming and shouting, and what sounded like an army stampeding the prison. Tucked up beneath his itchy blanket, he craned his neck to see prison officers sprinting down the corridor, and heard their footsteps up the flights of stairs just past his cell.

Lester hung his head over the top bunk. ‘What the hell’s happening, Wilson?’

‘Someone’s either fighting, dying or dead,’ Charlie replied matter-of-factly over the rhythmic thumping of fists now banging against cell bars.

‘Oh, shit.’ Grimacing, Lester’s tattooed face disappeared again.

Looking to where a single shaft of daylight filtered through the window above the sink, Charlie folded his hands beneath his head, thinking about what lay ahead for him today. It was Sunday – official visitor’s day – but he wasn’t buoyed by the fact. Today, he was going to say what had been weighing heavily upon his mind and heart, and Grace was quite possibly going to hate him for it. He still hoped that, eventually, she would understand that this was his way of loving her.

Three and a half hours later, he was by the door, waiting to be buzzed into the communal visitation room. It pained him to know that each time Grace came here, she was patted down. The thought of another’s hands upon her made his blood boil, though he supposed with what he was about to do, he was going to have to come to grips with that. Somehow. For her.

The door slid open. His heart leapt into his throat as he stepped into limbo – the room where freedom and confinement met. And there she was, as always, in her slacks and conservative top, looking as pretty as the first day he’d fallen head-over-boots for her.

She rose from her chair. ‘Hey, Charlie.’

‘Hi, Grace.’ He pecked her cheek and waited for her to sit at the little round table before taking the chair opposite. ‘How are you?’

‘Yeah, good.’ She met his gaze. ‘You?’

‘Yeah, can’t complain.’ He made sure to take all of her in, the dusting of freckles across her petite nose, the laugh lines at the corners of her beautiful sea-green eyes, the glossy plump

lips he'd kissed hundreds of times over. 'And how are the kids?'

She smiled, but it was strained. 'Yeah, they're good too.' She glanced down at her lap, clearing her throat, then came to meet his gaze once more. 'The boys will be in year one soon, and Ava will be starting kindy.'

'Wow, they're growing up so fast.' It was agony to not be sharing these moments, but he hid the hurt away as best he could. 'And Hope, how is she going with school?'

Now Grace smiled from the heart. 'She's doing so well, Charlie, a top student her teachers tell me, as does her report card.'

'That's our girl,' he said, proudly.

'Yes.' Grace's smile faded.

It was the same conversation as always, clipped and undeviating, with uncomfortable silences in between.

With a slow steady breath, he reached across the table, gesturing for her hand to be in his. She hesitantly placed it there. 'My sweet, beautiful Grace, you don't look happy.' He looked from where he was tracing her palm with his thumb and into the depths of her eyes, so green-blue, they reminded him of the mesmerising water of Sapphire Bay.

Stiffening, she shifted a little uneasily. 'Well, I suppose that's because I'm not happy, Charlie. Especially when I'm sitting in a prison, visiting my husband.' Her lips quivered, but with a sharp inhalation she gathered herself quick-smart. 'This isn't the life I imagined for us.'

Charlie was so ashamed, he could barely hold her steadfast gaze. 'I know it's tough, and I'm so very sorry I've put you, and our children, through all of this.' Knowing what he had to do, his heart slammed to a grinding halt. 'This is only going to get harder as the years roll on, you know that, right?'

'Of course I know that,' she snapped. 'I may be in the outside world, but trust me, it's awfully tough out there too.'



She sniffled, her shoulders squaring. 'It's like I'm living the life of a widow.'

'I'm sorry.' While wondering how many times he'd apologised to her in this lifetime, Charlie nodded sadly while taking his time to put his words into order. 'We need to get a divorce, Grace.'

Snatching her hand from his, she tipped her head, blinking fast. 'What did you just say?'

'You heard me.' He took a breath and sighed it away. 'You need to be able to live your life without the curse of my burdens.'

'I am living my life, as are the children,' she retorted.

'I've only done two and a half years Grace. Two years,' he repeated, hitting the harsh fact home. 'I still have another seven and a half to go.' He almost choked on his words. 'I want you to be loved, and be in love, Grace, because you deserve to be.'

'But Charlie ... I *am* in love. With you.' Softening, she brought her hand back to his, giving his fingers a reassuring squeeze.

'No, you're not.' He took her hand again and rubbed a thumb over the softness of her skin, locking the sweet sensation within his heart for when he went on without her. 'I don't doubt that you love me, Grace, but you're not *in* love with me anymore, and there's a big difference.'

Her mouth opened and closed, twice. She huffed, sniffled and then offered him a lacklustre smile. 'Well, sorry to ruin your ridiculous plan, but I'm not going to let you tell me what to do.' She inhaled a sharp breath. 'I might not be head-over-heels in love with you right now, but I do love you very much, Charlie Wilson, which says a lot after what we've gone through.'

Charlie had known she'd put up a fight, and he was ready to lay his law down as gently as he possibly could. 'I'm not telling you what to do. I'm looking out for you.'

Her forehead puckered. ‘Without you around, I’ve learnt to look out for myself, thank you very much.’

‘Exactly my point, Grace. You shouldn’t have to look out for yourself.’ He wasn’t about to tell her that he wanted her to find another man to fill his shoes, because it would hurt her, and him, way too much to say it out loud. ‘I don’t want you coming here to visit me anymore.’

‘What if *I* want to?’ Her lips pressed into a thin line.

Oh god, this was hard. ‘I’ll refuse the visit.’ Charlie hated himself for saying it, but he had to.

‘But Charlie ...’ Grace choked back a sob and covered her mouth. ‘Why are you doing this?’

His anguish was raw and bitter, pulling him into the darkness like quicksand. ‘For you, Grace.’ He pushed the words past the lump of emotion now lodged in his throat. ‘I’m doing all of this for you.’

Grace nodded once, her mouth setting in a firm line. ‘Fine. I’ll give you what you want.’ She shot to her feet. ‘But I won’t forgive you for this, Charlie Wilson. Not ever. You’ve broken my heart again, but this will be the very last time you do.’

Turning, she stormed away.

Charlie fought the urge to race after her and take her into his arms. He didn’t want to let her go, but he had to, for her sake, for the children’s sake.

She didn’t even stop to look back.

\* \* \*

It had been almost six months since Grace had said her final goodbye to Charlie, and she was doing her best to move on, but it was proving tough. There wasn’t a room in the house that didn’t echo with his absence, and even more so now she never saw him. It was as if he’d died, and she was a widow in mourning. All in all, it made her seriously consider moving out of the homestead – if only she could afford to start afresh.

It would do her, and the children, the world of good. But she simply didn't have the resources. For now, she had to work with what she had, as hard as that might be.

Up before dawn after another sleepless night, she had already popped three loads of washing on, hung two out, mopped the floors upstairs and downstairs and finally found a small escape to freshen up. Feeling a little more human once she had her hair blow-dried and a light dusting of make-up on, she reached the bottom of the staircase in record time, and thankfully without injury after tripping over some of the boys' Lego halfway down. There, she was met by Nugget, their golden retriever. At first she'd been hesitant about adding a dog to the mix of her busy life, but she'd quickly become appreciative of Nugget, whose unconditional love and loyal companionship had proved essential these past three years.

'Hey there, my boy.' His tail tapped the timber floorboards rhythmically as he excitedly greeted her, his tongue lolling comically out the side of his mouth. 'Aw, I love you, you big goof.' She stole a few seconds to crouch down and give him a good scruff around the neck. 'Do you need to go out for toilet duties, buddy?'

Straightening, she strode toward the back door, Nugget's toenails rhythmically clipping behind her. As she swung the door open, he scooted past her, raced down the steps and to the back lawn, his trip clearly urgent. Grace chuckled at his antics – he was her constant reminder that life could be fun and easy, if you lived in the moment. If only she had a minute to stop and smell the roses, that would be a regular thing. But with the homestead re-mortgaged to pay Charlie's legal bills, living expenses rising, a teahouse in need of some repairs – thank goodness for Jenny taking on the managerial role – a brooding teenager, two six-year-old boys to control, and four-year-old Ava to contend with, Grace had her hands too full to even think about bending to sniff roses on the proverbial path of her crazy life. Heck, she barely had time to nip off to the loo, and quite often when she did find the time, she'd look down to see

the cat wrapping itself around her ankles, in search of whatever love she had left to give.

Hankering for her habitual morning coffee hit, she left Nugget in the backyard and rushed into the kitchen. Caffeine was the only thing that got her through the day. Unfortunately, it was also what kept her awake at night.

After filling the kettle, she plonked it on the stove to bring to the boil. Spooning three teaspoons of coffee grounds into her plunger, she got back to preparing tonight's dinner in the slow cooker. Today was going to be a long one at the teahouse, so arriving home to a meal ready to go would be a godsend. Halfway through layering the browned chicken, bacon and mushrooms, she heard the doorbell chime, reverberating through the house.

Slipping her apron off, Grace ran for the front door.

'Hey, Rodger! Come on in.' She stepped aside and ushered him in, eyeing his armful of boxes. 'What's all this?'

'Just a little something for the kids.' Rodger brushed past her and put his nose to the air. 'Wow, something smells divine.'

'I whipped up a casserole for our supper, which I hope you and Alison will be staying for, given you're going to be minding my wayward children all day.' Offering him an appreciative smile, she glanced behind him. 'Speaking of which, where is she?'

'Oh, she got caught up.' He kicked his shoes off and smiled. 'But trust me, by the smell of that, I'll definitely be staying for dinner.'

Given the fact that she and Alison had put aside the past and become friends, Grace couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't accompanied Rodger on his past couple of visits, not that she was about to ask. It wasn't her business, but she had heard through the grapevine that his inability to have children was placing stress upon their marriage. She couldn't help but feel heavy-hearted for them. 'A little something for the kids,

huh? It looks like you bought out the entire department store.’ She looked to the three large boxes he was now plonking down on the entrance table.

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ He waved a hand through the air. ‘I got the boys a set of remote-control cars, Hope that Game Boy she’s been talking about and Ava a Cabbage Patch doll.’

‘Oh, Rodger, you shouldn’t have done that.’ Grace shook her head, although her smile was thankful. ‘It’s way too much.’

‘Don’t be silly, Grace. They deserve to be spoilt a little.’

Grace felt a little embarrassed by his lavishness, but thought it rude to say as much. ‘Thank you so much for offering to look after them today.’ She closed the front door. ‘This flu that’s going around has the babysitter tucked up in bed for the next couple of days.’

He tipped his head and smiled. ‘We’re friends, Grace, and we look out for each other. Speaking of which ...’ He plucked a folded piece of paper from his top pocket and passed it to her.

Grace looked at it. ‘What’s this?’

‘That’s the name of my friend I told you about last week, the bank manager. He’s expecting your call.’ His expression turned serious. ‘He believes he’ll be able to help you shuffle your mortgage around so you’re more financially comfortable.’

‘Oh, Rodger, thank you!’ She fought back raw emotion. ‘You truly are a blessing.’

‘I’m here to help you through this, Grace, okay?’ He offered her a sad smile. ‘I just wish you’d say yes to moving into my guesthouse, and renting this big old place out. Especially given the fact the cottage is in dire need of renovations, so you can’t move back in there, or rent it out. It will fix all your money problems, and you’ll be much closer to the teahouse too. Within walking distance.’

‘I know, and my parents have tried to help me, too, but I want to try and do this on my own.’ The way he smiled at her, the deep timbre of his voice, the gentleness of his hand that came to rest on her arm, it almost brought her to sobbing. ‘Things have been quite tough, as you know, so I do appreciate your help.’ Sniffling, she blinked faster.

Rodger went to move closer. ‘Oh, Grace, I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘No, don’t be silly. It’s not your fault.’ Stepping out of his reach, she led him into the TV room, sat him on the double sofa and settled herself on the single one opposite him.

Quickly gathering herself, she plucked the list of to-dos and not-to-dos for the children. ‘I hope you don’t mind, but I wrote this out.’ She pushed it across the coffee table. ‘It has the times of the boys’ games, what they can and can’t eat, and Hope’s friend’s address for the birthday party she’s going to.’

Rodger read down the almighty list, his smile widening. ‘You’ve covered everything, by the looks.’

Footsteps sounded and Hope waltzed through the lounge room. ‘Hey, Rodger.’ She looked to Grace. ‘I’m almost thirteen, Mum. I don’t need to be babysat.’

‘I know, love. Rodger’s here for the boys and Ava.’ She gave Rodger a look that said otherwise.

‘Okay, well ... that’s okay then,’ Hope called over her shoulder.

‘I’d best go and get Ava up and say a quick hello to her before I say goodbye.’ Standing, Grace took a much-needed breath. ‘Back down in a jiffy.’

‘You take your time, Grace.’ Rodger rose too. ‘I’ll make myself useful by getting the boys ready for their football game.’

‘Thanks, Rodger.’

Sitting on the edge of Ava’s bed, Grace looked to the row of stuffed animals perched on the bedhead, then to her

youngest child soundly sleeping. How could she wake her, when she looked so peaceful? So, instead, she gently placed a kiss on her forehead, and tiptoed back out of the room.

Rodger was right. Her children needed stability, she needed peace, and they desperately needed money. If she rented this place out, it would cover the mortgage and leave her with a good lump of change for living costs. Guilt crushed her heart at the thought, but her motherly instincts were encouraging her to accept the offer. She couldn't do this alone. She needed help.

This had been her and Charlie's forever home, the place they'd planned to raise their children in, to grow old in. But Charlie wasn't here anymore.

Bidding Rodger goodbye and good luck, Grace gathered her handbag, making sure she'd stuffed the sealed envelope within, and stepped outside. A cool breeze blustered over the rise that led to the staircase leading to the seaside, stirring dried leaves from the towering trees, and sending them scattering across the lawn. Her shoes crunched upon them as she strode toward the car, thinking about the words she'd written to Charlie in that letter she was about to post. She may not be paying him visits anymore, but she sure as heck was going to continue to write to him every month to tell him about his children.

He wanted her to get on with her life, but he was and always would be a part of it. She would make damn sure of it.

# CHAPTER

## 16

1996

Time, and plenty of soul-searching, had allowed Grace's broken heart to heal, even if the scars remained. Her trips to church every Sunday morning had reminded her of the power of forgiveness, and how holding grudges within was like swallowing poison. Charlie was human. Yes, he'd made a massive mistake which had seen him thrown in jail, but he was, and always would be, the father of her beloved children. She'd had so many long conversations with her pastor, and finally come to understand that if she didn't let go of the resentment and hurt caused by Charlie's actions over the years, she'd never be able to find solace.

Even so, she'd been on tenterhooks all morning, even as she tried to pretend this day was like any other. She'd even skipped her ritual sunrise coffee to try to keep her racing heart at bay. But she had to be kind to herself. It was to be expected. Today was the day that everything was going to change in her world, and that of her children. For the better or for the worse, she couldn't be quite sure. Time would tell. One step at a time. That's what she kept telling herself.

She was searching through her jewellery box for her ruby earrings when she accidentally knocked the entire thing from her dressing table. As the ornate timber box crashed to the floor, her jewellery went flying, bouncing all over her bedroom.

'Oh, for goodness sake!' she huffed beneath her breath as she clambered on fours, trying to find every piece. 'I don't have time for this.'

After fifteen frustrating minutes, she was satisfied she'd retrieved everything when a sparkle from beneath the bed caught her eye. Lying on her stomach, she reached beneath to



clutch the last remaining piece. As she sat up against the bedframe, her heart shuddered when she unclutched her hand and saw what was resting in her palm, the setting of the deep blue sapphire nestled among the sparkling diamonds even more beautiful than she remembered.

And the sentiment of it was made stronger after everything that had happened. After everything they'd been through. Surprised by a sudden rush of hot tears, she blinked faster as she clutched the brooch Charlie had gifted her all those years ago to her chest.

'Oh Charlie, we really went and messed things up, didn't we?' she whispered.

Was this a sign from the heavens that they would come to some kind of understanding, some kind of peace? She hoped so. She opened the little clip and slipped the pin into her blouse, fastening it carefully.

She took a minute to do some deep breathing to centre herself before pushing herself up to standing. She squared her shoulders and made a promise to herself that she would make this a positive day.

For all their sakes.

\* \* \*

Charlie had followed the rules, always, and his good behaviour had made him eligible for parole. Instead of leaving at forty-five, he'd be walking out of prison as a forty-three-year-old man. Two extra years of freedom was one heck of a lot. All in all, he'd spent eight lengthy years reflecting on his crime, repenting every second of it, and making use of being locked away from the world. He knew the one he would be stepping into now would be very different to the one he had left behind.

Waking before dawn, his usual exercise routine got him through to eight-thirty sharp, when his cell door slid open on his final push-up. A shower and shave followed his last ever breakfast of slop and stodge. The next hour was spent trying to gather his thoughts and calm his nerves. He couldn't help but

wonder what it was going to feel like, walking out of here. Some prisoners were reluctant to go because prison was all they knew – he wasn't going to be one of those guys.

An announcement came over the speaker, requesting him to the release gate. His legs felt a little unsteady, as he rose and headed toward the part of the prison that was usually forbidden to inmates. A familiar guard met him there and led him through the steel doors he'd only ever seen once before – on his way into this hellhole.

His sack filled with clothes, personal belongings, photos of his children and Grace, and the pile of ninety-two letters he'd received from her over his shoulder, Charlie walked through the corridors one last time, stopping at the final heavy iron door. In here, he'd watched his life tick away, but now, he was looking forward to his future, whatever that may be. The right to live his life as he chose awaited.

One second. Two seconds. Three. Four. Five. Then a few heavy footsteps fell, and there was an echo of voices and jangling keys on the other side.

*Clunk.*

The lock turned. The heaving door scraped against the concrete ground as it opened and then did the same as it slammed shut behind him. It felt so good being on the other side of it. His steps became lighter. He'd envisioned this day for eight long years, and now he was about to walk out a free man, it felt unnervingly surreal but exciting.

Beneath blinding sunshine, he was led past the exercise yard. Some of the prisoners stopped to applaud his early parole, others were clearly envious. The gates topped with skin-ripping razor wire swung open.

One second. Two seconds. Three. Four. Five. As he waited, he recalled the time he'd watched a desperate inmate try to climb over the razor-wired fence – the image of his torn and bloodied body was burnt into his brain forever.

A bell sounded and the guard urged him forward. He didn't need any more of an invitation. Stepping through the belly of the beast, he took one last breath of prison air as he dared a glance back over his shoulder at the guard who'd grown to become a man he classed as an acquaintance, maybe even a friend.

'You take care now, Charlie, and keep your wits about yourself, okay?' the guard said, chewing his gum like a cow chewing its cud.

'Don't you worry, Frank, you won't be seeing me again.'

'Good, because you got an ugly mug, Wilson,' Frank said, chuckling and shaking his head before slamming the gate shut.

Charlie felt like a different man to the one who'd ambled in here, with his tail between his legs and a giant chip on his shoulder. Outwardly, with his hair clipped short and all the time he'd spent training, there was certainly more stock to his build. Inwardly, deep down in his soul, the dark edges had been lightened and his demons were rarely heard, nor felt. When they occasionally were, he knew how to scare them away with a simple game of cat-and-mouse, where he was *always* the lion.

He also recognised the value of freedom and the liberty of making choices, and by god he was going to be making the right ones from here on in. He had a life to live, and a woman and his children to make things up to. Grace may no longer be his wife, but she would forever remain the mother of his children and the owner of his heart. He could never love another like he still loved her and because of that, it wouldn't be right to ever allow himself to fall for a woman again. Without Grace to share his days with, he was certain he'd grow old alone, and die alone. Everything else, he would work out along the way.

With the warm afternoon sunshine upon his face, he inhaled deeply and honed his senses. The scent of barbecued steaks and mowed grass lingered on the breeze. The bark of a dog carried from a few blocks away. A plane flew overhead.

There were two ways to the transit station, and he could go whichever way he pleased. So he did. One step after the other, he closed the distance between this place and the bus ride that would lead him back to Sapphire Bay.

The rental tenants Grace had chosen had been given sufficient notice and had vacated, and Moonflower Acres awaited him with open arms. Tomorrow, he would contact his literary agent to see how developments were coming along, and if they had any more bites on his memoir. So far, there were two firm offers on the table, but his agent had told him to be patient so they could play the field.

Half an hour into his trek, as he wandered along the outskirts of the neighbouring township, an unfamiliar sedan pulled in alongside him and a male voice greeted him by name.

Dipping his head, Charlie looked through the passenger window, to see a familiar smiling face staring back at him. ‘Holy moly, Marty! I didn’t expect to see you round here.’

‘Yeah, sorry I was late, but the prison gave Grace the wrong time for your release.’ Reaching over, he shoved the passenger door open. ‘Come on, then, bugalugs. Get in.’

Chuckling at the nickname Marty had given him at high school, Charlie clambered in and plonked his bag at his feet. ‘Thanks for coming to get me.’ It was his first time in a car in years, and he felt a surge of nerves when Marty pulled back out onto the open road. ‘So, what have I missed?’ he said, by way of trying to take his mind off the fact they were hurtling along at top speed.

‘A heck of a lot, my friend.’ Gliding through the gears, Marty headed in the direction of home. ‘But I’ll fill you in when we stop for a decent meal, hey?’

‘Oh, okay.’ Charlie thought about tucking into a big juicy steak with a side of crisp garden salad and crunchy fries, smothered in peppercorn sauce, followed by a slice of warm

pecan pie and creamy vanilla ice-cream, and his mouth watered. 'Sounds like a plan.'

'Great.' Seemingly a little unsettled, Marty turned the radio up.

Minutes later, they pulled into one of the last parking spots at the front of a café. 'Oh, crap. I haven't got any cash, Marty.' Charlie suddenly remembered how money made the world go around, unlike inside the clink, where cigarettes, drugs and other commodities ruled.

'All good, Wilson. This one's on me.'

They dodged traffic as they crossed the road. Taking in his surrounds, and the flash new cars, Charlie couldn't believe how much things had changed. Reaching the footpath, he stopped to let two scantily dressed women pass by. 'By the looks of it, people are wearing a lot less than I recall,' he said quietly.

'Ha, yeah, fashion has changed quite a bit, Charlie.'

The door of the busy cafeteria jingled with their arrival. Chatter echoed and music played from the jukebox. The mouth-watering scent of good food wafted. With every one of his senses on high alert, Charlie sucked in a sharp breath. Stepping in here was like diving head-first into quicksand.

Marty rested a hand on his back. 'You good?'

Charlie snapped to and nodded. 'Yup, just a bit overwhelmed.'

Marty leant in and dropped his voice. 'We can go if you like.'

'No way, Jose.' Charlie shook his head. 'I haven't eaten a decent meal in eight years. I'll handle it.' He offered a lopsided smile. 'No pain, no gain, as they say.'

'Ha, yeah, sorry, my bad. I didn't stop to think about how crazy this would all feel for you.'

'No need to apologise, buddy. It's all part of the process.'

An elderly waitress bustled over and greeted them, then ushered them to a booth. Sliding into his seat, Charlie silently mused over the fact there were real plates, actual glasses and metal cutlery, and there were no guards standing by in case all hell broke loose, which it quite often did. To him, this was like fine dining at its very best. And the scents wafting from the openplan kitchen were a far cry from the stench of prison food. His stomach growled in response.

Catching his wandering attention, Marty handed him a menu, and flicking it open, Charlie ran his gaze over the myriad choices. ‘Gosh, Marty, talk about giving a man way too many options.’

‘I know, loads, huh.’ Marty glanced over the top of his menu. ‘I can vouch for the beef burger, and the chicken Kiev is good, too, oh, and the Caesar salad.’

‘Righto, well that narrows it down a bit.’ Spotting the price of the steak and chips, Charlie grimaced. ‘Dang, inflation has happened big time while I’ve been away.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Marty half snorted. ‘The cost of living goes up and the wages don’t. It’s the way of the world we live in, I’m afraid.’

‘So, boys.’ The waitress arrived at their table and pushed her glasses up her nose. ‘What will you be having?’

Charlie was at a loss. Knowing he could order anything he liked was mind-bending. ‘Uhh ...’ Panic made him point randomly. ‘I’ll have this.’

‘Fair enough, but ...’ The waitress smirked, not unkindly. ‘I don’t know what *this* is.’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Charlie felt like a chump. ‘The steak sandwich and a side of beer-battered fries.’ He read it out and was pleased he was going to fulfil his craving for a steak, but on the cheaper side for Marty’s pocket.

‘Actually, make that two. And two Cokes.’ Marty gathered the menus and passed them back to the waitress.

Charlie did his best to relax into the surroundings, but the chatter, the people, the noise – it was all so much. Just as he was about to ask Marty to elaborate on what he'd missed, something chimed loudly from the tabletop, sending him to his feet.

‘It’s all good, buddy, it’s just my mobile.’ Chuckling, Marty held up a flip phone. ‘Hello.’

Shamefaced, Charlie avoided catching the eyes now staring at him, and sat back down as quickly as he could. Marty kept his voice low and his head turned. Clearly it wasn’t a conversation for Charlie to be privy to, not that he minded. He was too busy realising just how far the world had moved on while he was buried deep inside the prison system. These few minutes with Marty’s attention elsewhere gave him essential time to ease his nervous tension. He was free. He was safe. The people here weren’t out to get him.

Once Marty was off the phone, Charlie was ready to hear what he was dying to know... was Grace with anyone? He wasn’t about to ask outright, not yet anyway; he wanted to see what Marty had to say first. ‘So, other than you and Jen becoming proud parents of two beautiful kids, fill me in on what else has happened the last eight years.’

‘Where do I start?’ Static anxiety seemed to surround them as Marty exhaled loudly before he leant back, his hands clasping behind his head. ‘Do you want the good news or the bad news first?’

Charlie’s stomach tumbled. ‘Might as well get the bad news out of the way.’

‘There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to give it straight-up.’ He inhaled sharply. ‘Grace and Rodger are living together.’

Feeling like he’d just been punched in the gut, and stabbed in the heart for good measure, Charlie took a long moment to recover. ‘But I thought he was a married man?’ Rodger was

one of Marty's close mates, so he needed to tread carefully. 'What happened to Alison?'

'He and Alison went their separate ways about five years back. They just couldn't seem to get past the fact that Rodger couldn't have children.'

'He's barren, hey?' He shouldn't be taking so much comfort in the fact Grace wouldn't be having any children with the man.

*Rodger Burrows? Of all the men Grace could be with ...*

'Yeah, afraid so.' Marty nodded then grimaced. 'Grace was living in the guesthouse when Alison and Rodger split and ... well, I think they just became close over time, by being there for one another.' He shrugged. 'One thing led to another, and now they're a couple.'

Charlie took a fortifying breath. 'Well. As long as Grace is happy, I suppose I have to try and be happy for her.'

'She seems to be. Happy, that is.' Marty looked extremely uncomfortable. 'Jenny reckons she still loves you, though, and I have to say that I definitely agree. Not that I've told Rodger as much.'

'Yeah, well, sometimes love ain't enough, hey?' He'd have been a fool to expect that Rodger wouldn't have made his move on Grace. In the grand scheme of things, he had no right being angry about it either. 'How is he with the kids?'

'He's real good to them, Charlie.'

'That's good to hear.' Ignoring his innate need to be jealous of the man caring for his children while begrudgingly feeling grateful to Rodger for stepping in when he couldn't, Charlie folded his hands on the table and his brows knitted together. He was about to ask more when their food arrived at the table. 'Well, well, look at this magnificent feast.' Charlie couldn't believe the mound of food on the mammoth porcelain plate was all his. 'Where do I start?'



‘Just tuck in.’ Marty gathered his steak sandwich and brought it to his mouth.

Charlie did the same, taking a decent bite and groaning in pleasure. ‘Wowers,’ he garbled through his tasty mouthful. ‘This is amazing.’

‘Too right it is,’ Marty garbled back.

Savouring their lunch, they remained quiet for a few minutes.

‘So, Marty, now we’ve gotten the crappy stuff out of the way, how about you give me the good news,’ Charlie said between bites of his super-long chips dunked in tomato sauce.

‘Well, I just thought you’d like to know. Rodger asked Grace to marry him, but she said no.’

‘Oh. I see.’ Charlie took far too much pleasure from the fact that Grace had rejected being Mrs Burrows. ‘And how did he take that?’

‘He was pretty upset, but eventually got over it, and now they seem ...’ Marty half shrugged. ‘Content, I suppose.’

‘Content, hey?’ Charlie dunked another chip into his sea of sauce.

‘Yeah. She doesn’t look at Rodger the same way she used to look at you, Charlie.’ Marty paused, tipping his head from side to side as if trying to find the right words. ‘You know Rodger is my good friend and always will be, but if I’m being honest, she and Rodger are more of a friendship than a relationship. You and Grace ... you were just meant to be.’

‘I see,’ Charlie said again, not knowing what else to say.

Taking a sip from his Coke, Marty regarded Charlie over the top of the glass. ‘Did you and Grace ever legally divorce?’

Charlie shrugged. ‘I honestly don’t know.’ He drew in a breath. ‘I filled out my side of the paperwork then sent it to Grace to sign and file.’

Marty pondered this for a few lengthy moments. ‘Did you get anything back to say it was done?’

‘No, but I didn’t expect to, given that I was in prison.’ Charlie’s mind whirled with possibilities now.

‘So, if she never filed it ... you could still lawfully be husband and wife?’ Marty’s eyes were as wide as their empty lunch plates.

‘Possibly.’ Charlie managed a deadpan expression even as excitement bubbled within.

‘Man, oh man.’ Marty’s brows rose to his receding hairline. ‘If that’s the case, it’s no wonder she said no.’

Charlie was at a loss for words.

‘And the plot thickens,’ Marty said, shaking his head.

Charlie nodded. ‘Indeed it does.’

‘Time’s a wasting.’ Marty slapped the table and stood. ‘Come on. Let’s get you home and settled, then you and Grace can work out when you can catch up with your kids.’

Nothing mattered more to Charlie than being able to look his children in the eyes, and tell them how sorry he was, and that he loved them, but he knew he had to follow Grace’s lead on when and where he could do that.

Later that day, after taking care of practicalities like withdrawing money and buying groceries – all while ignoring the hushed whispers around him – Charlie took a slow wander through the rooms of the homestead, opening every window to allow the freshness of the outside in. With a keen eye, he noted all the painting and cleaning and refurbishment to be done – the minimal furniture would do the trick until he had the time and money to get new things – and he felt grateful for the renewed sense of purpose breathing life back into the homestead would give him.

Charlie left the sanctuary of his childhood home and sought out the stone stairway hugging the steep cliffs at the highest point of Moonflower Acres. Having lost himself in the

magic of this place that he'd taken for granted before being locked away, time was getting away from him, but before the day ended, he needed to hear the squeak of sand underfoot, and feel the ocean kissing his skin.

Passing the old chicken coop, overgrown with brambles, he made a mental note to tidy it up so he could buy some chickens and enjoy fresh eggs daily. Then he might look at getting a couple of cows and a goat, maybe even a few ducks – he loved the richness of their eggs for baking. A vegetable and herb garden were also on his list – he was going to be a busy man, and he liked the thought. His goal was to become as self-sufficient as possible, to make good use of the land his forefathers had spilt blood, sweat and tears over so he too could one day pass this land on to his children.

Coming to the end of the earthen track, he ducked beneath a canopy of flowering shrubs. The old metal gate groaned as he unlatched the lock and swung it open before he carefully made his way down each uneven step to the shoreline of the beach below.

With his trousers rolled up to his knees and the turquoise water lapping over his bare feet, he enjoyed the sensation of each wave sinking him deeper into the sand. He hadn't realised quite how much he'd missed the pull and push of the ebbing and flowing sea, or the squawking of the seagulls soaring high above him as they hunted for their dinner. Other than a lone fisherman at the end of the pier with his line dangling in the water and a bucket at his feet, the beach was deserted. Blinking into the dazzling sunshine, Charlie admired the way the ocean appeared to kiss the far-reaching horizon. He'd gone from a three-by-three cell to his very own stretch of Sapphire Bay shoreline – there was so much vastness, so much freedom, and he was going to make sure he enjoyed every bit of it. What a blessed man he was, to call such a heavenly place his home.

Closing his eyes, he breathed the salty breeze in deeply, feeling it rekindling the fire deep down in his soul. His heart warmed and, little by little, his body unclenched. For the first

time in years, he felt truly alive, as if he could finally breathe. Prison had taken so much from him, but it had also given him the time he'd needed to overcome his demons. Behind prison walls, there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide; he'd had to face everything he'd tucked away or stupidly drowned with alcohol. Now, being able to plant himself firmly in the present moment, he could *really* feel the sun upon his skin, he could *really* appreciate the gentle breeze stirring his hair, and the taste of the salt upon his lips was delightful. From this day, he would focus on life's simple pleasures.

The sun was beginning its descent behind the mountains as he traipsed up the twenty-eight stairs that led back to the homestead. With his pocket full of seashells and his heart full of Mother Nature's breath, his soul was singing.

The cool early-evening breeze rustled the leaves in the canopy of trees above him, dappling the path in shadows as he moseyed along. A leisurely twenty-five-minute stroll across the lush green fields found him arriving back at the homestead to an unexpected visitor. Spotting her, he felt his heart explode from his chest, as if desperately trying to reach for the silhouette on his verandah, for it was one he knew like the back of his hand.

'Grace.' Her name carried from his lips and had her turning in his direction. The years had been kind to her, and her exquisiteness stole his breath.

She appeared dazed, but then she smiled ever so softly. 'Charlie. Hi.' With quiet intensity, she watched him taking steps to close the distance as she tugged her shawl in tighter. 'I didn't think you were home, so I was just about to go, but I got caught up in the views.' She sighed, lifting her eyes to the panorama. 'I'd forgotten just how beautiful this place is.'

'Yes, it most certainly is gorgeous.' *Just like you.* Charlie hadn't forgotten Grace's timeless beauty, but witnessing her in the flesh after almost six years of only seeing her in his memories and dreams was like seeing an exquisite piece of art for the very first time. 'I wasn't expecting to see you, so I'm

sorry if I seem a little stunned.’ It was more than the fact that she had always had this mesmerising effect on him, but he wasn’t about to admit that. There was way too much water under the bridge for romantic sentiment.

‘I totally understand.’ She met him at the top of the steps. ‘I hope you don’t mind me popping in unannounced.’

‘No, of course I don’t.’ Not knowing what to do with his hands, he slipped both into his pockets, fighting the urge to sweep her into his arms. ‘It’s really good to see you.’ She smelt of strawberries and sunflowers and the wildest of honey.

‘You too, Charlie. I have to say, you’re looking really good.’ Her soft smile spread to the crinkly corners at her striking sea-green eyes. ‘Much better than I expected, given ... well, everything.’

‘Thanks, Grace, and you’re looking well too.’

*And beautiful and stunning and breathtaking.*

‘Thank you, Charlie.’

So formal, so measured, so ... odd were their replies to each other that Charlie had to put an end to it. ‘I’ve missed you, Grace.’

She pressed her lips together as if to stop telling him the same before nodding. Time seemed to stop and rewind as they held each other’s gazes as though reading one another’s souls. Then the magical moment was lost.

Charlie cleared his throat. ‘Shall we sit?’

‘Yes, I think that’s a good idea.’ She glanced toward the settee they’d spent countless nights cuddled up in together, in what felt like another lifetime. ‘I think we’ve got a few things to talk about.’

Wandering toward it, Charlie took a seat and she sat beside him. She crossed her legs, and her hands came to rest on her knee. ‘So, first things first. I suppose you know about Rodger and me?’

‘Yes, Marty filled me in.’ He adored the way the rosy hues of the setting sun shone in her eyes. ‘Thank you for sending him to pick me up.’

‘I wasn’t going to let you make your own way back, Charlie. And I’m glad he told you, because I asked him to, if he was comfortable in doing so.’ She paused, looking toward the twilight sky before she drew in a breath. ‘Rodger was there for me and the kids, Charlie, and they’ve grown quite fond of him over the years, as have I.’ She turned back to look at him. ‘So I hope you can let go of your animosity. I’ve said as much to him. I want us all to move forward, at the very least for the children.’

Charlie was speechless. They were so close, and she was so strikingly beautiful in every single way. He wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss her. But he didn’t have the right to, or even a hint of an invitation.

‘Charlie, did you just hear what I said?’ Frustration crinkled her eyes.

‘Sorry, yes. I promise I’ll do my upmost best to be courteous in his company.’ His jaw worked as he imagined doing just that.

She breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Thank you. That means a lot.’ Her appreciative smile was filled with the glowing warmth of her heart – one that had once only had room for him.

‘I’d do anything for you, and the children.’ Charlie arched a brow. ‘But, just between you and me, that doesn’t mean I’ll ever like the man.’

She nodded. ‘I know. I don’t expect you to.’

Suddenly realising his lack of hospitality, he sucked in a breath. ‘Oh dear, I’m so sorry, Grace, I haven’t even offered you a drink. It’s just, well, I’m not used to playing host anymore.’ He stood to go and make her something. ‘I can do coffee, or tea, or juice ...’

‘No, I’m good, thanks, Charlie.’ Grace chuckled as she patted the seat. ‘Sit back down and relax.’

He did, but a little bit closer to her this time.

After more conversation about the kids and how they were all doing at school, and how well the tearoom was doing, they fell into a companionable silence as the sun gave way to a star-studded night. Charlie silently captured the moment with her by his side and tucked it away in his heart – it was a perfect end to the first day of the rest of his life.

Eventually sneaking a lengthy sideways glance, Charlie broke the quiet with a soft chuckle. ‘Do you remember that time we fell asleep on the beach and woke up to a wave crashing over us?’

To his delight, the memory made her smile. ‘Oh, yes, how could I forget it?’ she chortled. ‘We were both soaked to the skin and my shoes were nowhere to be seen, so you piggybacked me all the way home then ran me a nice warm bubble bath.’

‘I most certainly did.’ Something hidden inside his heart began to stir, as if waking from a deep slumber. ‘I loved getting your letters each month, Grace, so thank you for sending them. I read each one hundreds of times.’ He wasn’t about to tell her how he depended on receiving his monthly updates in her cursive handwriting, or how he would kiss the pages countless times, with tears in his eyes. ‘And the photos of the kids as they were growing up ... my goodness, I cherished each and every one of them.’ He sighed. ‘They really helped me through from one day to the next.’

‘I’m glad they brought you comfort, Charlie. It was the very least I could do.’ Her smile was gently sympathetic. ‘So, when are you going to come and visit the children?’

Nervous tension gripped Charlie’s stomach. ‘That’s up to you, Grace, and the children, not that we can call Hope a child anymore, at nineteen.’ He rubbed the stubble on his jaw.

‘I don’t have to go in to the teahouse tomorrow, so how about you come around for some afternoon tea? Rodger will be playing golf,’ she added when he hesitated.

‘I’d love that, but are you sure the children want to see me?’

‘Yes, Charlie, they do, but just bear in mind that it’s going to take some time for them to become comfortable with you, given how long it’s been.’ She bit her lip and glanced away, blinking fast. ‘It’s been tough for them, living with the stigma of a father in prison.’

Charlie hated himself for putting Grace and the children in that position, but he couldn’t rewind the clock. All he could do was use the time he had to make up for it. ‘I totally understand, and I’ll be sure to give them as much space and time as they need.’ With raw emotion rising, he got caught on his words. ‘The most important thing is that they’re happy.’

Grace nodded. ‘It’ll be slow and steady with Hope and the boys, I think. But for Ava, she’s still young enough to be sweetly innocent, and a little more ready to love her daddy.’ She looked to her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. ‘I’ve made sure to talk about you as often as I could, and tell them what a wonderful husband and father you were.’ When she brought her eyes back to his, they were filled with so much tenderness, and so much heartbreak. ‘We’re all human and we all make mistakes, Charlie. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

Choked up, Charlie took a lengthy moment to respond. ‘You are one amazing woman, Grace.’

She offered him a wispy smile. ‘I don’t know about that, Charlie. I just want my family to love each other.’ She looked as if she were holding tears at bay. ‘Because, like I’ve instilled in each of our four beautiful children, life is too short for holding onto any resentment.’

If she burst into tears, he’d have no choice but to take her into his arms and comfort her. ‘Like I said, you’re an amazing



woman.’ He took a breath in a bid to stop his own tears from rising. ‘While we’ve got this moment to ourselves, can I ask, did you end up filing the divorce paperwork I posted back to you?’

‘I, um ...’ She blinked owlshly then glanced down at her wrist. ‘My god, is that really the time?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t have a watch.’ He leant in, and his brows rose. ‘Wowsers, it’s almost eight. We’ve been sitting here for a couple of hours.’

‘I’d best be getting home before Rodger thinks I’ve run off with you.’ She chuckled a little awkwardly then came to her feet. ‘Thanks for the chat. I’d forgotten what a great listener you are, Charlie.’

‘No need to thank me.’ Wishing they *could* run off together, Charlie stood. ‘I could sit here and listen to you talking all night long, Grace.’ He walked her across the verandah, down the steps and toward where she’d parked her car around the side of the homestead. ‘About the divorce, Grace.’ He wasn’t about to let her get away without explaining. ‘Are we ...?’

Clearing her throat, she swallowed down hard and, after a slight hesitation, forced a wobbly smile. ‘Can we talk about this another time, please? We’ve covered enough for one day.’

He wasn’t about to push her to explain when they’d ended her visit on a high note. ‘Yes, of course. When you’re ready.’ She looked incredibly anxious, and his chest tightened at witnessing her so troubled, so fragile. ‘Can ... can I give you a hug?’

She stood silently for a moment, and then a moment more, but then she opened her arms to him. ‘Yes, of course.’

Charlie didn’t need any more of an invitation to hold the woman he’d loved, dreamt about, adored and admired for almost all of his life. Grace was the woman he lived for, and would die for. The same went for his four children. Always.

Whether living under the same roof or worlds apart, his life was finally all about them.

Slipping his arms around her, he pulled her close, and after a few seconds, she melted against him as though instinctively. With a heavy heart, he could tell she needed this closeness just as much as he did. If only they could go back to being together, and so very much in love. With her head resting against his chest, he felt as if she were right where she should be. He was born to love her, to protect her. He wanted to tell her so, but he held the words back. It would only complicate what was a rare, real, pure, undying love.

They stayed like that for a few glorious heartbeats, lost in one another as the world faded away, but then she unravelled from his arms and stepped out of his reach, her expression a picture of tenderness.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Charlie rocked back on his heels. ‘Goodnight, Grace.’

‘Goodnight, Charlie.’ She stepped forward, reaching up on her tippy toes, and pecked his cheek. ‘It’s been really nice catching up. We’ll see you tomorrow, around two-ish?’

‘You most certainly will.’

She flashed a careful smile over her shoulder before climbing behind the wheel, revving the engine to life then, after one more reflective glance, driving away.

The faint scent of her familiar floral perfume lingered as Charlie watched her rear lights fade into the darkness of night, before turning, climbing the stairs and heading inside to his big, lonely house.

Just across the water, under Rodger’s roof, was a family who could fill it – his family. If only he could try to be a husband and father again, one more time.

# CHAPTER

## 17

**2002**

The sweet singsong of the honeyeaters' morning choir serenaded Grace through the bathroom window. She tried her best to lose herself to their melody like she usually could, but today her mind was elsewhere. Dabbing her favourite perfume on her pulse points, she felt a tinge of nerves as she thought about Rodger and Charlie sitting at opposite ends of the dining table tonight. They hadn't had to be together a lot over the past six years, but it was Hudson's and Bryn's eighteenth birthdays and they'd specifically requested for them to all be together. Both men had been warned that they'd better be on their best behaviour or there'd be hell to pay from Grace. Not that she had reason to think otherwise. They'd both been, for want of a better word, civil when in the vicinity of one another, but the undercurrent of their abhorrence was still clear, at least to her, but sometimes also to the children, not to mention their mutual friends. Poor Jenny and Marty were quite often the ones stuck in the middle.

Huffing with her worrisome train of thought, Grace lifted her chin and sucked in a breath as she rubbed her face cream on.

*It'll all be okay.*

A few minutes later, Rodger's reflection appeared in the mirror above the sink, followed by a waft of his spicy aftershave. 'I'm off to work, darling. I'll see you tonight,' he called over the whirr of the hairdryer.

'Okay.' Turning, she leant toward him, pecking him on the lips. 'Have a good day.' She flicked the off button, and the bathroom fell silent.

‘I’ll do my best to try to enjoy a long day of mind-numbing meetings.’ Rolling his eyes, he flashed her a smile. ‘Would you like me to pick up anything for the party?’

‘No, I have it covered, but thanks for the offer.’

‘I thought as much, Little Miss Organised.’ Catching his reflection again, he straightened his tie. ‘Have you reminded Charlie to bring the gifts you hid at his place?’

‘I have.’ Grace kept her replies short. This was a conversation that had led to a few heated arguments over the past couple of weeks.

‘Excellent.’ He turned back to her, his face a picture of uncertainty. ‘But the question remains, will he remember to bring them?’

‘Rodger,’ she said warningly.

He stopped in the doorway. ‘Sorry, Grace, but his inability to be depended upon is beyond my comprehension.’

‘Charlie is very dependable when it comes to important issues, Rodger, you know that. He’s just forgetful with the smaller things.’

Rodger’s brows bumped together in a scowl. ‘I really hate the way you defend him.’

‘Rodger, I don’t want to do this again.’ She turned her back to him and started applying foundation. ‘He and I are friends and we always will be, especially for the children’s sakes. I’m defending him like I would anyone else.’

With an almighty huff, Rodger fell silent for a few moments. ‘Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry.’ He cleared his throat. ‘And on that note, I’ll see you later.’

In the middle of washing her hands, she looked back to him. ‘Yes, see you tonight.’

She watched him walk away, her heart dropping like a lead balloon. They weren’t perfect, but no couple was. Maybe if she’d agreed to marry him ...but she couldn’t bring herself to

file the divorce paperwork. Having the same last name as her four children meant the world to her, not that Rodger knew that was why she'd said no to his proposal, not once, not twice, but three times. After explaining to him that it wasn't anything to do with him, it was just that she never wanted to marry again, a fourth proposal was most certainly off the cards, and she was okay with that.

She did love Rodger – how could she not, given the kind man he was? – but as Charlie had said to her on that fateful day, loving someone and being in love with them were two very different things. She'd tried, again and again, to step over that threshold, to love Rodger as she had once loved Charlie, with every inch of her being, but she couldn't, and she didn't know if that was because Charlie had broken her heart so badly, it was beyond repair, or if it was because she would never love another like she had loved Charlie because he was her one and only true love in this lifetime.

So many ifs, buts and maybes ... she could send herself crazy. For now, she didn't have the time or the headspace to think about it. Today was all about their amazing, handsome, clever, kind sons. Making both Hudson and Bryn feel happy and loved was her entire focus.

After swiping on some rouge, she applied a bit of gloss, smacked her lips together and put on a happy face before she wandered from the bathroom with her to-do list rolling around in her head. Barely stepping over the brand-spanking new Roomba vacuum cleaner Rodger had brought home last week, Grace marvelled at how it cleaned the floor all on its own. Talk about progress. Next, given that she was useless at reverse parallel parking, she hoped someone would invent a car that would park itself. She chuckled at the thought.

‘Mum?’ Ava's voice carried down the hall.

‘I'm in here, love.’

Her hair as wild as her free spirit, Ava stuck her head through the doorway. ‘Is it alright if Dad and I head over to the shops today, so I can help him pick out a present for the boys?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Hands going to her hips, she tutted. ‘Although, I would have thought he’d have already gotten them something by now, given it’s their birthday today.’

‘Muum, shh!’ Ava held a finger to her lips and brandished the cordless phone. ‘He probably just heard you say that.’

‘Yes, I did.’ Charlie’s booming voice carried from the receiver.

‘Oops.’ Grace covered her mouth as she dashed to Ava’s side. ‘Sorry, Charlie,’ she bellowed.

Ava hit loudspeaker. ‘Did you hear that too, Dad?’

‘Yes, I did,’ he chuckled. ‘All good, Grace. I can take it.’

‘I know you can,’ she teased. ‘You’re used to me lecturing you, after years of it.’

‘This is true.’ His gravelly laugh echoed. ‘And just for the record, I’ve already got Huddy and Bryn their main gifts. I just want to add to it.’

Ava looked to the ceiling, mumbling something beneath her breath.

Grace flashed her a what-the? look. ‘Oh, well, in that case, good for you, Charlie, and I’m sorry for being so quick to judge.’

‘Like I said, I can take it.’ Charlie’s tone was lighthearted.

Laughing, Grace enjoyed the spirited banter. She and Rodger had never engaged in it.

Ava blew an impatient puff. ‘Would you like to have a conversation while I go and get ready?’ She shoved the phone in Grace’s direction.

‘No,’ they answered in unison.

Ava waltzed off with the phone to her ear. Grace loved how close they’d become over the years – it warmed her heart no end. Unexpectedly, Ava had been the last child to accept

her father coming back into their lives. With Rodger's gentle encouragement to give their father a go – not that she was allowed to let Charlie know this – Hudson and Bryn had been the most forgiving, with both boys excited to have Charlie at their every football game. Hope came next, and she and Charlie had bonded over their love of nature. Ava had lagged for about a year, but with Charlie's gentle love and persistence, he'd finally broken down his youngest daughter's walls. Now, they were inseparable.

Her step a little lighter than fifteen minutes ago, Grace got back to her chores. Making the bed with fresh sheets, she held the comforter to her nose and inhaled the scent of her rose and ylang ylang fabric softener. There was something to be said for climbing into a freshly made bed. A once-a-week job, habitually on a Friday, which was always her best night's sleep. As her mum always said, cleanliness is next to godliness. Rodger found her love of a sparkling house a little overbearing, but she wasn't about to change. She felt good when the home was spick-and-span, making it a haven for her family.

An hour later, taking the last sip of her ice-cold tea, Grace rinsed her cup and popped it into the dishwasher. The thunder of heavy feet fell down the hallway, and Hudson and Bryn exploded into the kitchen. Never a day went by without the pair of them playfully feuding over something.

'Hey, mumma bear!' they said in unison.

'My beautiful boys, happy birthday to you again.' Grace held her arms out and they came to her. Both young men were a foot higher than her five foot nothing, and built solidly, like their father, and she felt safely cocooned within their arms. 'I love you both so very much, you know that right?' she said, stepping back and blinking fast. 'And I'm so proud of both of you.'

'No, you never tell us anything of the sort,' Bryn said playfully.

‘Yeah, we feel very unloved,’ Hudson agreed, his trademark cheeky smile plastered on his handsome face.

‘Oh, stop it, you pair.’ Grace tugged the tea towel from her shoulder, and swiped it in their direction. ‘Now, what can I make you both for a birthday breakfast, before you head off to wow your teacher with your culinary skills?’

‘Oh, I’m all good thanks, Mum.’ Hudson grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl. ‘I’m saving myself for your awesome cooking tonight.’

‘Me too.’ Unlike his health-conscious brother, Bryn grabbed a box of chocolate biscuits out of the walk-in pantry.

Grace’s hands instinctively went to her hips. ‘How many times have I told you that you shouldn’t be starting the day off with junk food, Bryn Wilson?’

‘Loads of times. But it’s my birthday, sooo ...’ He tossed a biscuit in his mouth and grinned, looking just like his father would have in the same situation, although she had to admit that his sweet tooth undeniably came from her.

‘Come on, we better head.’ Hudson planted a kiss on Grace’s cheek. ‘Love ya, Mum. Catch you later.’

Bryn followed suit. ‘Love you more than this clown, Mum,’ he said, provoking a jab to the ribs from Hudson.

Grace watched them hightail it out of the kitchen, their backpacks over their shoulders. ‘Good luck with your exams!’

A chorus of ‘Thanks!’ was followed by the slamming of the front door.

Rolling her eyes, she chuckled to herself. Her boys were so alike in so many ways, yet they were vastly different. Veering off on different culinary paths, they’d both chosen to become chefs – Hudson wanted to specialise in cooking food where every morsel of animal and vegetable was used, whereas Bryn was all about becoming a pastry chef. They were living the dream that she never got to fulfil, of becoming a qualified



chef, and all off their own backs. It was as though the love for preparing delicious food was in the blood.

As for Hope, she was falling in love with a military man just like her father. Grace just hoped and prayed he didn't encounter the same demons that Charlie had. As they'd all learned the hard way, hurt people hurt people.

The phone chimed on the kitchen bench, and she snatched it up before it went to the answering machine. 'Hello, Grace speaking.'

'Hey, Mum.'

'Hope! Hi darling, I was just thinking about you.' Gazing out the kitchen window, she watched Hudson and Bryn disappear down the driveway in Hudson's beloved Ford truck. 'How's it going?'

'Yeah, pretty good. Just navigating the Sydney traffic right now.' The sound of a car horn blared. 'I'm running a little behind time, as usual, but don't worry, I should make my plane.'

'Okay, I hope so. The boys are going to be so happy you're flying up to surprise them.' Another horn resonated down the line and she grimaced. 'Just make sure you drive safely, won't you?'

'I'm not the one driving, Mum.'

Grace wandered over to the oven. 'Oh, are you in a cab?'

'No, Kelvin offered to bring me.'

'How lovely of him.' She turned the temperature to one hundred and eighty degrees. 'Say hi to him for me, and tell him we're sad he won't be making it up here for the weekend.'

'You're on loudspeaker, Mum, so he just heard that.'

'Oh, hi Kelvin,' Grace said to the man she was yet to meet, but had heard so many good things about.

'Hey, Mrs ... uh, Hope's mum.' Kelvin's voice was deep and friendly.

‘Just Grace is fine.’ Going to the fridge, she grabbed the bowl of fresh eggs Charlie had given to her – they tasted so much better than shop-bought ones.

‘Okay, Mum, we’re almost at the airport, so I’ll be seeing you in a couple of hours.’

‘I can’t wait to give you a big hug! Two months is ages between visits.’ She walked into the pantry in search of the rest of the ingredients for the birthday cake. ‘Have you sent your father the flight number and arrival time?’

‘Yes, he rang me this morning to tell me he’ll be there to pick me up, with bells on.’

‘Great.’ Grace quietly appreciated how Charlie always remembered the important stuff. ‘I love you, my darling.’

‘Love you too, Mum. Bye for now.’

‘Bye, love.’

Hanging up the phone, Grace decided to take five minutes out before ploughing into her morning of cooking. She had to head into town to grab a final few things straight after, so now would be the only time she’d have to take a breather. Over the years, through all her trials and tribulations, she’d learnt how important it was to take the time needed to stop and smell the roses. It made for a much happier, more peaceful life.

Wandering onto the front verandah of the Waterside Estate home they’d shared with Rodger for just over a decade, she leant on the top timber railing and gazed across the ocean, toward what had once been her home and haven, Moonflower Acres. Charlie had been back there for almost six years now, and although he appeared happy living life on his own, especially with how fabulously successful his book had been, she couldn’t help but wonder if he was ever going to meet a woman who he’d choose to share his life with. Word was a few of the local ladies had tried to date him, but Charlie hadn’t blinked an eye their way.

She knew it was going to be hard to see him with another, when the time came around. Yet she was hopeful it would, for

Charlie's sake. He'd come a long way from the troubled young man she'd married, and had healed into a wonderful gentleman she adored and cared for immensely. No matter the fact she'd moved on in her life, she'd come to accept that Charlie would always be on her mind, be it at the back of it, the forefront of it, or just lingering at the edges. And he would always own a piece of her heart. He was the father of her children, so how could he not?

Drawing in a deep breath, she brought herself back from across the water, and centred her mind on the day ahead. There was much to be done. With the hours ticking by, she bustled around the kitchen with her favourite ABBA CD on, humming and enjoying every second of cooking this mammoth feast for those she held dearest. She'd asked everyone for their favourite dishes. For Hudson and Bryn, it was her red wine and garlic pot roast. For Rodger, it was gruyere potato bake. Ava begged for roast honey pumpkin with crumbled hazelnuts, Hope had asked for green beans cooked with bacon, brown sugar and butter, and Charlie, of course, had requested his all-time favourite, her chive pinwheel rolls to mop up the rich, meaty gravy.

It was close to midday when she was finally draining the sink. She popped the dishcloth back in its place, then stepped back and surveyed one end of the kitchen to the other, making sure everything was done. Spotting a cobweb in the far right corner, above her Aga, she went to grab the broom from the storage cupboard beneath the stairs when the doorbell chimed. Changing trajectory, she made a beeline for the front door.

'Oh hey, Charlie.' She flashed him a friendly smile as she swung the screen door open. 'Why didn't you just let yourself in, Ava?'

Ava stepped inside, her hands full of shopping bags. She gave Grace a kiss on the cheek as she passed. 'I forgot to bring my keys.'

'Oh, fair enough.' She waved Charlie in, then turned to watch Ava traipsing up the staircase with her shopping haul.

‘Looks like you two were busy.’

Charlie gave her an exaggerated nod. ‘That girl of ours can shop. I’m pooped.’

‘You would be.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘You’ve still got half an hour. Would you like a drink before you head to the airport?’

‘Sounds nice, as long as I’m not putting you out?’

‘Of course not.’ She led him down the hallway and into the kitchen. ‘Cold or hot?’

‘Oh, it’s a bit of a hot one out there today.’ He grinned, tempting her into banter.

Happy, she took the bait. ‘Okay, yes, it is hot out there smartypants.’ She chortled, rolling her eyes in humour. ‘Would you like a cold or hot drink?’

Charlie’s grin was wickedly mischievous. ‘I’ll go for something cold.’

‘Iced tea it is, then.’ She collected the jug from the fridge and poured two glasses.

Gratefully taking his glass, Charlie took a sip. ‘Wow, this is very tasty, did you make it yourself?’

‘Yes.’ Not feeling as if she had to play the perfect host when it was Charlie, Grace continued to potter about the kitchen. ‘I find it refreshing when it’s a hot day.’

‘It sure is.’ He took a hearty glug. ‘You’re one talented woman.’

‘It’s only iced tea, Charlie, but thank you.’ Turning to the stove, she adjusted the flame beneath the simmering pot. ‘So, have you had any luck with your agent, regarding the book being made into a movie?’ It was a casual question.

‘Actually, that’s why I walked Ava in, Grace. I was hoping to have a private chat with you.’

Grace peered over her shoulder. ‘Oh? Is everything okay?’

‘Yes, it’s nothing bad,’ he said quickly, to clear any worry from her mind. ‘On the contrary, actually.’

Intrigued, Grace watched him rise and move closer, stopping a respectable distance from her. Their gazes locked and held for a few moments. Instinctively, Grace’s hand went to the brooch Charlie had gifted her all those years ago. She still wore it, when it matched her chosen outfit.

‘I like that you still wear it.’ Pointing to the brooch, he cleared his throat and smiled. ‘Well, it looks like all my hard work is going to pay off, and I have something for you.’ Retrieving a folded bit of paper from his pocket, he held it out. ‘They’ve finally upped their offer to option my book for a movie.’

Accepting it a little hesitantly, Grace unfolded what she realised was a cheque made out to her. Her eyes widened when she spotted the six-figured amount. ‘Charlie, oh my goodness! This is way too much.’ She went to hand it back. ‘I mean this in the politest of ways, but I don’t want your money.’

‘I refuse your refusal.’ Holding his hands up, Charlie stepped back from her. ‘I’ve been wishing for this moment since I first put pen to paper almost thirteen years ago.’ He sighed a little sadly. ‘Nothing will ever make up for the years of hardship I put you and the kids through, but this will at least help make your and their lives that much easier now.’

Tears blurred her vision and, before she could hold them at bay, rolled down her cheeks. Sniffling, she covered her mouth. ‘But Charlie, I don’t expect anything. You’ve made up for it all ten times over, with how caring you are to me and the children.’

‘I want you to have it, Grace. Please.’ His gaze was imploring. ‘It’s taken way longer than I first expected, but the offer has made it worth the wait.’

Unsure of what to do, Grace jumped when the front doorbell rang. She quickly wiped her tears. ‘I’d best get that. Back in a sec.’

‘Okay.’ He stepped out of the way so she could pass.

Her mind in a spin, Grace opened the door to two police officers, their faces grave. ‘Hello, can I help you?’

The older officer addressed her. ‘Are you Grace Burrows, ma’am?’

She wasn’t about to explain the convoluted story of how she was actually Grace Wilson. ‘Yes, what’s this about?’ She blinked into the revolving blue light still spinning on the police car parked in the driveway.

Solemn-faced, he briefly looked to his partner and then said, ‘May we come in, Mrs Burrows?’

‘Of course.’ She stepped back, her heart racing. ‘Come and have a seat in the lounge room.’ Ava was upstairs, Hope was midair and the twins had talked to her on the phone not long ago... surely they were all okay. So whatever could this be about?

Charlie met her in the hallway, the two officers in tow. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘I ... I’m not sure,’ she replied, her voice trembling.

He placed a reassuring hand upon her back. ‘I’ve got you, okay?’

She nodded, grateful he was here to support her. The silence thick, the four of them sat.

This time, the younger officer spoke. ‘I’m afraid Rodger Burrows has had a terrible car accident, and he did not survive. You are listed as the next of kin.’

‘No. Please ...’ The world was beginning to sway. Grace wrapped her arms around herself, as if shielding her heart, and although she heard the words, it didn’t feel like any of this was real.

*Rodger, dead?* It couldn’t be so. It just wasn’t possible.

The next thing she knew, she was gathered in Charlie’s arms, sobbing her broken heart out, and wishing with

everything she had that she could rewind the clock back to this morning and tell Rodger one last time that she loved him.

\* \* \*

Five days after Grace's world was tipped upside-down and inside out, Charlie pulled up out the front of her and Rodger's home, dressed in black. She might still be his wife on paper, but for the past ten or so years, she and Rodger had shared an intimate relationship, so her grief was understandably palpable.

Stepping from the car and slipping the keys into his pocket, he took a moment to gather himself. His heart broke for her loss, and that of the children. Heck, even he was saddened by Rodger's untimely passing – Charlie quietly appreciated how much love he had given to both Grace and the children.

He was about to knock on the front door, when it swung open and Ava greeted him. 'Hi, Dad.' Her smile was soft and sad, and her eyes were red-rimmed. 'Come in. Mum's still getting ready.'

'Hi love.' He stepped inside. 'How are you coping?'

She shrugged. 'Sometimes I'm okay. Other times, like today, I just can't seem to stop crying.'

'I know, poppet. I'm so sorry you're going through this.' His soul aching, he pulled her to him, and she hugged him tightly. 'I know it doesn't feel like it now, Ava, but it will get better with time.' He tipped his head to look down and hold her teary gaze. 'Just be kind to yourself, okay?'

She nodded. 'Thanks, Dad. I love you.'

'Love you too, poppet.'

Grace emerged from the hallway and, seeing the two hugging, graced him with an appreciative smile. 'Hi, Charlie.'

Unravelling from his arms, Ava sniffled and turned to her mum. 'Oh my gosh, you look beautiful, Mum.'

Offering her compassionate eyes, Charlie had to silently agree. 'Are you two ready to go?'

Tight-lipped, Grace nodded, her haunted expression that of a widowed woman. 'Thank you, Charlie, for accompanying me and Ava.' Her voice was a strangled whisper. 'I don't think I could make it through this without you.'

'Don't mention it, Grace. I'm here for you and the kids, whenever you need me.' He offered his arm and she appreciatively hooked hers in. Then, step by steady step, he walked her to the car, helped her into her seat, then climbed back behind the wheel.

An hour and a half later, after an emotional service, the drive from the church to the cemetery was a silent one. Behind the hearse carrying Rodger's body, Grace's teary gaze was fastened to her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. Charlie couldn't blame her for not wanting to watch her love being driven to his final resting place.

Heading through the gates of Sapphire Bay Cemetery, past where his grandparents were buried, Charlie parked behind the row of cars lining the shady laneway. Helping Grace from the car, he kept both of his hands on her arms as she steadied herself. Hudson and Bryn were the first to meet them on the lush grass beneath a towering gum tree, soon followed by Hope, Kelvin, Ava, Jenny and Marty. Rodger's well-to-do parents had flown in last night, and were standing with Grace's parents, who had arrived three days ago from London. Rodger's mother looked over at him, regarding him with the dislike she'd never felt the need to hide when anywhere near him.

'Hudson, Bryn.' Stepping out of Grace's earshot, Charlie spoke softly to his two sons. 'Do you think it's the right thing for me to be a pallbearer?'

They both nodded. 'You and Rodger might never have seen eye to eye, but he did regard you as part of the family, Dad.' Hudson's usually deep, resounding voice was instead incredibly quiet.



‘He’s right.’ Bryn nodded. ‘Besides, I think it will mean a lot to Mum.’

‘Okay then.’ Charlie was overcome with emotion he was far from revealing in this moment so, squaring his shoulders and drawing in a deep breath, he blinked faster and looked to the rise of the hill, to where, along with his sons, Marty and two of Rodger’s cousins, would be carrying Rodger.

Ten minutes later, with the mourners gathered at the graveside, Charlie heaved the mahogany coffin onto his shoulder. Then, step by step, they marched the man who’d been both family and foe to him up the hill. As gracefully as possible, they lowered the casket onto the cloth straps and, with his gaze respectfully cast downwards, Charlie came to Grace’s side.

Back at the wake, Charlie stood back, nursing a cup of extra-strong black coffee, and watched Grace float around the room. Forever the gracious hostess, even when she’d just lost her companion, she was making sure everyone else was okay when it was her who needed the most comfort. Although she was holding her own for now, Charlie knew her too well to believe it. He could see past her poker face – the quiver of her bottom lip, the extra crinkles at the corners of her beautiful eyes, the way she was taking shallow breaths, the covert dabs of her handkerchief when she thought nobody was watching. If he could, he’d take on all that heartbreak himself and save her from the engulfing pain of grief.

But he couldn’t, so he did the only thing he could, and made a solemn vow then and there that no matter what, he would be here for her, whenever she needed him, however she needed him. Because that was how true, unconditional, eternal love worked.

# CHAPTER

## 18

### Late 2005

Charlie knew from his extensive research that he had a one in eight hundred chance of hearing bad news in the next half an hour, which was reduced even further given that he was a man. Good odds, considering. Although he was nervous as all hell, he was focusing on the fact that it was a perfect spring day with a temperate breeze and crystal-clear blue sky. Surely nothing could go wrong when Mother Nature was putting on such a glowing performance, he thought as he pulled up out front of the oncologist and took a few moments to steady his racing heart.

Drawing in a breath, he thought about the last time he'd parked at this medical centre for his yearly physical. Generally fit and well, he hadn't been concerned in the slightest. Just like every other routine appointment, he and his doctor had chatted about the weather, politics and the latest cricket scores like the old friends they'd become. That was, until the doctor found the disturbing lump, in his chest of all places, which had instantly pulled the proverbial rug out from beneath his feet. Next step had been the ultrasound, where the radiographer had refused to give him any indication as to what she'd seen. Then, for six excruciating days, he'd tried to get on with his daily life, as though there was nothing to be concerned about. He'd decided to keep his concerns from his friends, Grace, and especially the kids. They'd all had enough to deal with over the years; he just couldn't put them through this too. Not until he knew the hard facts, the truth of his future, or lack of.

Subsequently, to his dismay, his newly assigned oncologist had confirmed the mass and a CT scan had re-confirmed it. A biopsy had been done on what the oncologist was afraid would

be a malignant lump, and now here he was, almost a month later, ready to hear his future, or lack thereof.

Pulling what parts of himself he could gather together, he stepped out from behind the wheel, locked the car, shoved the keys into his pocket and took striding steps toward the sliding doors of the medical rooms while repeating his mantra to himself: *I've been fretting over nothing. It's all going to be fine.*

He may have silently told himself this countless times already, but at this very moment, while fighting to maintain his mindfulness, he was also mentally preparing for the worst. How could he not? Were all his prayers said in the dead of night going to be answered? Or was this about to be his comeuppance for making so many wrong decisions, ones that had caused his loved ones immeasurable grief?

Twenty-eight minutes later, shocked to his very core, yet somehow oddly numb, Charlie blinked into the eyes of his oncologist. 'Are you absolutely sure?' he finally said, his mouth feeling as if it were filled with sand as he rolled the C-word around in his mind.

'Yes, Charlie, I'm afraid so. And as I explained, it's already stage three, so we're going to have to move quickly with your treatment plan.' The doctor went on to clarify this a little more, but Charlie only heard snippets of the clarification.

'So ... how many stages are there?' he stammered.

'Four. So three is considered quite aggressive.'

'Jesus.' Charlie dropped his head into his hands, roughly rubbing his face. 'This is the worst news.'

'Yes, it is.' The oncologist heaved a sigh. 'I'm so sorry to be the bearer of it.' He removed his bottle-thick glasses. 'But, on the other side of the coin, the lymph nodes showed no sign of cancer, which is great news, so this is no death sentence, Charlie. You have options, and the treatment for this kind of cancer can be very effective.'

A man of action, Charlie didn't give himself much more time for the news to sink in. 'Right. Well, tell me, what do we do about it, doc?'

'Well, for the best chance of survival, a double mastectomy is a certain. And then we will need to start you with a course of chemotherapy as soon as possible after that.'

Charlie's brows knitted together. 'Okay, so when will the operation be?'

'Possibly within the next two weeks.' The doctor readjusted his glasses. 'I will speak with my receptionist and get her to send you an email tomorrow morning with all the details.'

'Okay. Thank you.' Charlie rose on wobbly legs.

The oncologist walked him to the door. 'I will be with you every step of the way, Charlie.'

'Thanks, doc.' Charlie fixed up his bill and collected brochures from the receptionist on cancer and how to deal with it, then stepped out into what was now a very imperfect spring day. Yes, the breeze was still temperate, and the sky was still strikingly blue, but it was so contradictory to his topsy-turvy world that it felt like a slap in the face.

Every step toward felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath his feet. On autopilot, Charlie wandered straight past his car. Realising a hundred metres down the road, he turned around and retraced his steps, the brochures slipping from his hand without him even noticing. His mind was spinning but one thing he knew for sure was that he wasn't about to tell his kids or Grace he was knocking on death's door. Not yet. He needed to get his own head around it all first.

He returned home, unsure of how he'd even got there. Reality hit him as soon he pulled into the garage, and he found he was angry with god, himself, the world, and even his oncologist for giving him such awful news. He'd already lost eight years of life in prison, did he really have to lose the life he'd made for himself now? Climbing from the car, he

retreated into his sanctuary, making sure to lock the door behind him. He didn't want any visitors tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day.

Losing track of time, he spent the rest of the night on the couch with his head heavy and crowded. The following morning, he woke to the shrill ringing of the house phone. He ignored it. It rang out three more times, which he also ignored. He wasn't ready to face the world, and wasn't sure when he would be.

Less than twenty minutes later, a firm rap at the front door had him stumbling toward it, bleary-eyed. 'Hold your horses, would you? I'm coming.'

Making sure his robe was tied tightly, he tugged the door open to a very concerned-looking Grace. 'Do you have breast cancer, Charlie?'

Shock had him internally reeling, but he kept his cool on the outside. 'Good morning to you too,' he said, trying to divert the conversation.

'Nice try, but I'm not doing this with you today.' She let herself through the flyscreen door and placed a hand on his arm. 'Yes or no?'

He swallowed hard then dropped his eyes to the floor. 'Yes.'

'Oh my god, Charlie.' Her voice broke. 'When ... how...?' The questions were babbled as she blinked faster.

'I only found out yesterday, and I haven't told a soul, so ...' He tipped his head, regarding her closely. 'How in heaven's name did you find out?'

'Mary popped around first thing this morning.'

'Mary?' He huffed. 'And how did she find out?'

Grace dug in her handbag, then held up the flyers he'd dropped. 'She salvaged these from where you dropped them. Said she called out to you, but you kept on walking, like you

were in some kind of trance.’ Grace’s voice broke and her forehead puckered. ‘When were you going to tell me?’

*Damn Mary and her big mouth.*

So much for keeping things private until he was ready to admit the C-word out loud. ‘Not today,’ he replied a little brusquely. ‘That was for certain.’

‘Then when, Charlie?’ Grace’s voice was soothingly soft.

‘Once I got my own head around it, I suppose.’

She nodded. ‘I understand.’ Biting her lip, she entangled an arm into his. ‘How about I make us a cuppa and you can fill me in on all the details?’

Charlie gave her hand a pat. ‘How about I make you a cuppa, and me one while I’m at it, and then I will tell you everything.’

‘Yes, okay.’ She followed him into the kitchen, where the conversation continued as he retrieved two mugs from the dishwasher, and she got the milk from the fridge.

Grace stood closely at his side, as if fearful to leave it. ‘So, when are they starting chemotherapy?’

Charlie passed a mug of steaming coffee to her. ‘My operation is next Thursday, and the chemotherapy starts two weeks after that.’ He took steps toward the doorway. ‘Let’s go and sit in our spot.’

‘That sounds perfect, Charlie.’ Side by side, she strolled with him to their chair on the verandah.

As they settled beside each other, Charlie took a few breaths laced with salty sea air before telling her all he knew so far. ‘I apparently have a seventy-five per cent chance of survival,’ he added at the end of the lengthy explanation.

‘I’m so sorry you’re going through this.’ Grace tilted her head to rest upon his shoulder. ‘But you’re not going to go through it alone.’ She looked up at him from beneath the long dark lashes with eyes that had always stirred his soul. ‘I’ll

collect you from the hospital after your surgery, and while you're having your chemo, you're going to come and stay with me.'

'I am, am I?' He almost chuckled, but given the weighty subject, stopped himself.

'Yes, you most certainly are, and I'm not taking no for an answer.' Her tone was authoritative.

Looking into the windows of her soul, raw emotion crashed over Charlie like a tidal wave, and he found it nearly impossible to hold back rising sobs. 'Thank you, Grace.' He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. 'I don't know what I'd do without you.' Touched by her kind heart, he pulled her a little closer.

'We're family, Charlie. Always have been and always will be.' She nestled into his side. 'I don't know what the kids and I would do without you.'

'We're quite a pair, aren't we?'

'That, Charlie Wilson, we most certainly are.'

\* \* \*

Ava pulled the car to a stop at the hospital door. 'Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you and Mum, Dad?'

Charlie shook his head. 'No, love. You go home and get some rest.'

'Okay.' She seemed unsure about doing so. 'I love you.'

'I love you too, poppet.'

Trying to ignore the raw pain of the stitches over where his breasts used to be, Charlie took slow, steady steps through the doors of the oncology ward. Grace was where she'd been the past two weeks, right by his side. News of his cancer had spread fast and wide, and their friends and acquaintances in the local community had rung, sent cards and flowers and called in with food to express their support.

Sitting them both in a pastel-coloured room, the head nurse explained the entire process in explicit detail. She then got him to sign a consent form. Charlie couldn't help but feel as if he were signing his life away.

Passing both the pen and paperwork back to the nurse, he looked to Grace. 'I would like you to go and enjoy a bit of sunshine while I get my treatment.'

'But Charlie, I want to be here with you.'

'I don't want you sitting around with me. You've done enough of that.' He waved her toward the doorway. 'Now, be gone with you.' He flashed her a cheeky smile.

She considered him hesitantly. 'Okay, but make sure you call me if you need me.'

He gave her a confirmative nod. 'I will.'

The nurse offered Grace a reassuring smile. 'I'll call you as soon as he's finished, Mrs ...'

'Wilson,' Grace replied. 'Grace Wilson.'

Hearing her saying his – their – last name, Charlie couldn't help but smile proudly as their gazes met, and held – so much was said in that silent moment.

'See you soon.' Grace stood and watched him being led through a swinging door.

'Yes, when I'm looking at you,' he replied.

After settling him into an armchair, a bubbly nurse approached him, pushing a trolley filled with syringes, bandages and medicines. 'Hello, Mr Wilson.' Her accent was very English, but not the posh kind, more cockney. 'I'm Kelly, and I'm going to be your chemotherapy nurse today.'

'Hello, Kelly. Call me Charlie, please.' With nerves running amok, his smile wavered.

'Okay, then, Charlie it is.' She quickly got to work and inserted a needle through the implanted port-a-cath under his



collarbone. ‘I’ll make sure to go slowly, seeing as this is your first time, okay?’

His throat tight with angst, all Charlie could do was nod.

Over the following minutes, Kelly checked in to see how he was doing. All went better than he’d expected until the final injection, which made him feel like his head was on fire. He told her as much. ‘Is it normal to feel like this?’ He held his skull tightly, feeling as if it were about to explode.

Her brown eyes filled with kindness as she crouched down at his side and placed a gentle hand over his. ‘It can be very uncomfortable, Charlie, but yes, it’s normal, for lack of a better word.’

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, wishing the time would speed up so Grace would be back by his side.

By the time that rolled around, he was feeling very under the weather. He was glad for the love of his life being back at his side, not only because her presence brought him immense comfort, but because he knew he wasn’t going to remember everything the head nurse was telling them.

‘For the first few weeks, as you can see, you’ve got quite a few tablets to take, but the good news is, after that initial period, the rest of your chemotherapy is tablet-free,’ she said, passing the packet over to Grace.

*Well, that’s a small plus.*

Slipping in and out of a drug-fuelled sleep, by the time he was wheeled to the car and Ava had driven them home, Charlie was extremely nauseous and quite breathless. With Grace not leaving his side for a second, he threw up four times throughout the night, and found it hard to keep sips of water down, even with the gentle encouragement of Grace.

Come morning, it was time for Grace to rest, and Hope arrived to take over.

Resting down on his bedside, Hope placed a gentle hand on his arm. ‘Hey, Dad. How are you feeling?’

‘Not the best, love, but I’ll get there.’

‘You will, I just know it.’ Biting her lip just like her mother did when she got emotional, Hope nodded. ‘I love you so much, Dad.’

‘I love you too, sweetheart.’

And the days rolled on like this, with Grace, Ava, Hope, Hudson and Bryn all taking their turn to care for him. By the fifth day, his mouth had developed thick phlegm and ulcers.

News of his cancer had spread fast and wide. Locals from the township and outlying areas called in, and rang, to express their support. By the middle of the second week, his mouth was filled with so many ulcers, he couldn’t bear to chew food, so his diet became liquid and mushed up anything. Brushing his teeth became a dreaded task. Sleep became a luxury. Rebellion against anything nutritious sat as a constant in the pit of his stomach. Catharsis came from his time spent on the verandah, staring out across the water to the rolling landscape of his childhood home. He felt renewed determination to be back there, living his life with an even bigger commitment to appreciating just how precious each day was.

And just when he felt like he’d turned a corner and was returning to some kind of normal, the weakness, fatigue and nausea returned full force with his next batch of chemo. The cycle continued until he lost track of the days, hours and minutes.

By the third round, his thick, dark hair was falling out in clumps, and he couldn’t bear to look at himself in the mirror. How Grace still looked at him with such tender love in her striking eyes was beyond him.

While pondering that life felt as if it were passing in a blur, Charlie turned to the sound of his bedroom door opening.

‘Hey, old man.’ Bryn strode in, a pair of clippers in hand. ‘I’ve come to shave your hair.’

‘Have you, now?’ Even though he felt like he was knocking on death’s door with broken bleeding knuckles,

Charlie offered his wonderful son the biggest smile he could muster. ‘At least I’ll save money on shampoo, and won’t be wasting my time brushing it.’

‘That’s the spirit.’ Bryn plonked down on the end of the bed. ‘But first, before we shave yours, you can’t be the only one having all the fun, so I’m going to shave mine.’

Charlie’s heart squeezed tight – the love his family gave him, in all their unique ways, was overwhelming. ‘Oh, son, you don’t have to go and do that.’

‘I’m not going to let you be the only one to look like a thug in this house, Dad.’ Footsteps fell and Hudson appeared in the doorway. ‘And this clown is going to do it too, aren’t you, bro?’

‘I sure as heck am.’

Charlie blinked back budding tears. ‘You boys. My god, how did I get so lucky, having amazing sons like you?’

‘Don’t you mean, what did you do to deserve not one, but two of us?’ Hudson flashed him a toothy grin filled with mischief.

‘Oi, boofhead! Speak for yourself,’ Bryn said, playfully jabbing Hudson in the ribs.

‘Now, now, you two behave.’ Grace’s warm smile lit up the room as she wandered in, coming to the bedside.

‘They don’t know the meaning of the word,’ Charlie said, chuckling.

‘Hey, Dad.’ A Chupa Chup in her mouth, Ava joined them, plonking down beside her brother at the foot of Charlie’s bed.

‘Hi, poppet.’ Tremendous gratitude swelled in Charlie’s heart. ‘It seems I’m going to have a captive audience for my new hairdo. Or should I say, hair-not.’

‘Of course I want to share this with you.’ Ava brushed a kiss on his cheek. ‘And there’s no way I’m missing out on seeing these two jokers shaving their heads.’ She flung her

spirited gaze to her brothers. 'At least they won't be hogging the bathroom for as long now while they groom their 'dos.'

'Pfft, yeah, whatever.' Hudson rolled his eyes lightheartedly.

'Let's get this show on the road.' Bryn looked to Hudson. 'You're up first.'

'Damn straight I am. Let's do this.' Hudson pulled the seat from the dressing table to the middle of the room and sat like he was in a saddle.

Charlie shared a meaningful glance in Grace's direction, treasuring how she was looking at their children with such motherly adoration, and the way her hand rested affectionately on his leg. Ava, Bryn and Hudson were now all huddled around each other, laughing as Hudson's locks fell to the floor.

Man, oh man, how he loved his family with all his heart. If it weren't for them, he would have given up and let the cancer win. But he wasn't about to let his death impact their lives. This was the fight of his life and he was going to give it all he had.

He was going to live, for them.

# CHAPTER

## 19

**February – June 2006**

The house was way too quiet for Grace's liking. With death feeling so close, she preferred for the house to hold as much life as possible, but it was hard when Ava was studying at the library, and Bryn and Hudson were at work. It was times like this that she really missed Nugget, who had crossed the rainbow bridge the year before.

Waiting for the saucepan of broth, made from organic chicken, and vegetables and herbs she'd gathered from her garden, to come to a simmer, she wandered over to the kitchen sink. Pressing the window wide open, she watched the lace curtains flutter in response to the gentle morning breeze. The scent of the lavender bushes she'd recently planted beneath the window drifted in, along with the sweet perfume of her vibrant English roses. The relaxing, rejuvenating aromas embedded her in the present moment and enticed her to take slow, deep breaths – now this was *really* stopping to smell the roses. The thought made her smile for the first time in ages. The simple things in life could bring so much pleasure, something she'd learnt time and time again in her fifty-four years of life.

Her chin resting on her folded hands, she gazed out at the gorgeous day with a sky so blue and clouds so cottony, it looked like a scene that had been freshly painted. She wished she and Charlie could go on an adventure like the many they'd enjoyed as young lovebirds, either out driving one of the winding roads that hugged the curves of picturesque coastline or lying on a picnic blanket down by the beach with a basket full of delicious homemade goodies. Back then, they hadn't had a care in the world, and nothing could burst their bubble of enduring love. Little had they realised just how many battles they would have to fight together, and apart. But this one was

the biggest, and scariest. She risked losing the love of her life in the most devastating of ways. To never hear Charlie's voice again, or witness the way he looked at her with such unconditional love, or to feel the tingle the brush of his hand on hers would entice, would damn near kill her too. Even thinking about it almost brought her to her knees, actually had brought her to her knees every single night, as she prayed like she'd never prayed before for god to spare his life.

Charlie was a fighter to his very core, that was for sure, but this battle was wearing him so thin. Literally. In a little over nine weeks, and after three chemotherapy sessions, he had faded away to a shadow of his former self, and he was only halfway through his journey to hell. He still had nine weeks of chemotherapy to go, and in the dark of the night, she admitted to herself that she didn't know how he was going to make it. But she had to keep the faith and believe there would be a happy ending. Right now, it was all they had to hold onto.

Ten minutes later, with a tray in hand, Grace climbed the staircase and knocked on the bedroom door. 'Charlie, is it okay to come in?'

At first, he didn't answer, but after another three knocks, firmer this time, his frail voice carried. 'Come in, Grace, but enter at your own risk.'

Grace's heart squeezed tight. Even at death's door, Charlie had kept his humour. 'I'll take my chances,' she called back as lightheartedly as she could as she pushed the door open with the toe of her shoe.

His eyes flicked open but then closed, as though his lids were made of stone. Charlie's face appeared even whiter than when she'd checked on him less than an hour before, if that was at all possible. As she placed the tray on the portable food table, she forced a broad smile – it was all she could do not to burst into inconsolable tears. Charlie didn't need to see just how deeply this was affecting her and the children. They were all doing their very best to remain bright and bubbly in his presence, which could be mighty tough. It was always out of

Charlie's earshot when they would break and be there to comfort one another. If it weren't for Hudson and Bryn's ability to add a dose of humour to every day, she didn't know how she, Ava or Hope would cope. They were most certainly their father's sons, always wanting to make another smile. And the girls ... well, they were just like her, empathetic and emotional.

Gliding the curtains open to allow the glory of the day in, she padded back to his bedside. 'It's a beautiful day.'

Turning his head, Charlie managed a slight smile. 'Yes, so I can see.'

His jaw was covered in grey stubble, and the glassiness of his eyes told her he was in quite a lot of pain. She sat alongside him and swept a gentle hand over his cheek. 'Would you like me to call the doctor and ask if we can up the dose of your painkillers?'

'No thanks, Grace.' He pulled the cotton sheet up a little further. 'I want to try and wean off the blasted things, not take more.'

'But Charlie ...' Emotions threatened to overflow, but she forced them back. 'I can see how much you're hurting.'

'Don't worry. It's just this headache that's doing me in.' He offered her a wincing smile. 'I'll be right.'

'Will you?' She knew that a headache was the least of his pain.

'You're not getting rid of me that easily.' A ghost of a smile flittered over his ashen face.

'I meant, will you be right without a bigger dose of painkillers, Charlie, not ...' She stumbled, unable to articulate the idea of losing him forever.

'Oh, sorry, my mistake.' His hand slid out from beneath the covers, and he brought it to cover hers. 'I'm going to make it through this, Grace. Because come hell or high water, I'm

sticking around to meet my twin grandbabies in four months' time.'

'Hope would love that, and our little Sharni and Rose will love to meet their granddaddy.' Drawing in a much-needed breath, Grace interlaced her fingers with his as she sighed it away.

'I'm going to be okay, Grace,' he assured her. 'Breakfast smells amazing, by the way.' He looked to the tray. 'Let me guess ... chicken soup?'

She broke a smile. 'You know it's chicken soup, you wag, seeing as it's the only thing you can stomach lately.'

'That doesn't mean I don't look forward to it, and you spoonfeeding me.' His brows moved ever so slightly in what would have normally been a cheeky wiggle.

Grace was momentarily lost for words, given she knew just how much he hated being fed. A week before, after insisting on doing it himself and spilling most of it down his pyjama shirt, he quickly learnt he simply didn't have the energy or the steadiness of hand, much to his exasperation and, at the time, embarrassment.

Grace did what Hudson would have and made light of it. 'You just like the fact you can be a lazybones.'

'Ahh.' Charlie pointed a finger. 'You got me.'

Grace came to her feet and moved to the top of the bed. 'Come on, let me prop you up a bit.' She carefully helped him sit forward, then placed two extra pillows behind him. 'How's that?'

'Perfect, thank you.'

Grabbing the bowl, she sat as close as she could and, bit by bit, patiently fed him, delighted that today he managed to stomach ten spoonfuls. 'Well, that's better than yesterday, Charlie. Almost double the amount.'

'I better watch out, or you're going to make me fat.' His chuckle sounded a little strangled.



‘That’s the plan.’ Placing the bowl back on the table, she ran a hand over his bald head. ‘You rest now. I’ll be back soon to check in on you.’

‘Okay.’ He held her gaze. ‘Thank you, Grace, for everything.’

‘You don’t need to thank me all the time, Charlie.’ She was on the brink of tears but blinked faster. ‘Just as you’d do anything for me, I feel the same about you.’

‘You do?’ Optimism flooded his pain-filled gaze. ‘Really?’

There was so much hidden meaning behind his three simple words that Grace found herself briefly taken aback, but she wasn’t about to lie to him when he was asking if she loved him as deeply as he’d always loved her. ‘Yes, Charlie, I do. Very much.’

‘That makes me a very happy man.’ His cherubic expression spoke as much.

Grace gave his hand a squeeze. If he did leave this earth, she wanted him to go as exactly that – a happy man who knew just how profoundly he was loved.

With Charlie’s eyes drifting closed, she sat for a few more moments and silently prayed. If she could take his place, she would. But here she was – with her two beautiful boys about to fly the nest, and Ava readying herself to head off to university to achieve her goal of becoming a psychologist after a gap year spent with her grandparents in the UK – watching the only man who had ever owned every piece of her heart, fighting like hell to live, but possibly dying right before her very eyes. Even though they’d had their fair share of time torn apart, she didn’t know what she’d do if she lost him forever. Death was a finality she wasn’t ready for when it came to Charlie. She instinctively knew they still had so much life to live, together. If she were being completely honest with herself, she’d always known that. And once he made it through this, she was going to tell him.

The rest of the day passed in a haze of bedside visits, fighting emotions, hiding in the pantry crying, chores, more praying, phone calls to her parents and Hope, all while playing host to a couple of local well-wishers calling in to check on Charlie, and to also see how she was coping. Now, close to midnight, after falling into her bed an exhausted mess then tossing and turning for hours, Grace finally gave up on the prospect of sleep. Rising, she tiptoed out of the room and along the hall, avoiding the places that creaked so as not to wake the children or Charlie, and downstairs for a cup of hot chocolate and some fresh air.

Waiting for the jug to boil, she looked to the silvery glow of moonlight shining through the part in the curtains. None of this made any sense. Why would god bring Charlie back to her and rekindle their love, when she had the biggest chance of losing him? It was so unfair. So cruel. She'd lost Rodger in the most shocking of ways, and she still carried the heartbreak that came with that, but losing Charlie, especially like this, she just couldn't bear to think it.

Tears stung beneath her heavy lids, and she squeezed her eyes shut against the threat of them. She'd cried so much this past month, surely she didn't have many tears left. Stuff the hot chocolate, she needed something stronger. So she poured herself a big glass of white wine and took a long sip.

Suddenly desperate to hear a familiar, friendly voice, she padded over to the cordless phone and dialled the number at the forefront of her mind. It rang four times, and she was just about to hang up, when her best friend's sleepy voice carried down the line.

'Hey, Jenny, it's me. I'm so sorry to call so late, but ...' Her sobs rose and this time, she allowed herself the freedom to weep.

'Don't be silly, you know you can call me anytime.' Jenny's voice was laced with sympathy. 'Is everything okay with Charlie?'

'Yes. No. Yes and no.' Grace knew she was waffling.

‘Oh, my beautiful friend, how can I help?’ Jenny’s voice broke and she sniffled. ‘I hate hearing you so upset.’

‘You’ve been here for me so much, there’s really nothing more you can do, Jen.’ Taking a sip from her glass of white wine, Grace plucked a tissue and wiped at her cheeks. ‘I’m so sick of feeling like an emotional basket case, but I’m terrified of losing him.’

‘You’re not an emotional basket case, Grace. You love that man with every breath you take and always have, so of course it’s going to tear you apart, watching him suffer.’

‘I just feel so helpless,’ she whimpered.

‘Would you like me to come over and we can cry together?’

‘You’re the best Jen, but I’m okay.’ Grace smiled through her tears.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m absolutely positive. I just needed to hear your voice and have a good cry.’

‘Well, I’m here anytime, all the time, Gracie. It’s the very least I can do.’

‘Yes, I know you are.’ She kissed the receiver. ‘Thanks, Jen. I love you.’

‘Love you too, bestie.’

Ending the call, Grace took herself and her glass of wine out to the front verandah. For the next two hours, she sipped her wine and searched the sky for shooting stars to wish upon that she and Charlie would live a long, healthy life by each other’s side.

\* \* \*

Four months later, as the sun rose over the Sapphire Mountain Range, casting golden warmth over land and sea, Charlie was woken on the very day he’d find out if he were cancer-free by

Grace's five-month-old toy poodle, a tiny puppy resembling a furry ball of black yarn.

Chuckling while avoiding doggy kisses to his face, he sat up and cuddled the wriggling dog to his chest. 'Well, aren't you a bundle of energy this morning, Miss Sophie.'

Sophie yapped an overexcited response, then began chasing her fluffy tail. Amused by her antics, Charlie recalled the very moment Grace had opened the gift he'd asked Ava and the boys to organise for her. He knew his darling Grace was suffering through his cancer with him, if not more than him, and he wanted her to have someone to brighten her days, and to cuddle at night. His plan had worked a treat. Sophie was an absolute blessing in all their lives, her loving nature endearing all their hearts.

Resting back, he thought about his cancer journey thus far, as well as the bumpy path that had led up to his diagnosis. It almost seemed like he was on the end of yet another bout of tough love. Just like being sent to prison, he'd been given an opportunity to overcome deep fears and relearn what kind of man he was when stripped of any control, albeit this time, it was his health rather than steel bars.

Coming to the realisation that at the end of this very day, he'd know if he was going to be granted more precious life or have it cut short, he took a breath and looked out the window to the bright blue sky. His soul yearned to be resting beneath it on soft green grass. His lungs hungered to breathe Mother Nature in deeply. So, climbing from the sheets, he wandered on feeble legs toward the view. Pressing the bay window open, he briefly closed his eyes and inhaled a lungful of salty sea air. If he survived this, which he was determined to, he planned to make one of Grace's biggest dreams come true. He was going to take her on an adventure to the Mediterranean, and he couldn't wait to be the one at her side when she embraced every second of it, like she always did with life itself.

An hour later, Grace popped her head through the doorway. 'Are you ready, Charlie?'

‘Ready as I’ll ever be.’ He turned from his reflection in the dressing-table mirror and took steps toward her. ‘Let’s go hear how I’ve beaten this darned thing, shall we?’

‘We shall,’ she said enthusiastically, hooking her arm into his.

The waiting room of the oncology ward lived up to its name, filled with people awaiting their fate. Young and old, a mix of ethnicities, male and female – cancer didn’t discriminate. Finding the last two available seats, Charlie allowed Grace to sit before settling himself down beside her. With nerves running amok in his belly, it didn’t take him long to begin fidgeting. Grace didn’t admonish him, simply placing her hand on his bouncing knee to help relax him. Offering her an appreciative sideways glance, he looked at the magazines spread out on the centre coffee table. The tabloid covers seemed futile in such a volatile environment, yet people still chose to read them, or at least pretended to. Sitting among the strangers who were either staring into space, fidgeting in their seats like him, gazing blankly at the mute television with its boxed subtitles or scrolling through their mobile phones, he felt connected to them in a strange way – cancer was a journey only those who’d suffered it really comprehended. It fought dirty, without rules or a referee to pull it into line. The people who battled it deserved medals for their bravery.

As his knee unknowingly bobbed again, Grace placed a gentle hand back on it to settle him, offering him a look filled with strength and compassion. Tears filled the eyes he’d been gazing into for most of his life.

‘It’s all going to be okay,’ he said as quietly as he could.

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded just as his name was called.

‘Charlie Wilson,’ the doctor repeated, louder this time.

Standing, Charlie returned his oncologist’s tight-lipped smile. With Grace close to his side, they followed him down a

corridor that felt like it went on forever before being led into a tiny, windowless room and taking a seat at his chaotic desk.

‘Sorry for the long wait, we’re a bit short-staffed at the moment,’ the oncologist offered by way of apology as he sat opposite them, the tell-tale paperwork now held in his hands. ‘How have you been feeling, Charlie?’

Even though he wanted to shout at the white-coated man to hurry the hell up because he’d already been waiting almost an hour to find out if he was going to live or, heaven forbid, die, Charlie just said, ‘Yeah, good, I suppose,’ as calmly as he could.

‘Good to hear.’ The doctor’s response was clipped.

Charlie glanced to where Grace was wringing her hands nervously in her lap, her hanky at the ready. After all the months of trying to remain positive, he braced himself for bad news.

When push came to shove...

‘Right, let’s get to it then, shall we?’ Popping his glasses on, the oncologist lifted his gaze and shone the broadest of smiles. ‘Charlie, I’m so very happy to tell you that you are now cancer-free.’

Time seemed suspended for a held breath before he and Grace exhaled with relief and grabbed each other tight. And for the very first time since his cancer diagnosis, Charlie openly wept, but unlike the tears that had quite often accompanied him to sleep throughout his war with the biggest enemy he’d ever confronted, they were now the happiest he’d ever shed.

Shortly after, they strolled out of the oncologist’s hand-in-hand, with broad smiles on their faces.

As soon as they walked through the doors of Grace’s Waterside Estate home, the phone chimed from the hallway table. ‘I’ll get it, if you like, so that you can nip to the loo.’

The smile that had planted on her beautiful face the moment they'd heard the news was still there, just as wide, just as warm. 'Thanks, Charlie, I'm absolutely busting.' With an overly eager Sophie at her feet, Grace raced up the stairs.

Moments later, with the phone pressed to his ear, Charlie nodded into it. 'Thanks for letting us know, Kelvin.' His smile even wider than before, if that was at all possible, he hung up and dashed to the foot of the staircase. 'Grace! Kelvin just called to tell us that Hope is in labour.'

'Oh my goodness! What a wonderful day it's turning out to be.' Grace's singsong voice carried down the staircase right before her head popped over the banister. 'We'd best get the next flight to Townsville.'

'Yes.' Charlie clapped his hands together. 'I'll get onto it. You start packing.'

And just like that, they were a team again, with the rest of their lives ahead of them.

And this time around, Charlie was going to make sure that nothing could ever tear them apart.

# CHAPTER

## 20

**June 2010**

Grace thought she couldn't possibly be any happier than she felt right now. She and Charlie had shared a romantic seafood dinner, talked for hours over a bottle of pinot noir, and were now swaying each other around the lounge room to 'Love Me Tender'. Mother Nature added to the ambience as steady rain beat on the homestead roof and distant thunder echoed. With the soft candlelight flickering over Charlie's handsome features, Grace found herself lost in the magnetism of the man she'd spent over half a lifetime tied to. He'd always been her strength, in one way or another, and the perpetual link that had bound their family together. In vivid detail, she knew every inch of his body, and the way he made her feel when he made love to her was out of this world.

As if reading her thoughts, he tipped her chin to look up at him, and she tumbled into his heart, now stripped bare of the armour he'd worn for far too long. Within his baby blues, his love for her was clear as crystal, and the potency of it almost buckled her knees. He'd never stopped loving her. She'd never stopped loving him, not for a single breath. They shared a powerful bond that could never be broken, and a love that had endured everything that life had thrown at them. Now, thirty-two years later, she was more in love with him than ever. How they'd ever survived without each other was beyond her. She never wanted to live a day without him there to share it with.

'Grace.' Her name rolled off Charlie's tongue so tenderly.

She gazed into the eyes that had looked at her with absolute love for her entire life. 'Yes?'

'I love you.'



Grace's soul lit on fire – she'd never tire of hearing him say those three beautiful words. 'I love ...' Her voice cracked with the word she felt so deeply within her heart. 'I love you too, my darling Charlie.' She took a deep breath, her eyes transfixed on his.

'I know you do. I feel it every second of every single day.' His gaze pulled her in deeper and captured her – there was so much promise in his tender regard of her.

Her soul sighing into his, Grace rested her cheek against his chest – her soft-landing place, her home sweet home – relishing the feel and sound of his heartbeat. His sincerity was compelling, and all encompassing; no more words were needed. She knew they would be together forever now, until one of them took their final breath, with the other holding their hand. If almost losing him had taught her one thing, it was that she was and always would be, deeply in love with this amazing man. She wanted him, needed him, was a part of him, just like he was a part of her, and when they passed from this life into the next, she wanted to be the one holding his hand on the next journey through life, because she couldn't imagine any lifetime without him.

The record coming to an end, the needle lifted and went back into place.

'You ready for bed, my sweet Grace?'

'I sure am.'

Taking her hand, he led her upstairs to their bedroom.

The following morning, nursing a cup of black coffee, Grace padded around her recently renovated galley kitchen backdropped by newly installed French-style doors that allowed jaw-dropping views over Moonflower Acres. Talk about letting the outside in – it was glorious.

Now four years to the day since Charlie was given the all-clear, and with his six-monthly cancer checks coming back negative each time, it was a massive relief to know he was past the worst of it. Even so, every single day counted.

High on their blissful life, Grace was in the mood to celebrate her husband's good health tonight at their Christmas in June family dinner. Her parents had moved back home almost two years ago upon her father's retirement; she was disappointed they couldn't make it this time around, but with her father unwell the past few days, he needed his rest. Given everyone's lives were so busy these days, with Bryn and Hudson running the teahouse, Hope busy supporting Kelvin as he climbed ranks in the army, and Ava working hard, too, having a midyear Christmas was always a great excuse to pull them all together. Tonight would be extra special, given Charlie's cancer-free anniversary. And apparently Hudson had something important to tell them too. Maybe – hopefully – he'd finally met a girl he'd fallen for.

Turning off the heat beneath the pan of scrambled eggs she'd collected from the chicken coop this morning, a pool of golden sunlight beckoned her from the kitchen and out onto the back verandah. Kicking off her slippers, she wandered into the warmth of it, enjoying the feel of the cool timber floorboards beneath her feet. Leaning against the railings, she closed her eyes and breathed the sea breeze in deeply, while the distant call of seagulls added to her invigorated senses. How fortunate she was to call such a magnificent place home.

The crunch of tyres on the gravel drive had her squinting into the morning sunshine to see Hudson's shiny black jeep approaching. Shading her eyes with her hand, she wandered down the steps and along the garden path to meet him at the front gate.

'Hi, love, we weren't expecting you until tonight.' Rising on her tippy toes, she brushed a kiss on his cheek. 'Is everything okay?'

Hudson grimaced. 'Yes. And no.' He half smiled. 'I guess it depends how you and Dad look at it.'

'Look at what? You're worrying me.' Nerves filling her belly, she watched nervously as her son frowned and fiddled with his jacket. 'Hudson, please tell me what's on your mind.'

‘I will, but I need to sit down with you and Dad and tell you together, if that’s okay.’ He glanced up at the house. ‘Is he home?’

Grace couldn’t help but think the worst. ‘Yes, he’s just having a shower, but I can let him know you’re here and would like to talk.’

Tossing his keys from one hand to the other, Hudson nodded. ‘That would be great. Thanks, Mum.’

To stop him fidgeting, just like his father always did when he was anxious, Grace took Hudson’s hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. ‘Come on, let’s go inside. I’ll make us all a fresh cuppa, and we can sit and have that chat.’ She fought not to run inside to tell Charlie to come downstairs, right this minute. The curiosity – and concern – was killing her. Once she had Hudson settled on a stool at the breakfast bar, she gave up the fight and did just that.

Less than five minutes later, with Charlie dressed in his robe because he hadn’t had the time to get dressed before Grace basically dragged him downstairs, they found Hudson pacing outside.

Charlie looked to Grace and shrugged. ‘Come on, Huddy. Don’t keep us in suspense, son,’ he said as they seated themselves at the table.

‘Yes, sorry. I know, I’m getting to it.’ He folded and unfolded his arms, shifting from foot to foot. ‘I have something to tell you both.’ He looked everywhere but at his father. ‘You might find this a bit of a shock.’

‘Hudson, please,’ Grace implored, panic rising. ‘Just say whatever’s on your mind.’

‘Okay. There’s no real way to say this gently, so here goes.’ He sucked in an almighty breath, as if trying to draw the strength of the landscape in with it. ‘I’ve fallen in love.’

Grace breathed a massive sigh of relief, and felt Charlie do the same next to her.

‘Aw, that’s wonderful, love.’ Grace stood and went to hug him.

Hudson stepped back and held his hands up. ‘I’m not finished yet, Mum, so can you please sit back down?’

Wide-eyed, Grace shared a bewildered look with Charlie as she sank back to her seat.

‘I’m in love with ... a man.’ Hudson fired every word, and then blinked owlshly.

‘What do you mean, you’re in love with a man?’ Charlie’s voice was gruff, and his brows had met in the middle.

‘Charlie.’ Simply happy that her son appeared happy, Grace’s tone was cautionary. ‘Don’t say anything more until you’ve taken a breath, or ten breaths, if needs be.’

Silence fell and extended uncomfortably. Grace had a million replies running through her mind, all filled with love for her son. And although she was dying to reassure Hudson, she wanted Charlie to step up and do it first. Hudson worshipped the ground Charlie walked upon – he needed to see that his father was going to support him. So instead of words, she offered Hudson a loving smile and subtly gestured toward the seat nearest to Charlie with her eyes.

Edging closer, Hudson took the seat opposite. ‘I’m sorry if this news upsets you, Dad, but I am who I am, and I can’t help how I feel.’

Charlie was doing as Grace had asked, taking deep, slow breaths. ‘Right, I see.’ He clasped his hands atop the table, his forehead puckering. ‘Well, I can’t say I fully understand it, but as long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters to me.’

Hudson shot Grace a look full of optimism, and met his father’s gaze. ‘Do you really mean that?’

‘I love you, son. Nothing will ever change that.’ Charlie lifted his stare from his folded hands to Hudson’s gaze. ‘If life has taught me one thing, it’s to not waste it. If you’re in love, you shouldn’t lose any precious time.’

‘Thank you, Dad.’ Reaching out, Hudson gave Charlie’s folded hands a pat.

‘Oh, I’m so happy to hear this! Hudson, I don’t care who you love, just as long as they treat you like the wonderful man you are.’ Grace finally allowed her feelings to be heard. ‘Tell us, what’s his name?’

‘Jacob Travers.’ Hudson’s face was a picture of happiness. ‘And before you ask the next question, he’s a solicitor.’

‘Did you hear that Charlie? Jacob’s a solicitor?’

‘Of course I heard, Grace, I’m sitting at the same table you two are.’ He half chuckled. ‘Why don’t you bring him along tonight, so we can all meet him?’

Hudson’s eyes couldn’t possibly get any wider. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, otherwise I wouldn’t have suggested it.’ He looked to Grace. ‘Is it okay with you?’

‘Of course it’s okay with me.’ She opened her arms wide. ‘The more the merrier.’

\* \* \*

Hope and Kelvin arrived right on time, along with Sharni and Rose – quite the feat, given the twins were now four and an absolute handful. Ava wasn’t far behind them. Bryn hitched a lift with Hudson and Jacob, but raced into the homestead first, and gave Charlie and Grace an advance take on his twin brother’s new relationship status. Like Hope and Ava, who Hudson had called and told during the day, he couldn’t be happier for him.

Charlie wished he could be as optimistic as the rest of his family, but it would take him time. Once he got to know Jacob, he might feel more at ease with Hudson’s relationship. As with all his children, he needed to see how their partners treated them before he trusted a newcomer to the family. This wasn’t going to be any different in that sense just because it was a same-sex relationship.

Greeting the pair at the door, Grace was making sure Hudson's partner felt welcome. 'Hi Jacob.' She pulled him into a warm hug. 'We're so glad you could make it at such short notice.'

'I'm honoured you invited me.' Unravelling from her embrace, he placed a hand over his chest. 'I wholeheartedly appreciate it.'

His initial impression of Jacob a positive one, Charlie waited patiently for Hudson to do the introductions. 'Dad, this is Jacob. Jacob, this is my dad.' He waved a hand from one to the other.

'It's lovely to meet you, Jacob.' Charlie shook his hand, liking Jacob's firm grip and that he held eye contact. That said a lot about a man.

'Likewise, Mr Wilson.' Jacob offered a genuine smile.

'Call me Charlie, please.'

'Okay, thanks, Charlie.' Jacob tucked his hand back into his trouser pocket. 'Hudson has told me so much about you both, and the family. I've been dying to meet you all.'

'Well then.' Grace waved them down the hallway. 'Enough dilly-dallying, come into the kitchen and you can meet the rest of the gang.'

Once the rest of the introductions were done, laughter and chatter soon filled the house, along with Sharni and Rose's squeals and giggles as Charlie chased them around the lounge room. Hearing his granddaughters' joy made his happy heart sing even louder. By dinnertime, the table was groaning beneath the weight of their epic feast with every trimming imaginable – along with everyone's requests, they also had crispy roast potatoes, a mountain of Yorkshire puddings and thick, meaty gravy made with the pot roast juices. Grace had gone all out, with him as her kitchen hand, and he'd loved every second of cooking beside her.

Taking his seat at the head of the table, with Grace alongside him, Charlie revelled in the atmosphere of family

and love. They ate until their bellies were full then, after cleaning up, retired to the sitting room.

Nestled in beside him on the lounge, Grace leant into Charlie's ear. 'Do you think it's time to announce our surprise?'

'Yes, it's the perfect time.' He addressed the room. 'Everyone, your mother and I have something to tell you.'

'Oh my god, you're pregnant,' Bryn chimed in, inciting a roomful of laughter.

'Stop it, you cheeky sod.' Grace threw Bryn a playful glance, then held out a set of keys. 'Hudson and Bryn, this is for you.'

Seated closest to her, Hudson took her offering and turned the keys over in his hands, confusion tugging his brows. 'What are they for?'

Grace grinned 'The teahouse.'

Hudson tipped his head. 'But I already have my own set of keys.'

Regarding Charlie's grin, Grace took the cue to speak. 'We've decided it's time that you and Bryn took over the business, with your sisters coming in as silent partners.'

'Are you serious?' Delighted surprise was written all over Hudson's face.

'Holy cow! Mum, Dad, this is ... just, wow.' Bryn's eyes widened to saucers. 'Did you two know about this?' He looked from Hope to Ava, who both nodded.

'Yes,' Hope replied. 'Mum and Dad got us both to sign the paperwork a few days ago, so it's all legit and ready to go.'

Bryn rubbed his face. 'I ... I honestly don't know what to say.'

'That's a change,' Ava said lightheartedly.

The room filled with laughter again.

Hudson rose and came to his parents, giving them a joint hug. 'Thank you so much.'

Bryn took his turn next. 'You won't regret it.'

Emotions welling, Charlie sniffled. 'I know you two boys have been running the teahouse for quite a while now, along with your mother's guidance, but it's about time she hung her apron up once and for all, don't you all think?'

'Yes,' was the resounding reply from everyone.

'Now you can change things to suit your visions for the teahouse.' Grace regarded both her boys. 'Like your desire to open it for dinner, Hudson, and your idea to start making wedding cakes and the like, Bryn.'

Bryn and Hudson both looked to each other.

'Let the fun begin!' Bryn said, rubbing his hands together and grinning.

'God help me,' Hudson replied good-naturedly.

'Right, with that being said.' Charlie came to his feet. 'Now, it's my turn to make an announcement.' He turned to Grace. 'And this time, it's all about you.'

'Charlie?' Grace offered him a look of confusion. 'What are you doing?'

Taking what he'd been dying to give her from his pocket, Charlie handed over the gold envelope. 'This gift is from all of us to you, for being a wonderful wife, mother and nanna.'

Grace looked at it as though it were made of real gold. 'What is it?'

Ava came to her mother's side and wrapped an arm over her shoulder. 'Open it and you'll find out, Mum.'

Charlie watched as Grace's eyes fell upon the two plane tickets inside. Pulling them out, she read the destination. 'Oh my god.' Her face a picture of absolute delight, she shot to her feet. 'We're going to Greece?'



Charlie felt wonderful seeing her so happy. ‘We sure are.’

‘Oh my, now it’s me who doesn’t know what to say!’ She threw her arms around Charlie’s neck, and they shared a kiss to the background of the four kids telling them to get a room. ‘Thank you, all of you.’ Her teary gaze flitted from one to the other. ‘I’m so blessed, having such a loving, thoughtful family.’

‘We learnt how to be that way because of you, Mum.’ Standing, Hope came and wrapped her arms around her mother. ‘We all love you so very much. You deserve this, after everything you do for each and every one of us.’

‘Family group hug!’ Bryn shouted, and they all came together.

A loud snuffle sounded, followed by a strangled sob, and they turned to see Jacob with a handkerchief to his eyes. ‘You lot have got me real good,’ he chuckled. ‘How lucky am I, to be invited into such a loving home.’

And it was at this very moment that Charlie accepted Jacob as one of his family. Hudson had made a marvellous choice for a partner, and he couldn’t be prouder of his son.

\* \* \*

The phone rang out in the dead of night, scaring Grace awake. Her nerves jangled, she flicked her eyes to the bedside clock: one-thirty am. Nothing good came from a call at such a time. Her heart in her throat, she groped through the darkness and clutched her mobile, quickly answering it.

‘Hello?’

‘Gracie, it’s your father.’ Her mother’s voice was wrought with emotion. ‘He’s had a heart attack.’

‘Oh my god, Mum! When? How? Is he okay? Are you okay?’

‘It happened about an hour ago, and he’s not in a good way, my love.’ Muffled sobs were followed with sniffles. ‘I

think you should come to the hospital as soon as you can.'

Sitting up beside her, Charlie's hand rested on her back. 'Grace, what's wrong?'

Grace shook her head. 'We'll be there as soon as we can. I love you, Mum.'

'Love you too, Gracie, see you soon.'

The phone went dead in her hands and she just sat there, staring at the eggshell-blue walls of their bedroom lit up by the lamp. Charlie's soothing voice wavered back into her perception. She sucked in a sharp breath. Like a sharp slap to her face, the reality of the phone call hit home, mighty hard, and her sense of urgency soared. What if her father died before she got to tell him, one more time, just how much she loved him?

'Hurry, Charlie.' She leapt from the bed. 'Dad's had a heart attack.'

Fifteen minutes later, Charlie's wide stride echoed with Grace's tiny steps as they crossed the car park and rushed through the doors of the Sapphire Hospital. They quickly headed to the lift, and up to the third floor. Grace saw her mother at the nurse's station, her face red and puffy from crying.

'Mum,' Grace said before both women entangled each other. They stayed like this for a few moments, their sobs echoing in the quiet room.

'Come and see your father, Gracie.' Taking her daughter's hand, her mother led them down the hall, and then stopped at a closed door. 'He's in a bad way, so prepare yourself, love.'

Adrenaline pumping and instincts on high alert, Grace paused and drew in the deepest of breaths while trying to gather enough courage to step into the room. Glancing up and into Charlie's compassionate eyes fortified her, and his hand upon her back gave her the nudge she needed. So, she stepped in.

One hand came over her mouth, the other over the pounding of her breaking heart. If it weren't for Charlie's arm, coming around her waist, she would have fallen to her knees.

# CHAPTER

## 21

**October 2010**

Four months after her father's death, after wading through the inconceivable heartbreak of losing a man who'd always loved her unconditionally, with his whole heart, all throughout her life, Grace felt ready to take on their travel plans, and her mother insisted she go.

Over the speaker, the flight attendant announced their imminent arrival into Greece. Eagerly leaning across Charlie, Grace pressed her face up against the window, marvelling at the multicoloured cliffs soaring out of the sea-drowned volcanic crater, the half-moon shape of the island and the snow-white sugar-cube houses all backdropped by the brilliant blue Aegean. The supermodel of the Greek isles, Santorini was enchanting, cosmopolitan and very romantic, but she knew there was far more to this place than just a pretty face. There was so much history, so much soul to the people who called it home.

The plane turned and the land and ocean quickly approached, along with a runway that looked way too short. Grace drew back and rested her head against the chair, closing her eyes to pray for a safe touchdown, all the while gripping Charlie's hand as if her life depended upon it.

‘Are you okay, Grace?’

She peeled one eye open to look at him. ‘Uh ... have you seen the runway? Or lack thereof?’

Charlie peered out. ‘Oh, yes, it is quite tiny.’

She squeezed both eyes shut again. ‘I can see that.’

‘We'll be fine.’ Charlie patted her hand.

‘Hmm.’ Her lips pressed as tightly closed as her eyelids.

Charlie was right, of course. Apart from a bit of a bumpy landing, they arrived safe and sound.

Wheeling their baggage through the arrivals hall, they stepped outside to the slap of Mediterranean heat. ‘Well, here we are,’ Charlie announced, his smile wide.

Grace danced on the spot. ‘Let the adventure begin.’

When they reached the taxi queue, a large man with a smile to match greeted them. ‘Welcome to Santorini, how may I assist you?’ His warm hospitality was engaging.

‘We need to get to here.’ Charlie handed over the name of their accommodation.

‘Easily done.’ Leaning into the taxi at the front, he addressed the driver. ‘Alexandros, can you take these lovely people to the Porto Villa?’ His accent had suddenly become thicker as he spoke to his colleague.

‘Of course.’ The taxi driver flicked his cigarette out the window, then flashed them the broadest of smiles, revealing two gold teeth. ‘Hop in.’

‘I’ll get your baggage in the trunk.’ The host opened the back door of the taxi. ‘Enjoy our beautiful island.’

‘Thank you.’ Grace slid in first, followed by Charlie.

With a shared adoring glance, Charlie and Grace laced fingers, then both their gazes were drawn out the open windows. As the taxi driver veered through thin cobblestone streets coming alive with local vendors selling their wares, and little tavernas welcoming their first customers for dinner, the setting sun cast a warm glow behind the myriad white buildings clinging to the steep slopes.

With the aura of the place enveloping her, Grace caught glimpses up tiny alleyways, leading to flights of stone steps overhung by baskets of colourful blooming flowers. In the opposite direction, rows of boats bobbed in the aqua-blue harbour, some luxurious visitors and others local fishing vessels. With goosebumps covering her, she breathed in deep,

imagining all the days she and Charlie would spend adventuring as the fragrance of Santorini filled her senses. This sea breeze smelt different to the wind that flowed through the heart of Moonflower Acres. Here, it was saltier, brinier, as if she were baking the freshest of fish wrapped in seaweed.

After a glorious sleep, Grace woke with a melodic tune playing on her heartstrings. Pressing open the shutters, she caught a glimpse of the gasp-inducing view from the caldera edge as the light breeze shifted the curtains. The golden sunlight poured into the bedroom, bouncing off the duchess mirror and over the bed she'd just made. With Charlie singing his heart out in the shower, Grace resisted the habit of popping her slippers on, instead enjoying the coolness of the stone floor against her bare feet as she sallied out of the bedroom with her new yellow sundress floating at her ankles. Unlike the homestead at Moonflower Acres, there were no boards to creak beneath her feet here – going barefoot seemed to be a prerequisite to having the true Greek experience.

Their whitewashed dome-shaped cottage high on the hillside was simple and cosy, and the kitchen was perfectly functional, with a fridge laden with Greek delicacies and a rectangular central bench that doubled as a dining table. The lingering scents of oregano, garlic and lemon were ingrained into the time-worn timber top. Not that they were going to be using it much when they had those to-die-for-views from the wrought-iron table and chairs on their balcony.

Wandering out to her sunny balcony overlooking the expanse of sea, she leant up against the banister, enjoying the combination of warm sun and sea air caressing her face. Just below her, a terraced garden was filled with jasmine and honeysuckle. Her face hurt from smiling so wide and she almost had to pinch herself – this was like something out of the movies. The sweet scent of blossoms carried with the sea breeze – it was a symphony for her senses. Santorini was an incredible canvas laid bare, with so much heart and soul to explore. The pulse of the island was steady, like a meditative

breath, in, out, in, out. So calm, so at peace. She couldn't wait to immerse herself.

After a few minutes spent in absolute awe, she settled in her sun lounger with a champagne flute in one hand and a small bowl of the infamous Santorini cherry tomatoes in the other. Who said she couldn't have a glass of bubbly for breakfast?

Closing her eyes so her sense of taste was heightened, she took her first bite of the bright red ball. 'Oh my goodness,' she moaned in foodie pleasure as the sweet, tangy flavour exploded in her mouth. 'These are absolutely amazing.' She took another and savoured it, licking the juice from her fingertips.

From her vantage point, she could see the bustle of the holiday-makers wandering the narrow streets below. She and Charlie would be among it all soon enough. Seeing it in the flesh, Santorini was far more beautiful than she had ever imagined. The pictures she'd pined over all these years simply didn't do the place justice. With its charming, stark-white buildings donning bright blue doors and a multitude of flowers blooming from every crack and cranny, along with colourful pops of bougainvillea, it was a joyous piece of heaven right here on earth.

After just one night here, she was already in love with this island, and they still had four more islands to visit in their month-long stay in Greece. And her Charlie had brought her to it – what an amazing man she had, loving her to no end.

Missing him even though she'd seen him five minutes ago, she called out, 'Are you going to join me out here, Charlie?'

His husky voice carried to her. 'I'll be there in a jiffy, my darling.'

Second later, he appeared, wearing a pair of colourful swimming trunks, with zinc smudged on his cheeks and a cheesy grin to boot. 'How do I look?' He bowed for added humour.

‘Oh, my goodness, Charlie ...’ Grace was finding it hard to speak through her chuckles. ‘You’re hilarious.’

‘I live to make you smile each and every day, my beautiful wife.’ He eased down to the sun lounger beside her.

‘And you do a very good job of making me smile, each and every day, my love.’ She turned her gaze back to the sun-sparkled water off in the distance and sighed softly. ‘Just look at this view, isn’t it magical?’

‘I’m too busy looking at you, and that smile that hasn’t left your face since we arrived.’

She playfully slapped his arm. ‘Stop it, you’ll make me blush.’

‘I’m honoured I still can bring that shy rosiness to your cheeks, Mrs Wilson.’

‘I love you, Mr Wilson.’

He flashed her another cheeky grin. ‘You’d better.’

After lounging for another half an hour, they decided to venture out. Wandering hand-in-hand, they both breathed in every sight, sound and smell. Passing an elderly couple on a bench facing the ocean, Grace admired how the man’s eyes were closed and his smile was wide, and the woman’s were eyes open and her smile was dreamy. They appeared so happy, so in love. An equally ancient dog sat at their feet, his head on his paws. Greece seemed to have a cathartic effect on all that were here.

Above, women were busy hanging washing on balconies and at tables behind alleyway shops, men were smoking and drinking coffee. Pomegranate, cypress and olive trees lined the path, as did shops selling delicate pottery, sculptured statues, beautiful silver jewellery, and so much food that Grace didn’t know where to look. Stopping at a little hole in the wall, she ordered two spanakopita. Standing off to the side of the queue, she passed one to Charlie then took a bite of the traditional cheese-and-spinach-filled pastry.



Eyes wide, she met with Charlie's. 'Wow, this is delicious.'

'Mm-hmm.' He ate his in one bite, the flaky crumbs sticking to his lips. 'I concur.'

'Shall we head down to the beach before it gets too hot, Charlie?'

'Sounds like a perfect plan, my sexy wife.' Charlie slipped his arm around her shoulder.

Dropping her towel onto one of the sun loungers Charlie had hired, Grace left him to relax on his and wandered toward where the frothy surf was kissing the white sandy beach. She stopped just shy of where a wave scurried up, leaving foam in its wake. This was the very instant she'd been dreaming of for most of her life – dipping her toes in the Mediterranean Sea on the shores of Santorini. It was such a momentous moment that she almost needed a drum roll to go with it. Step by step, she strayed forward. The warm sea lapped over her feet and crept up her legs as she gradually made her way in. Once she was waist-deep, she decided to dive beneath a gentle wave. The delicious tingle of salt water cooled her skin as she rose to the surface, and the water brushed her long sandy-blond hair from her face. Resting back, she floated on the gentle waves, her eyes sweeping over the perfect blue sky. Being here was awakening something deep inside of her, a piece of herself she'd tucked away while she'd devoted her time – her life – to work and family. And it felt so good, like coming home to herself, after so long away.

When she was ready, she swam lazily back to shore, her stroke just enough to keep her head above water.

As she neared Charlie, his smile was slow and sexy. 'My wife is like a Greek goddess.'

'Oh, Charlie, I am not.' Clutching her towel, she wiped her face.

Charlie didn't take his gaze from her. 'Seriously, Grace, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on.'

‘As long as you think so, that’s all that matters to me.’ Settling down onto her sun lounger, she leant in and met his lips. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too, Grace.’

Their next few hours were spent laying beneath a blue-and-white striped umbrella, until hunger had them searching out some lunch. After eating, then wandering through the markets, they decided to go into a bookshop set off the main street. The doorbell jingling behind them, Grace breathed in deep – there was nothing better than the smell of books. They took their time choosing one each, then gradually made their way back to their villa, where they made love overlooking the endless ocean.

Showered and dressed, they headed back out for an early dinner. They chose a taverna by the sea, where a young waitress with jet black hair slicked back into a bun at her nape led them to a table.

‘I’ll be back soon, to take your order.’ Her accent was rich and evocative.

Grace acknowledged her with a smile. ‘Thank you.’

Five minutes later, she swished back to their table, placing water and two glasses into the middle. ‘Are you ready, or would you like a little more time?’

‘I think I know what I’m having.’ She peeked over her menu. ‘How about you, Charlie?’

He looked ever so perplexed. ‘There’s just so much to pick from.’ He looked to the young woman. ‘Can you suggest something for me?’

‘Are there things you don’t like?’

Charlie screwed his face up. ‘Anchovies.’

The waitress giggled. ‘Okay, well how about you try our special for today?’ Her green eyes matched the pretty turquoise rings adorning her fingers, and her myriad bangles

jingled as she poised her pen, ready to take their order. ‘Chargrilled lamb chops and Greek salad.’

As Charlie pondered, Grace chose the honey-drizzled haloumi for her starter, and the salt and pepper baby squid and fried aubergine for her main, and Charlie got the baked feta and olives for entrée and the waitress’s suggestion of the daily special. It didn’t take long for their food to arrive, and just like the picturesque scenery surrounding them, the cuisine was full of sensual promise. They ate and talked, talked and ate, in between sips of sweet red wine, at the little mosaic table with the water lapping at their feet. Just before sunset, they finished their feast off with a slice of nutty sweet baklava and a glass of ouzo before paying the bill and joining the rest of the holiday-makers awaiting the glorious show. Cuddled up on the beach, they watched the day bow out to night, the sky turning glorious shades of apricot, purple and pink before black velvet gave a backdrop for glittering stars. The gentle breeze blowing through her loose hair was warm and caressing, as were Charlie’s lips as he brushed a kiss over hers, a fleeting touch, nothing more and nothing less.

Wrapped in his arms, Grace snuggled closer to him. ‘I feel like I’m twenty-two, and we’re falling in love all over again.’

‘We’ll never be finished falling in love, my beautiful Grace.’

‘Touché,’ she said, softly.

The following day, they were up to watch the sunrise burst over the water in a daybreak that was worthy of a standing ovation, its fiery rays momentarily setting the few listless clouds ablaze. Taking sips from their blue cups, both Grace and Charlie sat in amazed silence until the day was gloriously ready and waiting for them. Grace slipped her new gladiator sandals on, and they headed down the steps that would lead them to the winding streets below. Greek sunlight heated Grace’s back as she breathed in a heady combination of sea, flowers and coffee. After experiencing her very first Greek caffeine hit yesterday, she would be on the hunt for another as

soon as they reached the village. Then they were off to explore the other side of the majestic island.

A leisurely twenty-minute bus ride later, past cone-shaped slopes sweeping down to black sand beaches lined with sun loungers on one side and agricultural wine terraces on the other, they had arrived at their destination. Spending most of the day lazing on the beach, eating delicious food and wandering the shops, they joined the line of equally eager tourists and made their way up to the ruins of the castle of Agios Nikolaos, a church that had been carved into the rock and was destroyed in an earthquake that made most of it collapse into the sea – there was only the watchtower left.

The views of the Aegean Sea were sublime, enticing the people gathered together to hush and watch Mother Nature at her finest. Sunset was upon them. The tangerine sky alight, Grace watched with bated breath as the sun dived into the sea. Once it was fully submerged, she and Charlie joined the crowd in applause.

His arm around Grace's waist, Charlie leant into her ear. 'Sunsets like that are proof that every day, no matter good or bad, easy or hard, long or short, can finish beautifully.'

Grace's heart filled to the brim with the love he forever gave her. 'Every day I get to enjoy and finish with you is beautiful, my darling Charlie.'

After getting off the bus back at the main village, they chose to dine at a restaurant that clung to the edges of the sharp mountainside, with jaw-dropping views of the Mediterranean Sea. The chatter and laughter of the other diners filled the pink and purple bougainvillea-vined terrace perfectly.

'You could almost feel seasick sitting here, if you were that way inclined,' Charlie said, his gaze glued to the ocean.

'I know, right?' Grace savoured her sip of Assyrtiko, the famous local white wine, along with the far-reaching ocean

view, with a horizon that seemed to drop off the edge of the earth. 'Isn't it all so surreal?'

'It sure is.' Charlie exhaled a satisfied sigh before reaching across the table and taking her hand in his. 'I'm so blessed to be sharing this adventure with you, Grace.'

Choking up with emotion, she smiled softly. 'I'm blessed you went and organised all of this.'

Charlie's expression was filled with so much, and his eyes conveyed all the sentiments Grace felt deep in her heart and soul. 'Aren't you glad we made it through everything, to be here, so in love, and so happy?'

'I sure am, my wonderful husband.' Grace squeezed both Charlie's hands, now held across the table. 'We were made for each other, you and me.'

The days and weeks rolled on in one big bubble of dreamy bliss. Before they knew it, they were saying goodbye to their taxi driver and checking in to their flight back home. As the plane rose into the sky, her hand clutched within her husband's, Grace took one last look down at the islands that had stolen a piece of her heart. Something about this magical place had anchored her and Charlie even closer together.

After decades together, battling through thick and thin, and loving each other eternally, theirs was a true love story.

# CHAPTER

## 22

### 15 Years Later

Grace woke to rays of golden sunshine reaching through the parted curtains. Blinking into it, her senses roused to the sweet birdsong that was carried on the soft breeze, along with the scent of freshly cut grass and lavender. A wispy smile claimed her lips.

Rolling over, she discovered Charlie's side of the bed empty, but unlike times of the distant past, he'd left a note resting on his pillow. Quite often, she'd find notes left around the house from him, reminding her of how appreciated and loved she was. Picking it up, she held it at arms-length and tried to focus on his cursive writing. The letters rolled into one another. There was no way she could read it with her deteriorating eyesight. Grabbing her glasses from the bedside table, her soft smile spread as she began to read:

Good morning my wonderful wife.

Happy Golden Wedding Anniversary. I hope you've had an amazing sleep. I'm downstairs preparing a delightful breakfast for us to enjoy out on the verandah.

See you soon. I love you, always and for evermore.

Charlie xx

After a night spent relaxing in the sitting room, chatting over glasses of port and a platter of cheese and cured meats, with their favourite records playing in the background, Grace felt absolute peace within her heart. Even after all these years, they still had so much to talk about, and so many adventures to relish, near and afar. After trying so hard to find their

companionable cadence in their earlier years, and failing several times, age had given them the patience and wisdom to try again, and to find that natural, easy rhythm.

Climbing from the bamboo sheets and feathery duvet, she found her slippers and, collecting her robe from where Charlie had slipped it from her shoulders before they'd fallen to the bed and made the sweetest of love, glided it back over her body. Making love wasn't like it used to be when they were younger and more virile, charged with raw passion and made easy with limbs that bent in directions she dared not try these days. But it was way more satisfying now, in her opinion. Their lovemaking was more of a slow burn, with tender touches, whispered words and lingering kisses, it was far more quality over quantity. It affirmed the deep, undying love they shared every single day, just by being together, laughing, talking, sharing experiences and quite often just sitting in the same room, curled up against one another, with their noses buried in a book or holding hands while they watched their favourite films from the 1960s – *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was her favourite, whereas Charlie loved anything starring Elvis Presley.

Freshening up then following her nose, Grace padded down the staircase, where she found Charlie in the kitchen, humming to the tunes of Buddy Holly while busily preparing their brunch. Unlike her, he was a messy cook, and pots and pans dotted the benches. 'Good morning, my handsome husband. I see you've been busy.'

Spatula in hand and wearing the apron Ava had got him for his birthday, which read *Mr Good-looking is in charge of the Cooking*, he greeted her with a dimple-clad smile. 'Good morning, my beautiful ray of sunshine. Did you have a good sleep?'

Grace grinned sassily. 'You wore me out beforehand, so yes, I did.'

Charlie couldn't hide his pride, nor should he. 'It's nice to know I still have it.'

‘You’ll always have whatever *it* is.’ With Grace rising on her tippy toes, they met each other’s lips, lingering there for a kiss and a cuddle.

The delicious scent of bacon sizzling made her mouth water. ‘Whatever you’re cooking smells amazing.’

‘With me at the helm, of course it does.’ He grinned playfully as he cracked fresh eggs into a pan.

‘Now, now, don’t get too ahead of yourself.’ Giving him a quick pat to his bottom, she padded over to the coffee machine. ‘Would you like me to make us both a vanilla latte? Or would you like a hazelnut one today?’

‘Hmm.’ His brows scrunched in thought as he sliced a fresh loaf of sourdough. ‘Let’s go hazelnut.’

‘Okay-dokey, hazelnut it is.’ The bopping song Charlie had just turned up evoking sweet memories she longed to share with him, she raised her voice over the music. ‘Remember when we used to dance our tooshies off to this?’

‘How could I forget all the times we burnt up the dance floor at Confetti?’ His arms came around her waist and she spun to face him. ‘Can I have this dance, Mrs Wilson?’

Tossing the teaspoon onto the sink, she obliged, and they swirled and swayed their way around the butcher’s block, over to the dining table and then back to where Grace was halfway through preparing their coffee, their wide smiles identical.

‘Now that was fun,’ Charlie said, a little out of breath.

Catching hers too, Grace had to agree. ‘We do impromptu so well, my love.’

‘Just like everything else.’

Charlie finished preparing a scrumptious feast of crispy bacon, poached eggs, grilled basil tomatoes, garlic butter mushrooms and toasted sourdough then, with two plates in hand, led Grace out to their favourite spot to sit while enjoying a lazy brunch. He had already set the table with rattan placemats, shiny silver cutlery and a vase with freshly picked



flowers from her beloved garden; it looked delightful, and made Grace feel extra special.

‘Oh, Charlie, this looks beautiful,’ she gushed as he pulled her chair out for her. ‘I’m so fortunate, having a husband like you.’

‘I’m the one who’s lucky, my love.’ He settled himself on the chair beside her, then passed her a gift-wrapped box. ‘This is for you, my darling Grace. Happy anniversary.’

Unwrapping the pretty paper, a velvet box was revealed. ‘Whatever have you got me?’ she asked as she opened it to see a pair of gold teardrop earrings with sapphires at the centre. ‘Oh, my goodness, Charlie, they’re absolutely stunning.’

‘They should match your brooch.’

‘Oh, yes, they most certainly will.’ She leant into him and lingered an appreciative kiss on his lips. ‘Thank you, I’ll be sure to wear them with my brooch tonight.’

‘Your turn.’ Taking the gift from her robe pocket, she passed it to him.

He unwrapped her present to reveal a golden signet ring with the Wilson family crest engraved upon it. ‘Oh, Grace, this is...’ He blinked faster, sniffing. ‘Wow.’

*Vincit qui se Vincit.* She repeated the verse that was written at the top of the crest when she’d researched it, not sure that she’d be able to fit the inscription on the ring. ‘I know what it says, but what does it mean?’

The tender look Charlie gave her was wise and otherworldly. “‘He conquers who conquers himself’”. Which essentially means it’s you against yourself, and if you can conquer all of your flaws, and all of your weaknesses, then you will find yourself on the road to becoming the best person you can possibly be.’

Grace’s hands came to cover her gasping mouth. ‘Oh my gosh, that’s so fitting for your life, my strong, sweet man.’

‘Yes, it most certainly is, my darling Grace.’ Tears rolled down his cheeks as he held the ring to his chest. ‘This means so very much, so thank you, from the bottom of my heart.’

‘My pleasure, Charlie.’ She met his lips. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you more.’

Taking the first bite of her brunch, Grace rolled her eyes in pleasure. ‘Oh, my goodness, Charlie! Where on earth did you get this maple bacon from?’

‘I drove over to the butcher on the other side of town yesterday, just for you.’

Her heart welled. ‘This is why I love you.’

‘Because of my bacon hunting skills?’

She chuckled. ‘Yes, exactly.’

When both she and Charlie had finished every morsel on their plates, he raised his coffee in salute, smiling broadly. ‘Here’s to a magnificent day, spent with my magnificent wife.’

Grace raised her cup to him. ‘I’ll drink to that,’ she replied with a warm smile. ‘And tonight is going to be magical, I just know it.’

‘Of course it will be. How could it not with Hudson and Jacob in charge of the arrangements?’

She chuckled at the thought of the loved-up pair racing around like chooks with their heads cut off, snapping orders at the hired help. ‘Lord help Hope, Ava and Bryn if they try to change anything.’

‘Ha, too right.’ He chuckled. ‘Glad it’s them and not us getting everything ready.’

Grace nodded. ‘I can’t wait to see what their place looks like, decorated to the hilt, no doubt.’

‘Don’t be wishing the day away, my love, because before we know it, we’ll be driving home, wondering where it went.’

‘So true.’ She turned her gaze toward the horizon. ‘Time flies when we’re having fun.’

Dusk was approaching as they entered Hudson and Jacob’s gated property on the other side of town. Climbing from the passenger seat of Charlie’s beloved Valiant, now fully restored to its former glory, Grace looked to where the cliffs dived down to the ocean beneath. The call of seagulls and the crash of waves could be heard above the organised chaos. A huge white marquee had been set up on the back lawn and the hired help were buzzing around long tables with starched black tablecloths and bowls filled with floating candles and rose petals. Glass diamondshaped gems were scattered along the centre, and the porcelain place settings were absolutely divine. Akin to an enchanting garden party, it had an air of elegance, and sophistication. Their four wonderful children had clearly spared no expense for the night’s celebration.

Climbing the front steps of the grandiose house, Grace and Charlie were greeted by a very snazzily dressed Jacob. ‘Hello, you two lovebirds.’ He waved them inside. ‘Please, *entrez*.’

Hudson, Hope and Ava were bustling about the galley-style kitchen, their chatter loud and their laughter resonating. They all paused to share hugs and kisses.

Grace looked left to right. ‘Where are Sharni and Rose?’

‘They’re out back, no doubt glued to their phones.’ Hope rolled her eyes and glanced at her watch. ‘Speaking of which, I’d better go hunt them down.’

‘Before you take off, sis.’ Ava started to pass out glasses of champagne. ‘I want to make a toast to our wonderful parents, who have made it through so much in life, and are now more in love than ever.’

‘Hurrah to that.’ Bryn raised his glass.

Hudson did the same. ‘Yes, here’s to fifty years of marriage.’

Dumping a plate of canapés on the bench, Jacob hurried to Hudson’s side. ‘Cheers to your incredible love story.’

His arm going around her waist, Charlie pulled Grace as close as he could to his side. ‘Here’s to your amazing mother, my beautiful wife, for putting up with me all these years.’ He held his crystal flute to Grace’s. ‘You’re one in a bazillion, my darling.’

‘Aw, Charlie. I couldn’t imagine my life without you. I love you so very much.’

The rest of the evening flowed smoothly, filled with so much love and so much laughter. Sitting beside her mother, Grace noted how fragile her mother looked. Taking her hand in hers, she blinked back raw emotion – it wouldn’t be long before she wouldn’t have her here. So frail and tiny, her dear mum couldn’t walk without her cane. Seeing her now, coming to the end of her long life, it was hard to believe she was the vivacious woman who’d started the four generations that were here tonight.

A tapping sound came over the speakers, and Grace looked up at the stage to see Bryn holding the microphone. ‘Ladies, gents and child-folk, now our bellies are full of delicious food, it’s time to begin the night’s festivities. So let’s all join on the dance floor for my mother and father’s favourite song.’

‘Love’ by John Lennon began to play, and Grace couldn’t help but tear up as poignant memories that had been made throughout almost fifty-one years of loving this man by her side were evoked. ‘Oh, Charlie.’ This had been the song she’d walked down the aisle to. ‘How did they know?’

‘I told them,’ Charlie said, standing and offering her his hand. ‘Can I have this dance, my love?’

Grace and her mum shared a meaningful smile before she rose. With the scatterings of silver throughout his hair giving him a regal edge, her tall, dark and handsome-as-ever husband led her to the dance floor. Taking the waltz position, Charlie’s right hand settled into the curve of her back and the fingers of his left entwined around her right ones. They fit together so wholly, so naturally, so exquisitely... just as they always had.

\* \* \*

Charlie felt like he was floating. Everything about this amazing woman wrapped within his arms conspired to move his emotions beyond anything imaginable. ‘I only have one wing left, Grace, but when I embrace you, I can fly,’ he whispered into her ear.

‘Oh, Charlie, my darling man. You really are the sweetest.’ She rose on her tippy toes and met his lips. ‘I know I say it all the time, but I seriously love you, so much.’

‘I know you do, and I count my lucky stars every single day.’

As the night wore on and guests began to leave, Charlie pulled Hudson aside and stood with his hands plunged deep into his trouser pockets. ‘Thanks, to you and Jacob, for giving us a night to remember, son.’ His fingers clutched the handkerchief he’d already dabbed both his and Grace’s tears away with – more were on the way for him.

‘Of course, Dad. It makes us so happy to see you and Mum so happy.’

Charlie nodded. ‘It makes me happy to see you and Jacob so happy.’

‘Ha.’ Hudson wrapped an arm around Charlie’s shoulder. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

They remained like this, the comfortable, reflective silence bonding them beyond what words could ever bring.

‘Well then.’ Charlie took a breath. ‘I’d best get your mum home.’

After helping Edith into her friend’s car, then gathering their children and grandchildren so they could say goodnight, Charlie and Grace climbed into the Valiant and began their drive home.

On the journey, Charlie hungered to glance Grace’s way, but his gut instinct told him to keep his gaze strictly on the

road ahead. But he could only do this for so long.

Pulling to the side of the road so he could safely give his wife the kiss he was aching to, he leant across the seat.

‘What are you doing, Charlie?’

‘This,’ he said, right before he met her lips.

‘Oh, Charlie. I adore your spontaneity.’ She cupped his cheeks. ‘Never stop being you.’

‘I promise I won’t, Grace, because you allow me to be me.’

Like the deep-seated need of a sunflower to follow the sun’s warmth, he’d followed her glowing heart with his, for all his life, to this very instant.

They stayed like this for a few moments more, staring into each other’s eyes, their silence filled with so much profound, enduring love that Charlie found himself blinking back tears and failing to hold them at bay. Grace brought her fingertips to his cheeks and gently brushed away the few that fell. Overwhelmed by the intensity of this fragment in time, he couldn’t help but feel that there was something so intensely familiar with this magical moment, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was.

‘You know what I want to do?’ Her smile was filled with mischief.

‘We will do whatever your heart desires.’

‘Can we stop by the annual fair on the way home, to grab a bag of pink fairy floss?’

‘Of course we can.’ Charlie chuckled. ‘That wasn’t what I was expecting, but I should have learnt by now that you will always find new ways to surprise me.’

Settling back behind the wheel, he indicated and eased back onto the deserted road, coming to a stop at the intersection that would take them straight past the fair on their way home. But, instead of turning, Charlie checked there were

no cars behind them then took Grace's hand from where it was resting upon his leg and lifted it to his lips to kiss her just one more time. Just as he did, blinding headlights approached from behind Grace, and a truck zoomed past on the carriageway, veering slightly onto the wrong side of the road before straightening trajectory.

An intense sensation of déjà vu came over Charlie, and he was momentarily dumbstruck. His mouth dry and his mind spinning, he drew in a steadying breath as he fought to shake the feeling off.

Her eyes wide, Grace turned to him and tutted. 'That driver is very clearly over the speed limit.'

'And not watching the road, by the way that truck just swerved.' Charlie shook his head. 'He's most likely tired and at the end of a long journey, but it's no excuse. It's motorists like that who end up killing people.'

Open-mouthed, she turned to him. 'I'm so glad you thought to kiss my hand, Charlie, before turning out, or we could have been those unfortunate people.'

The thought made Charlie sick to the stomach, as an all too real image of their car crashing into a guardrail flashed through his mind. 'Saved by a kiss.'

'It appears so.' She placed her hand back to his now bouncing knee, steadying it like she always could. 'We're alive and well, so let's go and get me that fairy floss.'

Charlie took a breath, and then nodded. 'Yes, let's.'

The annual spring fair was close to shutting down for the night when they pulled up. 'If you want to wait here, I can run in and grab a bucket of fairy floss for you.'

She peered to her left and pointed. 'There's that fortune teller we went to, and her lights are still on.' She jiggled in her seat. 'Can we see if she'll do a reading for us, Charlie? Pleeease?'

Charlie loved how excited his wife was. ‘Come on, then, before she closes.’

Climbing the four stairs of the old-world wagon, he parted the red velvet curtains and moved inside. Just like the last time he’d come here with Grace, as twenty-something lovebirds, it was like stepping through a portal and into another world.

The same ageless eyes met them. ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’ Lit by the soft glow of a lamp, the elderly woman waved them over. ‘Come, sit.’

‘She been waiting for us?’ Grace whispered, her hold on Charlie’s arm tightening. ‘How spooky.’

‘Yes, I have,’ the fortune teller said with a knowing smile as they got settled opposite her. She fixed them with a steady stare. ‘So, I see you two are still madly in love?’

Grace looked to Charlie, and then back at the woman. ‘You remember us?’

‘Yes, I do.’ Her accent was still thickly exotic. She reached out her crooked fingers, myriad gold bangles jingling as she did. ‘I would like each of you to take one of my hands and then one of each other’s.’

They sat in a circle of handholding, and for a drawn-out moment, she said nothing. Then she nodded slowly, and her pursed mouth formed a tiny smile. ‘You made it.’

‘We made it?’ Grace asked with furrowed brows.

‘Yes, and you will make it until the end of your days, loving each other more and more. And when the first of you passes on, the next will be very soon to follow, for you will not be able to live many days without the other by your side. For you are each other’s air.’

Breathing in deep, the woman closed her eyes. ‘But, until then, there will be many travels, some near, some far. And your love, and legacy, will live on through your four wonderful children, and ... eight grandchildren.’

‘Eight?’ Grace exclaimed. ‘Golly.’



‘Yes, eight. Five girls, three boys. And you will live to meet every one of them.’

Grace mouthed ‘Wow’ to Charlie.

The woman’s eyelids flickering open, she tilted her head and offered a wispy smile. ‘That is all I need to say.’ She let go of their hands. ‘I won’t charge you for this reading. My gift to you.’

Her expression a little perplexed, Grace stood, as did Charlie.

The fortune teller took her time to come to her feet, her weight on her walking stick. By his side, she took Charlie’s hand and squeezed it, and he felt her press something into it.

‘You did it, Charlie,’ she whispered. ‘You went and gave your life for your wife’s. You’ve learnt the hardest lesson in love there is – to forgo all else for the sake of great love.’

Charlie had no idea what she was on about, but he graciously smiled. ‘Thank you.’

Grace touched the woman’s arm. ‘We appreciate you doing this for nothing, but are you sure you don’t want any money?’

The woman shook her head. ‘Absolutely not. It was my pleasure to bear witness to such great love. It is very rare these days.’

With Grace making her way in front of him, Charlie quickly opened the note and glanced down at what appeared to be his handwriting:

*I, Charlie Wilson, will give my life for the love of my life, Grace Burrows.*

The same déjà vu sensation fizzed over him, giving rise to goosebumps, and he sucked in a shuddering breath. Turning, he caught the old woman’s profound eyes, and she offered him a meaningful smile as he shoved the note into his pocket.

As soon as they stepped through the heavy velvet curtains and down the four steps, Grace pulled him to her. ‘What did

she say to you?’

Charlie held the eyes of the woman he’d loved for a lifetime, smiling from the depths of his soul. ‘She told me how lucky I am, to have spent my life loving a beautiful woman like you, my darling Grace.’

‘Did she now?’ Optimism sparkled in her sea-green eyes. ‘Another six grandchildren is wonderful, if she’s right. And I also like how she said we have many travels ahead of us.’

‘Me too.’ He chuckled. ‘I think we should pack our bags tomorrow and head off on our next adventure, before we have eight grandchildren to fill our days.’

‘You do?’

He nodded enthusiastically. ‘Why not?’

‘Oh, Charlie.’ Grace folded her hands beneath her chin. ‘Where shall we go this time?’

‘How about Italy? We can roam the cobbled streets and little laneways, and drink good coffee and slurp pasta until we’re so full, we have to roll back to our hotel.’

She clapped her hands together. ‘Now, that sounds absolutely perfect.’ She tipped her head, her eyes never leaving his. ‘True love really *is* falling in love with the same person, again and again and again. Because I’ve fallen in love with you a thousand times over, Charlie, and I will many times more before the first of us takes our last breath.’

‘Oh, Grace, my sweet, loving, kind-hearted woman. My love story began with you, and I’m so happy it will end with you, too.’ He gathered her into his arms. ‘I love loving you.’

‘I love loving you too, Charlie.’ Embracing him tight, she rested her head on his chest.

With his chin nestled against her hair, Charlie breathed her in deep. Grace was his heart, his soul, his home, his meaning. She was his everything, and he was hers. And that was all he could have ever wanted in this life. He’d surrender, sacrifice

and forgo anything to be right here, in this very moment, with her wrapped up in his arms.

For this was exactly where they'd always been destined to be.

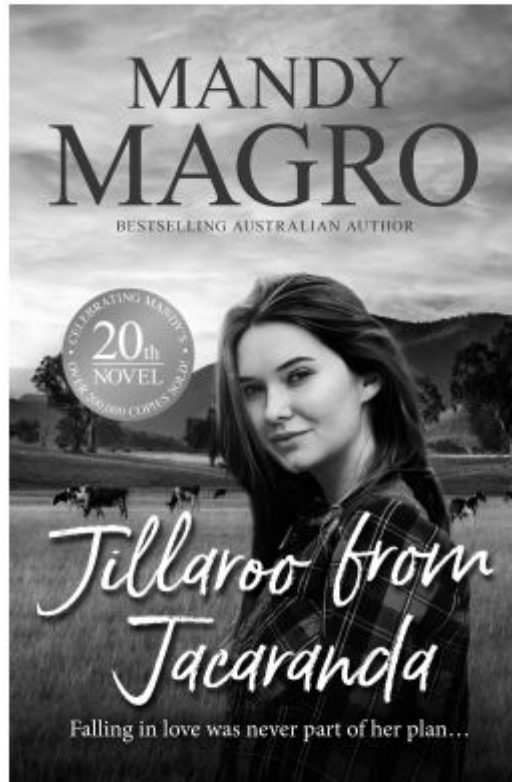
# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To YOU, my treasured reader, thank you for coming on this journey with me, into a slightly new genre. This has been a dream come true! I hope I've made you feel all the warm and fuzzies, made you laugh at times, made you cry (mean author, I know, but evoking all the feels is my mission 😊) and given you a big, contented sigh at the end. Because let's face it, love, and our belief in it, is truly what makes this world go round. A big grateful hug to every one of you, from the bottom of my romantic heart!

Until my next book has you ignoring the chores, hiding in the toilet away from the kids and pets, snuggled beneath a doona, laying below an expanse of sun-kissed blue, or cuddled up with the star-studded sky as your ceiling, make sure you do what makes your heart sing...dance like a chicken if it makes you happy! Try to stop and take that breath you need, and give yourself time to smell the roses, because life is fleeting, and we all need to grab hold of every moment. And of course, as always, keep on smiling and dreaming.

Turn over for a sneak peek.



Available now.



# PROLOGUE

Rose Jones lifted her dark sunglasses to the top of her head, took a shaky breath and braved a glance left and right. All around her, the pews of the church were packed with mourners, from near and far. Her beautiful great-grandmother had touched many hearts over the years. Elizabeth Jones was going to be deeply missed.

Bringing her attention from where her stepfather, Heath, had his arm wrapped tightly around her grieving mother, Rose looked to the mahogany casket adorned with flowers through tear-blurred eyes. She jumped as her father, Mark, placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Swivelling in her seat, she graced him with an appreciative glance over her shoulder. His kind eyes were filled with the same sadness she carried in her heart.

She was grateful for his comfort, especially as the poker-faced man beside her was cold as ice after an argument this morning, and had offered her no support. It showed to Rose how insensitive her fiancé had become. Rose and Finley Cole had been together for years, sharing dreams, fears, goals ... and yet, she felt as if she didn't know him at all anymore. Cracks were appearing in every part of their relationship, but after months of trying to be the only peacekeeper, she just didn't have the energy anymore, and they were sinking, fast.

Watching GG, her great-grandfather, shuffle up to say his final words very nearly had her sobbing uncontrollably. But with her mother squeezing her hand tight, she held it together, just. She also felt consoled in knowing her great-grandmother was no longer suffering from the cancer that had stolen her bright spirit and riddled her body with pain, even if it didn't curb the fathomless anguish of her loss. Never had she thought her heart could break like this; it was as if she could barely draw a breath.

Taking a moment to gather himself, David Jones cleared his throat before leaning into the microphone. 'Elizabeth was

the absolute light, and love, of my life. She was a wonderful wife, a devoted mother, a loving great-grandmother and a loyal friend to many. She always believed that love was the greatest of gifts, and we all know how much of it she gave to each and every one of us.' His chin wobbled, and he paused, gripping the lectern tightly. 'Excuse me for a minute.' Closing his eyes, he turned his back to the mourners, his burly shoulders shaking.

Unable to sit back and see her hero in so much pain, Rose shot to her feet, disregarding her wobbly legs, and rushed to his side. 'It's okay, GG. I can finish your speech if you like,' she whispered, rubbing his back.

'Thank you, little one, but I want to try to do this. For her.' Wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, he brought his big hand to her cheek. 'But can you stay here with me, just in case?'

Biting her trembling lip, Rose bit back a sob. 'Of course I can.' In her line of sight, her mum, Molly Jones, offered her an appreciative look.

After a few breaths, her great-grandfather turned back to the sea of mourners, and she slipped an arm around him. Together, somehow, they got through it. As they always had, and always would, no matter what life threw at them. Then, taking his hand in hers, she led him back to his seat, beside her stepfather. Step by step, they had been moving through the motions of death as the tight-knit family they were. Day by day, they now had to find a way to get through their mountains of sorrow. She didn't know how it was going to be possible, but one thing was for certain, she was going to make sure she was there for her family, just as they'd all been loyally by her side throughout her twenty-one years of life.

# CHAPTER

## 1

### **One month later – Jacaranda Farm**

After dumping the grooming bucket onto the timeworn timber workbench, Rose stole a moment to ease out her tight neck. Tossing and turning all night long while she worried herself sick was doing her no favours. She really needed to get back to her yoga and meditation; it would help her to relax and switch off her overactive mind. With the new year only weeks away, maybe that could be her resolution to welcome the next year in? Not that her resolution for this year had come to fruition – with her busy lifestyle, taking better care of herself had proved difficult. Between teaching kids how to ride, meeting her writing deadlines, keeping in touch with family and friends, being a good fiancée/homemaker and the intense training and competition schedule that came with her barrel racing, she barely had time to stop and take a much-needed breath. If only she had the chance to slow down and smell the proverbial roses, just for a little while. Now, wouldn't that be nice?

*Pigs might fly too.*

Sighing, she looked at the two posters her great-grandmother had made, which Rose had pinned to the tack-shed wall as an eleven-year-old girl. Now faded – even the tacks that held the laminated placards in place were rusting – the posters had been a way to encourage her big dreams of becoming Australia's barrel-racing champion, just like her great-grandmother had once been. She remembered working with GG, hammering each pin into place – her up on the bench with swinging legs, GG with hammer in hand, the next tack held between his teeth.

She quietly read each inspiring quote for the umpteenth time in her life.



*'I figure if a girl wants to become a legend, she should just go ahead and be one.'*

– Calamity Jane

*'Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.'*

– John Wayne

She softly smiled to herself. This kind of encouragement and inspiration was what pushed her through the hard times and lately, she'd had many challenging times. Sure, barrel racing was tough – the hours on the road were gruelling and the injuries could sometimes be excruciating – but it was all worth the blood, sweat and tears. Not that Finley shared her opinion. And to prove the point, he'd stopped showing any interest in her endeavours. Sure, it would never make her a millionaire, but between the prize money, the income from her horse-riding school, occasional jillarooing jobs and the royalties from her barrel-racing guidebooks, she was living comfortably doing something she was passionate about. Yes, she was juggling a few balls, but she always found a way to fit everything in, and to put time aside to spend together as a couple. Although, for the past few months, he didn't seem keen to be in her company. It felt like he was avoiding her.

With a heavy heart, her thoughts drifted back to their argument yesterday. She plucked her mobile from her pocket and re-read the text message he'd sent her last night.

*You're going to be my wife in six months' time, Rose, and you know I want a family sooner rather than later. You really need to start looking towards motherhood, which means letting go of your barrel racing and riding school. You can't ride a horse like that when you're pregnant. That would just be stupid, and selfish.*

No mention of 'I love you', or 'We will work this out'. Just demands. That had become Finley's way. And she didn't like being told what to do.

Cursing beneath her breath, she gritted her teeth as she shoved the phone back into her jeans pocket. It was a given that she'd never compete while she was pregnant – she'd never dream of endangering her unborn child's life. But wasn't it her choice too, as to when she and Finley had children? She wasn't ready yet. Especially considering she was just shy of twenty-two. Yes, Finley was seven years older, but that gave him no right to pressure her into his timeline – one that she'd known nothing about until recently – and she'd said as much in her reply text to him, to which she'd received no response. Nor had he answered her three calls this morning. Her annoyance rose another notch just thinking about it. Hopefully, when he arrived home tonight, they could have a calm conversation, like the adults they were supposed to be.

*You're kidding yourself, Jones. He's never going to listen. You should've learnt that by now.*

Rose huffed her voice of reason away. Love was unconditional, uplifting and encouraging ... wasn't it? But since getting engaged five months before, the rose-coloured glasses had tumbled off and been crushed beneath her boots. The position Finley had taken at his father's insurance firm meant many nights away from home, and he was gradually turning into a person she didn't know and, at times, didn't like very much. Not to mention his outdated expectations had thrown her off-kilter, with him transforming suddenly from an easygoing larrikin who laughed a lot to a suit-wearing solemn man who lived to work.

If they could only iron out the matters that were causing their recurring arguments, she truly believed they could be happy again. She wasn't asking much. He wanted four children; she'd be happy with one or two, and she didn't want any for a few more years. He wanted her to stay home, but she didn't want him to be the only breadwinner; she believed in mutual contributions. She didn't believe he needed to know where she was all the time because she was as loyal and trustworthy as a person came, and she thought it was a double standard that he expected her to give him complete freedom to

do as he wished, whenever he wanted, without question. It just all seemed a little one-sided, and it was beginning to wear her on patience and optimism.

Heaving another weighty sigh, she tried to shake the contemplations from her mind. There'd be plenty of time for her to mull it all over later, like she'd been doing all week, with Finley away on yet another work trip. Right now, she needed to put one hundred and ten percent focus into her barrel racing. She couldn't risk an injury to herself or Buck, especially when it was so close to the end of the rodeo circuit. She needed top points to walk away Australian barrel-racing champion for the second year running – handing the trophy over to her arch-nemesis would be an utter nightmare. Madeline Hew might have been an excellent rider, but she was a horrid human being, a bad sport and a shocking loser.

Leaning in, Rose placed a hand on her great-grandmother's cursive writing. 'I'm going to make you super proud this weekend, Great-Grandma,' she said quietly, blinking back tears. 'I just wish you were here to watch.' She bit down on her bottom lip to stop from crying. 'But I know you'll be cheering me on from heaven.'

Running at her dreams head-on had been a trait the strong women of her family had taught her – her grandmother, her mum and her aunties. She wasn't about to let go of that, not even for Finley. She just hoped he loved her enough to accept who she truly was.

Taking a breath, she turned and gathered her emotions before stepping from the shade of the leather-scented tack shed. Having made the effort to dress in her competitive gear – it always gave her that extra oomph – she looked every part of the champion barrel racer, with her diamanté-studded jeans, blingy belt, pink and purple checked Western shirt and timeworn Ariat boots.

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AUSTRALIA

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