

HANNA HART

BEST SELLING AUTHOR

Starting
over
in

Sunfall Key

A Warm Beach Series, Book One

Starting Over in Sunfall Key

SUNFALL KEY SERIES

BOOK ONE

HANNA HART

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Chapter One

“Cameron, I love you, but if you don’t get out of here in five minutes, I am going to be forced to fire you.”

Ronda was standing on the other side of the check-in desk with her hand on her hip and a knowing smile splayed across her face. She was my manager and friend of over a decade, who saw me come into work bright and early at 6am this morning. It was now going on 9:30 at night, and I knew she was worried I was working myself silly.

“Ronda,” I said. “My shift doesn’t end for another thirty minutes.”

“I know, but sweetie, you’ve been here for more than twelve hours already. Don’t you want to get home to Michael?”

I shook my head. “He’s working late too, and now that Neal’s off taking summer classes, the house is just too quiet. There’s nothing to go home to right now, so I might as well finish my shift. Besides, we work at a hospital—pulling doubles is the norm.”

“But this is your third double this week,” Ronda reminded me.

I smiled at her over the desk and suppressed the sudden urge to yawn. “Seriously, I’m fine,” I told her. “I’m good to stay for another 30 minutes, and then I swear to you, I’ll go straight home.”

She pursed her lips and seemed to think this over for a few seconds, then she grumbled her agreement under her breath

and went into the backroom to do some filing. Ronda was a good boss, if not a little over involved sometimes. I appreciated her concern, but what I didn't think she understood was how much I would rather be at the hospital these days than sitting at home alone, wondering what the rest of my family was up to. I thought I was prepared for my only child, Neal, to turn 18 and leave for college, but when the day came to actually say goodbye to him, I realized just how naive I'd been. I spent that first week without him muddling around the house, looking for ways to fill my time. One weekend, I even suggested to Michael that we both take some time off work and go do something fun together, but he didn't seem all that thrilled by the idea.

I couldn't blame him. We'd been growing apart for the last few years, and neither of us had been putting much effort into rekindling the romance. But now that we were empty nesters, I was determined to take the extra free time we both had and make the most of it. I truly believed we would be able to find our way back to one another, as long as we both worked at it. I was staying at the hospital late for the time being, just to give my racing mind something to focus on while I dealt with the pain of having to watch my son grow up way too fast. But soon enough, I would pull back from work and start focusing on my marriage instead.

Shortly after Ronda disappeared into the back room, a woman came into the hospital lobby looking frazzled and lost. I'd seen this look many times and I knew exactly what to do.

"Excuse me, miss," I said, standing up so that she could see me better. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes," she said, her voice desperate and shaky. "My husband. He—he was brought in after some sort of workplace accident. I only just received the call that he was here, and I rushed over as soon as I could."

I smiled sympathetically. "What's your husband's name?"

"George," she said. "George Banks."

"Oh, my goodness, Mr. Banks is your husband?" I laughed cheerfully. "That man is quite the character, you know that."

He's been cracking jokes ever since he came in."

"So, he's okay?" Her face flooded with relief.

"Yes, he's okay," I confirmed. "He's just down the hall in room four. I'll show you the way." I came out from behind the desk and motioned for her to follow me. "I believe he fell off a ladder, but it wasn't a huge fall and I think he just has a couple sprains. But for insurance purposes, most workplaces have to send their people to the hospital when there's an accident and get them checked out just in case."

"Right, right," the woman said, nodding, but still looking a little like a deer in the headlights. We came to the door to her husband's room, and I reached out and put a kind hand on her shoulder. This was my favorite part of the job.

"He's fine, Mrs. Banks," I said. "And he's going to be so happy to see you."

She smiled and mouthed the words thank you, her eyes filling with tears. I was used to people crying around me. Sad tears, happy tears, I'd seen it all. She patted my hand and then I opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

"Oh, hey honey!" I heard Mr. Banks say. "I was wondering when you were going to get here. Did you know they have cable? If I'd known I could switch between three different baseball games at once on a hospital TV, I would've fallen off a ladder years ago."

I chuckled to myself as I shut the door behind them and headed back to my desk with a smile on my face.

* * *

On my way to my car that night, I received two text messages. One was from Neal, letting me know he was all settled into his temporary summer dorm and that he'd already made a couple friends. I told him I was proud of him for putting himself out there and promised to call in the morning. The other text was from my late aunt's lawyer, confirming that I'd received the paperwork he'd emailed to me earlier in the day.

This text filled me with even more excitement as I recalled the conversation I'd had with this polite young man that morning.

My favorite aunt Susan had passed away earlier in the year, and it was devastating to say the least. It took me weeks to feel normal again after losing her, and it took her lawyer months to find her will. My aunt hadn't been the most organized person, and she could be a bit of a packrat, so it wasn't easy to track down her last will and testament. Once it was found, however, I was the first person the lawyer called because apparently my aunt had left me her seaside cottage in Sunfall Key.

As much as I missed her, hearing that Aunt Susan had left her house for me had been some of the best news I'd gotten in years. The house was where I spent many happy summers as a kid, and that gift from my aunt couldn't have come at a better time.

Michael and I needed to find a way to reconnect with one another, and what better place to do that than a cute little beach house in a quiet coastal town? Making the trip down to Sunfall Key for a week or two that summer was *just* what the doctor ordered.

I was so excited to tell him all about it that I could hardly stop from grinning as I drove through town, to the other side of Naples, where our house was nestled in one of the lesser developed suburban neighborhoods. The living room light was on when I pulled into the driveway, so I knew Michael was home. I hurriedly got out of the car and sloughed my overstuffed work bag over my shoulder. On days when I worked doubles, I always brought a lot of stuff with me, like two full meals and a change of clothes just in case. Even though I wasn't a nurse, that didn't mean my job didn't sometimes get messy.

In the house, I heard the sounds of pots and pans clanging around in the kitchen, and then there came a heavy sigh of defeat.

“Sweetie?” I called from the other room. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just trying to get some dinner going.”

I frowned. Michael didn’t normally cook dinner, and especially not on nights when we both got off work so late. I tossed my bag on the floor and shimmied out of my jean jacket, letting it fall on top of my bag instead of putting it in the hall closet. I knew it bothered my husband when I didn’t put things where they belonged, but I was too tired to deal with such menial tasks right then. Besides, I was eager to tell him about the phone call I had with Susan’s lawyer.

Coming around the corner into the kitchen, I saw a pot of boiling water on the stove and the microwave door open. It looked like an entire tomato had exploded in there. I laughed. “Woah, what’s going on here?”

“I told you,” he said, sounding exasperated. “I’m trying to make dinner. I’ve got pasta going on the stove and I was trying to heat up the sauce in the microwave to make the process go a little faster, but I forgot to cover the bowl.”

“I see.” I went over to the stove and checked the tenderness of the pasta, then turned off the burner. “Why didn’t you just order something like usual?”

“Because it’s expensive to order-in all the time,” he said. “I can’t keep burning money on stuff like that. Plus, I’m a grown man, I should learn how to cook myself dinner, don’t you think?”

“Well, sure, but...” I trailed off, not really knowing what to say to all of this. With both of us working at well-paying jobs, I didn’t understand why Michael was suddenly concerned about spending money on take-out. Also, in all the years I’d known him, he never once showed any interest in learning how to cook.

“Why don’t you just let me take over,” I said. “Go sit down and try to relax.”

“No,” he said. “It’s fine. I’ve got it.” He took the pot off the stove and poured the pasta into the strainer, then threw the

sauce on top and mixed it together without adding any butter, cheese, or seasonings. I watched with a raised brow, thinking that was probably going to be some of the least flavorful pasta my husband had ever eaten, but knowing better than to say as much out loud. Five minutes later, when he sat down with his meal and I sat down with my leftovers from lunch and a glass of wine, I decided now was the best time to tell him the good news. I needed to raise his spirits.

“So,” I said, taking a sip of wine and leaning back into my chair. “I got a call from my aunt Susan’s lawyer today. You’ll never guess what she left for me in her will.”

“What?” he said. He wasn’t even looking at me. He stabbed his fork into his bowl of pasta and I could tell from his facial expression as he took each bite, that he wasn’t enjoying his meal.

“She left me her house in Sunfall Key!” I smiled. “Isn’t that great?”

“Where?”

“Sunfall Key,” I said. “Remember? I used to spend my summers there with Susan when I was a kid. It’s such a cute little town and the people there are all so nice. I’m so excited to go back! I haven’t been in years. I just hope the town hasn’t lost its charm or anything. I would be so bummed if someone built a resort or anything that would bring too many tourists around.”

Michael nodded. “That’s good about the house.”

“It’s amazing!” I said. “And you’re going to love it too. It’s the perfect place to get away. Once you get there, you sort of feel like you’re in a whole different world, and it’s easy to forget all about your life outside of the town and just relax into the peaceful ebb and flow of small-town life.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “That sounds nice, but I’m probably not going to be able to come with you. Sorry.”

I pinched my eyebrows together. “Why not?”

“I’m just really busy with work these days.”

“You’re always busy with work,” I said. “But you still get vacation, don’t you? Can’t you take a week off this summer and come down to the coast with me?”

He sighed and put his fork down, and for the first time since we sat at the table together, he met my gaze for longer than just a fleeting glance. “Cameron,” he said. “It’s just not going to work out, okay?”

“But why not?”

He shook his head. “I really didn’t want to do this tonight, but I guess it’s better just to get everything out in the open.”

My stomach dropped. I could tell Michael had something serious to tell me, but I had no idea what to prepare myself for. I took one last sip of wine to try and ease myself into whatever was coming next, but the liquid stuck to the back of my throat, and I had to force it down with some water so I didn’t choke on it.

“I also talked to a lawyer today,” Michael said. “*My* lawyer.”

“Since when do you have a lawyer?”

“Since I decided that this marriage just wasn’t working for me anymore.” He stood up and walked over to the kitchen counter and opened his briefcase. I watched him go, but it was like he was moving in slow motion or something. The words he’d just said were hanging in the air between us and I was still trying to absorb their meaning when Michael placed a thick stack of papers on the table before me.

“What—what’s this?” I asked.

“Those are divorce papers,” he said. I looked up at him in shock, my eyes beginning to water. “I’m sorry, Cameron, but I’m leaving you.”

Chapter Two

TWO WEEKS LATER

At the hospital one Monday morning, I sat behind the desk with my timesheet up on the monitor and my hands poised on the keyboard, but my mind was elsewhere. I hadn't typed a word in probably five minutes, and my eyes were glazed over as I recalled everything that had happened since the night Michael served me with divorce papers.

It had all moved so quickly after that.

He packed his stuff and moved out the following day, and all the sudden the house I already felt was cold and empty, became even more frigid and more lonely. In order to keep myself from spiraling, I took on more double shifts at work, but even my job had started to lose its luster. The interactions I had with patients and worried loved ones began to feel stilted and forced. I had not one, but two different people take out their anger on me, which normally didn't affect me too much, but after everything I'd been through, getting screamed at by someone who just lost a family member was too much. I broke down each time and Ronda had to rush me off to the breakroom and help calm me down with coffee and words of encouragement.

I hadn't told anyone about the divorce, not even Neal, because telling people made it too real. I still needed time to figure out how I felt about everything that happened before I let others in on what was going on.

"Hey, Earth to Cameron."

Someone was snapping their fingers in front of my face and therefore snapping me back to the present moment. I shook my head and blinked a couple times, and then looked up to see Ronda standing over me with a cup of coffee in her hand. "Your shift is over," she said.

I checked the time at the bottom of the monitor screen and saw that I'd been sitting there doing nothing for much longer

than I thought. “Oh wow, that went by fast.”

“Maybe for you,” Ronda said, easing herself down into the wheely chair next to mine. “I still have three hours to go on my shift, and yet it feels like I should already be home watching TV and eating ice cream out of the tub.”

I smiled as I began to pack up my things. “You got any plans for your day off tomorrow?”

“None,” she said. “Which is exactly how I prefer to spend my day off—with absolutely no plans and no obligations whatsoever. What about you?”

I shrugged. “Not sure yet. I might just see if someone has a shift they want me to take.”

Ronda clicked her tongue. “Are you serious? You can’t come in tomorrow. You’ve been coming in for nine days straight! You need a break.”

“I’ll take one eventually,” I said. “I just think that while I have the energy to keep coming into work, I might as well do it, right? The overtime is good money.”

She shook her head. “You’re going to burn yourself out. Really, Cameron, why are you doing this to yourself? Are you trying to save up vacation days for that trip to your aunt’s house or something?”

I frowned. I honestly hadn’t thought about my aunt’s house or Sunfall Key since the day I found out that she’d left it to me. I completely forgot that Ronda had been sitting next to me when I got the call from the lawyer, and I spent much of that morning telling her all about the summers I spent there as a kid.

“Huh,” I said.

“What?”

“It’s just that it totally slipped my mind. Planning a trip out there, I mean.”

Ronda balked. “How could you *forget* about the fact that you inherited a beach house in a small coastal town where you can get away from the hustle and bustle of daily life whenever

you want?” She laughed. “If I had a place like that, I’d be there every weekend. And I definitely would’ve gone last weekend if I were you—after the week you had!”

I drew back, worried that Ronda had somehow found out about my divorce without me telling her. “What do you mean after the week I had?”

“With those people yelling at you,” she said.

“Oh, right,” I laughed a little under my breath. “That.”

“What did you think I meant?”

“Nothing.” I waved a hand in the air. “I was just blanking, that’s all. It’s been a long day.”

Ronda reached over and put her hand on my arm, meeting my gaze straight on. “Cameron, I know you’ve never really taken my advice before, and you have that stubborn way about you that makes it hard to admit when you’re wrong... but if there was ever a time to hear me out, let it be now. You need a break, and I honestly think the fact that this house landed in your lap right now is a sign. Your aunt wants you to stop working yourself to the bone and enjoy life a little. You’ve been given a really great gift here, and if you refuse to take it—well, how do you think that would make Susan feel?”

A slight smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. “Are you actually using my dead aunt to help you make a point?”

She winced. “That depends... is it working?”

I gently pushed her hand aside, but we shared a laugh. “You’re shameless, you know that?”

“Hey, I’m just doing whatever I can to get through to you!” she said as I got up to go. “Think about what I said, okay? Ask yourself what your aunt would say if she were to see you were working this hard and not taking any time for you.”

I rolled my eyes and told Ronda to have a good night, not promising to think over anything. But of course, as I drove home, and later on as I laid in bed all alone, staring up at the

ceiling, Ronda's words came back to me, and I couldn't shake them.

I knew exactly what my aunt would say if she were here. She would tell me that I was being ridiculous and insist that I stop being so serious and practical and have a little fun. Her life motto had always been "If it makes you smile, and if it doesn't hurt anybody else, then go for it". I remembered that's what she said to me when I asked her if I could wear my tutu to the museum one summer afternoon as a kid. And she said it again to me when I was a teenager, and I told her that I was thinking about trying out for the soccer team instead of doing SAT prep after school like my parents wanted me to.

Everyone else in the family used to talk about Aunt Susan like she was the fun but irresponsible one, but the older I got, the more I started to think that she actually had more figured out about life than the rest of us.

So yeah, if she were here with me, she would tell me to pack up my car and head to Sunfall Key for a weekend, or a week, or a month... Heck, she'd probably tell me to spend the whole summer there. She would've known that spending the next few months in Sunfall Key living life to the fullest and reconnecting with who I was before I got married and had Neal would be *exactly* what I needed.

And she'd be right.

* * *

The next morning, I woke up from a dream where I was swimming in the ocean and the sun was shining overhead. The birds were calling to each other on the shore, and I had a smile that took up my whole face.

When my alarm went off at 5:30am, I rolled over and hit the snooze button, groaning because I'd been ripped away from such a beautiful and warm fantasy. I closed my eyes again and tried to return to the dream, but my efforts were in vain, and five minutes later, when my alarm went off again, I knew I had to get up and return to my actual life.

I sighed as I dragged my sleepy body to the bathroom to brush my teeth and splash some cold water on my face. I was still groggy and only half-awake when I opened the cabinet behind the mirror and grabbed my face lotion. I ended up knocking over a few other cosmetics, which scattered across the tile floor. I thought about just leaving them there, that's how tired I was, but then I realized one of the things that fell was in a glass bottle so I knew I should check to make sure it didn't break. I got down on my hands and knees and gathered all the fallen items, and while I was down there, I spotted something shiny and silver hiding behind the base of the bathroom sink. Frowning, I reached out and curled my fingers around cold metal. Bringing my prize up with me and holding it out into the light, I had to laugh.

It was my Aunt Susan's ring.

Years ago, before my aunt even got sick, I was visiting her for just a short weekend trip. I was only able to get away from work for a couple days, and I didn't want to leave Michael in charge of taking care of Neal himself for much longer than that anyway. During that rushed trip, however, Susan and I got to talking and I ended up asking her why she never married. She said she just never found anyone who's company she enjoyed more than her own. When I asked her why she wore a little silver band around her ring finger then, she laughed and told me the story of when she bought that ring while traveling through Europe as a young woman.

She was in her early twenties, and everyone told her that she was making a mistake by selling her car, and most of her belongings, and heading out of the country for an adventure. But she knew she was making the right choice for herself, and while she was in a small town in Italy, she came across a tiny storefront where a woman sold her handmade jewelry. Susan tried on this one, simple silver band with a leaf design carved into it, and it fit her finger perfectly. Even though it was technically a wedding band, she decided to buy it for herself because it just felt right on her hand.

She'd worn it ever since, but as she aged, her hands, along with the rest of her body, grew thinner and frailer, and the ring

no longer fit.

That weekend, she told me to try it on, and when we realized that it fit me perfectly, she told me to keep it. I wore it on my right hand for years, until one day, it slipped off my finger when I wasn't paying attention and I never found it.

Turns out, it was tucked into this little section of the bathroom floor that I never would've seen if I hadn't gotten down on the ground to grab my cracked perfume bottle.

Crying a little, I slipped the ring on my finger and ran my thumb along the leaf carving.

At that moment, I knew exactly what I had to do.

I called Ronda while I was packing my bags and told her I was going to take all my unused vacation days, which added up to just over two months. I knew I was leaving her high and dry, and I apologized profusely for the last-minute shift in staffing, but she told me not to worry about it. She would figure it out.

Once I had everything packed, I threw it all into the back of my car and locked up the house. I didn't even bother calling Michael or leaving a note. If he wanted to talk to me, he could come find me, and in the meantime, I was going off on my own adventure.

I put the key in the ignition, and with one last look at my sad, empty house, I pulled out of the driveway and headed down the coast.

Chapter Three

Tears were already forming in my eyes as I pulled up to the house that encompassed so many of my best childhood memories, and they blurred my vision a little as I brought the car to a stop. The house looked pretty much exactly as I remembered it, and just being back in Sunfall Key made me feel like I could breathe a little easier. It was like I'd been holding a breath for the last few years, but I didn't even know it, and now, staring up at the house and hearing the waves crashing against the shore in the backyard, I was finally able to release it.

I left my stuff in the car for now and walked up the steps to the porch. I noticed that some of the paint was chipping and one of the shutters on the window to my right was partially broken and hanging off its hinges, but even still, the house was perfect in my eyes. I jingled the keys, which Susan's lawyer had mailed to me two weeks ago, and slipped the gold one into the lock. The door creaked as I pushed it open, and a plume of dust billowed out the moment I stepped onto the welcome rug on the other side of the threshold.

Coughing and waving my hand in front of my face to try and clear the air, I took a look around and smiled. Yes, there was dust everywhere, and the house repairs weren't isolated to just the outside, but I didn't care about any of that. Being in the living room, seeing the same furniture that I spend many summer days lounging on, and inhaling the salty sea breeze, brought me right back to my childhood. I sighed with instant relief and contentment, and walked further into the house, checking to see what had changed and what had stayed the same in the years since I'd been there.

It was obvious that nobody in my family had visited the house since my aunt died, and nobody had bothered to go through any of her things. I was grateful that all her stuff was still here. It wouldn't have felt the same if it had been cleared out. Still, because my aunt had a hard time throwing stuff away, I knew I would have to get rid of some things in order to make room for myself for the summer. Like the stack of old newspapers that was pushed into a corner in the kitchen, or the dead houseplants on the window sill.

But all of that could wait.

First—I wanted to see the ocean.

I went out the sliding back door and stepped onto my favorite part of the house, the back patio. Susan's property went all the way to the water's edge, and this part of the beach was private and tucked away, so hardly anyone stumbled onto this perfect little alcove. There was no one outside just then, so I had the view all to myself. I smacked some dust from the cushions on one of the patio chairs and then made myself comfortable. I stared out at the water and then leaned my head back and closed my eyes, feeling the sun's rays warm me up from the outside in. I listened to the waves form, then crest, then crash against the rocky shore, and for a moment, I felt like my aunt was there with me.

The tears that had formed in my eyes earlier, upon just seeing the house, now returned and began to fall down my cheeks. I thought about how much my life had changed in the last couple of weeks, and how for the first time since I was a young girl, I really had no idea what I was doing or what was coming next. Unlike my aunt Susan, I'd always done things the practical, expected way. I graduated high school on time, then got my degree in healthcare management and was settled into a well-paying, steady job by the time I met Michael. We got married, saved up to buy our house, and then had Neal all before my thirtieth birthday. Even when I was young, I never really let loose or did anything I wasn't supposed to. I'd always considered myself a fun person, but I was milk toast compared to my aunt.

Susan was an adventurer, and I knew if she were here, she would know exactly how to help me navigate these nasty storms my life had suddenly steered into. She was great at thinking on her feet, and since she never seemed to expect things to go ‘the right way’ she always seemed prepared for whatever was coming.

Sniffing, I opened my eyes and looked up at the sky, imagining her watching over me from wherever she was now. “What do you think I should do?”

It wasn’t as if I was actually waiting on an answer. I knew better than to hold my breath for some sort of signal from the beyond. As someone who worked in the ER, I’d seen many people standing by the bedside of their loved ones who had made the journey to the other side, begging for some kind of signal that they were still there with them. Sometimes, mourners would claim that the bird who flew by the window or the song that came on the radio at that exact moment was their sign, but more often than not, these poor people were left with nothing but disappointment. Over the years, I’d started to realize that the signs people were seeing, or thought they were seeing, often pointed in the direction where they wanted to go already. The bird who flew by the window told a sad widow that it was okay for her to let go of her pain and move on with her life. The song that came on the radio was a sign to a grieving son that his father had forgiven him for the cruel things he’d said the last time they saw each other. These signs, whether they were real or not, gave people closure and comfort, so who was I to tell them it was all made up? But for those who never received any sort of sign, I saw how much the waiting had hurt them, and I wasn’t going to put myself through any more emotional turmoil than was necessary.

As I sat there, with the sun shining down on me, and the salty ocean breeze filling my lungs, I had to smile at myself, because the more I thought about it, the more I realized I didn’t need my aunt Susan to somehow communicate with me from the great beyond. I knew her well-enough, perhaps better than anyone else had known her, and I knew what advice she would give me if she were here.

“Live your life as boldly and as happily as you possibly can,” she’d say, as she often did when she was still alive. “And do what makes you feel most like yourself.”

Being there, at that house, made me feel more like myself than I had in a long, *long* time, and when I glanced back over my shoulder at the aging, withering structure, I saw what I’d been looking for. My ‘sign’, so to speak, had been staring me in the face all along.

“I’m going to fix up this house,” I said quietly. “I’m going to clean it out and restore it to its former glory.”

The only problem was, I had no skills or expertise when it came to house repairs.

Shrugging, I thought, *but hey, isn't that what the internet's for?*

* * *

I got started right away, surveying the house, and making a mental list of repairs that same day I’d arrived in town. The task I wanted to tackle first was the leaky faucet in the upstairs shower. I watched a handful of videos online, and was pretty sure I’d diagnosed the problem to be a loose seal with the knob for the hot water. The video made the repair process seem pretty easy and straightforward, and I figured I could get it done that very same night if I was quick about it.

I made a list of all the tools and parts I needed to fix said issue, and headed off to the local hardware store just a few blocks away. While wandering the aisles aimlessly, wondering whether or not I’d already gotten myself way in over my head, a woman wearing heavy boots and an apron walked over and asked if I needed help finding anything. She had a gruff voice but a kind smile, and her hair was graying a little at the roots. I stared at her for a few seconds, overwhelmed by this feeling of recognition.

“I’m sorry,” I said, frowning. “I just had, like, *deja vu* or something. I felt like I’ve been in this exact store before, and

that you've come around the corner and asked if I needed help just like that."

The woman, whose name tags read "Tilly", laughed. "Yeah, well, if you've been into this hardware store any time in the last thirty-five years, then it's highly possible that we have had this interaction before."

"Well—huh. I'm not sure, but it's possible that I came in here once or twice with my aunt when I was a kid. She's the one who had a house here, I only ever came to visit over the summer."

"What's your aunt's name?"

"Her name was Susan," I started to say, and right as the name fell from my lips, the woman's entire demeanor changed. She went from looking at me as a friendly stranger, to looking at me as a somewhat morose family member.

"You're Susan's niece?"

I nodded, and before I could say anything else, Tilly closed the gap between us and wrapped me up in a big bear hug. "I was so sad to hear about your aunt's passing. She was one of my oldest friends."

I patted this woman's back, and was thankfully very used to being hugged by people I didn't know. It happened a lot at the hospital. "Yeah," I said when we pulled apart. "It was pretty shocking for me as well."

"Of course," Tilly said, her eyes looking a little watery. "Gosh, the whole town was devastated. Even though Susan often kept to herself in that beautiful old house of hers, when she did come out into town, she always brought gifts and goodies with her, and was nothing but smiles. She would drop into the hardware store every other week or so, and we'd sit and chat over coffee that she'd bring from the house in her little thermos."

"That sounds like Susan," I said, smiling.

Tilly seemed to get lost in the memory for a moment, then she snapped back to the present and clapped her hands together. "Well, anyway, that's probably enough reminiscing

for now. If I think about her for too long, I'll get choked up. Like I said, if you need help finding anything—”

“Actually,” I said. “I need help finding just about everything on my list. You see, Susan left me the house and I arrived earlier today to see that it's in desperate need of a few repairs. I've decided to start with this leaky faucet, and based on a couple videos I watched online, these are the things I'm going to need.” I handed her my list, which I'd scribbled on the back of an old receipt I'd found in one of Susan's junk drawers.

Tilly frowned as she scanned the various items. “You think the problem is with one of the knobs?”

“I hope so,” I said. “Because I did a little research, and that's just about the only problem that someone like me could actually fix on her own. If it's something more serious than that, I'll have to call a plumber.”

Tilly handed the list back and put her hands into the pocket of her apron. “Look, I'm no contractor, but I have been working in this shop ever since I was a teenager and my dad first opened it. I've picked up a lot of knowledge over the last couple of decades, and if there's one piece of advice I can give you, it's not to mess with plumbing stuff unless you *really* know what you're doing.”

“But the video I saw made it look so easy.”

“I'm sure it did,” Tilly said. “And there's a chance you're right, that it's just an issue with the handle... but if you're wrong, and you go taking apart the faucet, you could land yourself in some serious hot water. No pun intended.”

I smirked and then stared down at the list. What Tilly said made a lot of sense, but I'd already gotten myself so psyched up for the prospect of fixing the house up. I'd chosen this task, figured out the problem and taught myself how to solve it. I didn't want to give up now. “I'll be careful,” I told her. “Don't worry.”

Tilly smiled and shook her head. “You are related to Susan, aren't you? She also thought she could take care of just about

anything on her own.” She walked past me and motioned for me to follow. “Well, c’mon then, let’s start tackling that list.”

Chapter Four

The sun was sitting low in the sky when I arrived back at the house with all the supplies and tools from the hardware store. I took everything upstairs with me right away and got to work. I re-watched the video, pausing it as I went, taking each step carefully and cautiously. First, I took the knob off, and noticed that the seal was in fact looking pretty worn down. I took the old seal off, cleaned up the area around it, then put the new one on. Next, I screwed the handle back into its rightful place, and tried twisting it a little harder to the left.

The leak stopped.

“Oh my god, I did it!” A huge smile spread across my face, and I threw my hands up in triumph. “I did it!” I was so excited, that I decided to celebrate by bringing the rest of my stuff in from the car and getting ready for a relaxing first night at the house. I tidied up the kitchen as best as I could for now, then poured myself a glass of wine from a bottle I’d picked up at the market on my way home from the hardware store, and went upstairs to draw a bath.

I turned the water on, twisting the knob for the hot water a little further than the knob for the cold, and left the tub to fill up. Sipping my wine, I stood by the window in the upstairs hallway and watched as the sun set in the West. The sky was a calming mixture of orange, pink, and purple, and the ocean seemed to go from a light turquoise color to a darker, navy blue. Once the sun had fully disappeared over the horizon, I took a long sip from my glass and returned to the bathroom. There was steam coming off the top of the water in the tub,

and I decided to dip my toe in first to make sure the temperature was just right.

The moment my skin breached the water's surface, I gasped and nearly fell backwards. It was boiling hot. I rushed to turn the knob for the hot water all the way off, and then waited for the stream to cool down. I stuck my hand under for a second, but the water coming out of the faucet was still as hot as could be. Finally, I turned both knobs all the way to the left, and everything turned off. I waited a few seconds, then tried just turning on the cold water. It was still boiling.

Sighing, I turned it all off once more and looked down at the water, which would probably be too hot to get into for at least another twenty minutes.

“So, I guess I didn't fix the problem,” I said to myself. “Or rather, I fixed the leak, but then somehow created a whole new problem. Great.”

I picked up my wine glass from the sink and headed across the hall into the bedroom, where I turned on the TV and settled down on the bed, to wait for the water to cool down so that I could at least enjoy my bath and have a nice evening to myself.

Tomorrow, I would deal with the problem I had created, and then start to work my way down the list of the other repairs.

Though maybe next time, I'll watch a few more videos before I get started.

* * *

The next day, I tried to find a good plumber online, but sifting through lists of positive and negative reviews was making it difficult to determine who would actually do a good job and who might end up destroying the pipe system for my entire house. The last thing I wanted to do was make matters even worse, so I swallowed whatever pride I had left, and called the hardware store.

Tilly answered after the third ring.

“Rodger’s Hardware, how can I help you?”

“Hey Tilly,” I said. “It’s Cameron.”

“Who?”

I realized I hadn’t actually properly introduced myself the day before and laughed. “Sorry, it’s Susan’s niece. I was in the shop yesterday.”

“Oh, of course, of course. Cameron. What can I do for you?”

“Right... so... I did fix the leaky faucet,” I said.

“That’s great,” she said. “I have to admit, I really thought you were going to seriously mess that one up. No offense, but the moment you told me you were going to be working from a video you found online, I had my doubts. But hey, you proved me wrong. Good for you!”

“Yes, well... okay. So, here’s the thing. I *did* fix the leaky faucet, but in the process of fixing that, it seems I may have messed something else up, because now there’s only hot water that comes out. It’s like I somehow cut the connection between the faucet and the cold water, and now all my baths and showers are going to be scalding if I don’t do something about it.”

“Huh,” Tilly said. “Well, that’s a new one. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard of someone messing up so badly that now they only have access to hot water. Honestly, I’m a little impressed.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I get it. I should’ve listened to you in the first place, next time for sure. But right now, I was just calling to see if you knew the name of a good plumber.”

“Sure do,” she said. “My uncle Jerry. He’s in his seventies, but he’s mostly there and he’ll get the job done for a fair price. Want me to send him over?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, that would be great.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “I’ll give him a call and send him your way whenever he’s got time. He’s a little hard of hearing, so you’ll have to speak up, and if he gets you confused with someone else, like your aunt for example, don’t worry. He just has a hard time keeping track of faces.”

I frowned. “Are you *sure* he’s up for the job?”

“Oh yeah,” Tilly assured me. “He may be getting up there in years, but he’s still the best plumber in town. It’s like, the less he remembers about the rest of his life, the more focused he gets on fixing people’s toilets and pipes.”

“If you say so,” I said. “I’m trusting you, Tilly.”

“Hey, you should’ve trusted me yesterday,” she said. “If you’d listened to what I had to say, you wouldn’t even be in this mess in the first place.”

“I know, I know.” I was standing in the kitchen, waiting for the water in the kettle to boil, and watching a couple of seagulls fight over what looked to be just a piece of seaweed on the beach. “I appreciate your help, and tell your uncle he can come around anytime today. I’m going to be home, getting some cleaning done.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up, and I poured the water out of the kettle into the French press I found in one of the cupboards. Five minutes later, with hot coffee in one of my aunt’s old to-go mugs, I put some rubber gloves on and started to clean the kitchen.

* * *

The doorbell rang just as I’d finished scrubbing the kitchen floors. It had been about two hours since I’d hung up with Tilly, and finally the kitchen was starting to look like it hadn’t been left to collect dust and grime for months on end. I’d cleared the countertops of all the miscellaneous items my aunt had held onto for one reason or another, deep cleaned the sink and the fridge, and then got down on my hands and knees to tackle the floors.

Standing up, my joints ached a little, and I was happy to have an excuse to take a little break from cleaning. I tossed the rubber gloves over the edge of the sink and pushed some hair out of my face as I walked to the front door.

“Hello,” I said to the man on the other side. “You must be Tilly’s uncle.”

“What?” He said, craning his neck and putting a cupped hand behind one ear.

“I said you must be Tilly’s uncle!” I spoke louder this time, and thankfully he seemed to hear me. He nodded, and then walked inside with his toolbox in hand before I could even invite him in. “The bathroom is upstairs. Do you need—”

“I know where it is,” he said. “I came to fix Susan’s sink last year.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. “Well, great.”

He started up the steps and I hesitated before following him to the second floor. He moved somewhat slowly, and it seemed like quite the strain when he had to lower himself down on his knees to take a look at the knobs. I winced as the old man let out a heavy exhale, and had half a mind to call Tilly back and tell her that I didn’t actually feel comfortable letting her uncle work for me. But then he opened his toolbox and started fiddling around with the faucet, and I could tell right away, he had zeroed in on his work. It was just as Tilly had said—he seemed incredibly focused.

“Alright, well I’m just going to leave you to it, then,” I said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

He didn’t even seem to hear me, so I opted just to wave so that he knew I was leaving, and then went downstairs to get back to cleaning. I heard a few clanks and clamoring from upstairs, but nothing too concerning. I sat down at the kitchen table and started going through all the stuff I’d found while I was organizing the junk drawers that morning, which mainly consisted of old magazines, receipts, and pens that had dried up. Originally, my plan was to make two piles. One for all the

items I knew were trash, and the other for anything I thought had enough sentimental or fiscal value to hold onto.

In the end, however, everything ended up in the trash pile. I felt bad, clearing out all this stuff and taking it to the trash bin out back, but really there was no denying that's where it belonged. It would seem that as my aunt got older, her tendency to hold onto things others would throw away became even more of an issue. She used to simply hold onto things like ticket stubs and emotionally relevant trinkets, but now she had entire drawers full of broken mechanical pencils and old medicine bottles. She wasn't a full-blown hoarder or anything, but she seemed to have been on her way to becoming one.

It made me think about how much time had passed since I'd last come to Sunfall Key to visit her, and I wished I would've made more of an effort when she was still alive. I came at least once a year, but that wasn't nearly enough. For either of us. I hoped she could forgive me for not being around as much as I should've been, and tried not to think too much about whether or not she'd be sad to see all her old newspapers go.

After throwing out the last of the junk from the kitchen, I prepared to move onto the living room, when Jerry lumbered down the steps to the main floor. He had his tools with him, and there was a little bit of sweat on his brow, but otherwise he appeared unphased. I hadn't realized how worried I'd been until that moment, when I sighed with relief at the sight of this old man still in one piece. "It's all fixed," he said. "Here's the bill."

He tore off a yellow sheet of paper from his pad and then headed for the door. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, if you have any other problems, don't hesitate to give me a call, Susan."

"Oh—uh, okay," I said. "Thanks."

He opened the door and had one foot out when he turned back and frowned. "Wait a second... you're not Susan. Susan—Susan passed away. I went to her funeral."

I smiled sadly. “That’s right. I’m Susan’s niece. She left me the house in her will. Sorry for the confusion, I just—”

“You just didn’t want to correct me when I called you by the wrong name,” he said. “I get it. Everybody has stopped correcting me these days when I get mixed up.” He waved a hand in the air and grumbled something under his breath that I didn’t quite catch.

“What was that?”

“I just said it was insulting,” he repeated himself.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I really didn’t mean to insult you.”

“No, not you,” he clarified. “I just mean everyone else. I don’t want to go around calling people by the wrong name or forgetting what month it is, you know? I like being corrected because it helps me keep track of what’s really going on. If everyone just lets me say that the sky is green and the ocean is red, then eventually I’m going to start believing it myself, and that doesn’t sound like fun.”

I chuckled. Jerry reminded me of this sweet old man who had been brought into the ER a couple times last year after he walked out of his assisted living facility without telling anyone. “I understand,” I said. “It can almost feel like people have given up on you.”

“Exactly.” He smiled for the first time since he’d arrived at the house. “I don’t like feeling as if my mind is so far gone, that people no longer feel there’s any point in trying to pull me back to reality.”

“Well, in that case,” I said, looking down at the bill he gave me. “I feel it’s my responsibility to let you know that you undercharged me. By a lot.” I didn’t exactly know what the going rate for a plumber was in this area, but I knew it had to be at least double what he’d written down on the yellow sheet of paper.

“Oh no, I did that on purpose,” he said, laughing.

“You did?”

“Er—yes and no.” He took a step towards me and lowered his voice. “I did think you were Susan there for a second. You look a lot like how she used to look when she was younger. But here’s the thing—” He hesitated, then went on. “If I tell you a little secret, will you promise to keep it to yourself?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“I always had a little bit of a crush on your aunt,” he said. “And any time she needed me to come over and look at something for her, I gave her a big discount. I don’t know if she ever figured it out or not, but when I went to write down the price for you just now, I thought I was billing her and not her niece...”

“So, then it is a mistake,” I said. “Because I’m not Susan.”

“Yeah, but for a second there, I thought you were,” he said. “And in that moment, I felt like a young man again. I remembered what it was like to be in the company of a beautiful woman, to be on the receiving end of her lovely smile, and that is worth more to me than you’ll ever know. So as far as I’m concerned, that price is right as rain.” He then nodded his head as if he had a hat on that he could tip, and told me to have a nice day.

“You too,” I said. “And thanks again!”

I watched him walk to the sidewalk and head in the direction towards town and smiled. “He’s a sweet guy,” I said, not so much talking to myself as I was talking to the house, and therefore, to my aunt. “I think you two would have made a cute couple.”

I stood in the doorway for a few seconds longer, taking in some rays, when I saw a man walking by with his dog. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a salt-and-pepper beard. His dog, a happy looking golden retriever with its tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth, trotted along in front of him and stopped to sniff my mailbox. The man turned and waved when he saw me, and I returned the gesture. Then his dog squatted and peed on my grass, and the two of them went on their merry way. I watched as they turned into the driveway of the

house just right of my aunt's and disappeared through the front door.

I guess that's my neighbor, I thought as I went back inside and shut the door.

He's kinda cute.

Chapter Five

The rest of that week, I spent most of my time cleaning up the rest of the house. The main floor took me two full days to get through, but that was partially because the hall closet had been crammed full of so much stuff, I wasted an entire afternoon just working my way through it. The upstairs thankfully went a little faster, seeing as my aunt didn't keep nearly as many things up there, and by the time the weekend rolled around, I could finally start to see the place coming together. I wanted to hold onto my aunt's memory as much as possible, while also starting to make the house feel a little bit more like my own. I didn't know how long I'd be staying for exactly, but I knew I'd be coming back here to visit whenever I got time off work, and I wanted the place to be cozy and welcoming just as it was for me when I was a kid.

On Saturday morning, after drinking my coffee out on the back patio and having a lazy start to my day, I headed into town to do some grocery shopping and stock up on more wine. I was on vacation, after all, and there was truly nothing more relaxing than sitting down with a glass of red at the end of the day and watching for any sign of dolphins jumping out of the waves.

Pushing my cart down the baking aisle at the market, I heard someone gasp behind me. I spun around to see if there was some sort of commotion, only to spot a woman with long dark hair, wearing a pink tank top and white shorts, and holding a bag of chocolate chips. She was staring at me with wide eyes and a slack jaw, and for a second, I wondered if she was having some sort of medical emergency. Frowning, I hurried over to make sure she didn't need any assistance.

“Are you okay?”

She gawked at me and then let out a soft little laugh. “I’m fine, thanks for asking. How are *you* doing, Cameron Dawson?”

I drew back. How did this woman know my full name?

She laughed again and tossed the bag of chocolate chips into her basket before letting the whole thing drop to her feet and throwing her arms around my neck. “Oh my god, it’s so good to see you after all these years! I can’t even believe it!”

“I—uh—yeah,” I said, trying my best to play along. “What a crazy coincidence to run into you here.” I hugged her back. “It has been such a long time.”

She pulled away but kept her hands on my shoulders, smiling ear to ear. “Are you visiting your aunt?”

“Oh, well... um.” I looked back at my shopping cart, which I’d left deserted when I thought this woman might’ve been in need of some serious help. Now I sort of wish I hadn’t abandoned it, because if I’d brought it over, it would’ve provided me with some sort of barrier. But now, I had nothing to put between me and this strange person, who was staring directly into my eyes as if we had known each other for our entire lives. I brought my gaze back onto her, and finally, something in my brain clicked. I saw her the spattering of freckles stretching across the bridge of her nose, and her crooked front teeth, and all the sudden, I knew exactly who I was looking at.

“Oh my god, Amanda?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it’s me!”

I shook my head. “That’s insane. Sorry it took me a second to place you, but now of course I remember! Geez, it really has been a long time.”

“Probably more than twenty years,” she said. “Maybe going on twenty-five, or so I would guess.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said. Amanda had been one of my best friends growing up. Her parents lived in Sunfall Key, or at

least they used to. They owned a house just three doors down from my aunt Susan's place and when I would come visit for the summer, Amanda and I would practically spend every day at the beach together. Sometime in our teen years, however, Amanda's parents moved to the mainland, and we lost touch. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get away for a while," she said. "I work as a teacher during the year, and usually I spend my summers picking up extra work as a tutor, but this year, I wanted to do something different. I wanted to actually have a real vacation, and I couldn't think of a better place than Sunfall Key. I loved growing up here, and I was so sad when my parents decided to move away."

"You and me both," I said. "The first summer I came back here after you moved away, I was practically devastated."

"We should've done a better job of keeping in touch!" she said. "I know we wrote a few letters back and forth, but with social media these days, it's honestly ridiculous that we didn't reconnect sooner." Then she smiled. "But who cares? We're both here now, and I can't wait to hear all about your life and what you've been up to since we saw each other last. Oh, and I'd love to see your aunt again too. She was like a second mother to me when I was growing up. I feel terrible that I lost touch with her as well."

"Right, well... I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Amanda's face fell. "Oh no."

"Yeah, my aunt passed away a little while ago," I said. "I'm here because she left me the house, and I also needed to get away from it all."

Amanda eyebrows knitted together in the middle of her forehead and her eyes began to water. "Oh my gosh, that's awful. I'm so sorry, Cameron. I had no idea."

"It's okay," I said. "I've had some time to process and grieve, and it's been really nice being back here. It makes me feel more connected to her."

“I’m sure it does.” She hiccupped and a couple tears fell from her eyes, then she pulled me into another hug, this one tighter than the first one. Since I now knew who was embracing me, I hugged her back just as tightly, and we stood there for a while, letting the sadness of the moment wash over us. When we broke apart, she sniffled and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“So, how long are you in town?” she asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “At least another couple of weeks. I took all my unused vacation at once, so I could stay for up to two months if I wanted to. We’ll just have to wait and see how I feel.”

“Oh goodie! That leaves us plenty of time to catch up. Are you doing anything tonight?”

“Nope,” I said. “I have zero plans.”

“Great! How about I come over and we order some dinner or something? I would love to see your aunt’s house again after all these years. I’ll bring some wine, and we can just hang out on that amazing patio overlooking the water.”

I smiled, happy to be around someone who appreciated my aunt’s house as much as I did. “That sounds fantastic,” I said.

“Wonderful,” she said, beaming. “I’m so excited.”

We parted ways after that, and I headed home to finish up a little bit more cleaning now that I had a guest coming over. Then I took a shower, which was thankfully not scalding hot, and threw on some sweats and a t-shirt. If I knew Amanda, which I was pretty sure I did even though we hadn’t spoken in quite a long time, she was going to show up wearing comfy clothes, with her hair tied back and no make-up.

A little after five, when I heard a knock on the door, I opened up to find that was *exactly* what she was wearing. I laughed, but when Amanda asked me what the joke was, I told her it was nothing and invited her inside. She went straight for the kitchen and stood at the sliding back door, staring out at the water.

“It’s just as stunning as I remember it being,” she said. “I’m so glad your aunt never gave in and sold this place.”

“Gave into what?” I asked, grabbing the corkscrew and opening up the bottle of wine she’d brought with her.

“Gave into the property boom,” she said. “Like my parents did.”

I frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Amanda came over and pulled a chair out for herself at the kitchen table. I poured us each a glass of wine and came to join her. “Well, property values in Sunfall Key skyrocketed a couple decades ago,” she said. “And they’ve more or less been continuing to go up ever since. There were a few dips in the market, but for the most part, it’s been all uphill. My parents got an offer they couldn’t refuse on the old house down the street, and since my dad had a lot of medical debt after his lung surgery, they couldn’t exactly turn down all that money. Still, it broke my heart, and what really rubbed salt in the wound was the fact that the new owners just wanted the land, not the house. They tore down my childhood home within weeks of closing, and that was that.”

“How depressing,” I said. “I remember when they brought the wrecking ball in. I didn’t really understand what was happening when I was a kid, but now I can see just how painful that must’ve been for you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had a lot of years to get over it,” she said. “And thankfully there are at least a handful of people left in town who are like your aunt, who never sold their property to someone who just wanted to build a massive mansion, blocking everyone else’s view of the water.”

I made a face. “There’s no way Susan would ever let that happen. And neither will I.”

She smiled. “You’re one of the good ones,” she said. “And so was your aunt.”

I nodded. “She really was, wasn’t she?”

* * *

Amanda and I spent the rest of that night chatting mostly about her life and what she'd been up to the last twenty years, give or take. She tried to turn the conversation back onto me a couple of times, but I wasn't all that interested in talking about my own life. I wasn't sure I was ready to go into the stuff about my marriage, and I knew if I told Amanda that about Michael and Neal, she would want to know why I'd come to Sunfall Key for the summer on my own, instead of with my family.

It was just a little too soon, the wound was still a little too raw, so I did my best to dodge the questions about myself and my life, and let Amanda do most of the talking. It turned out, she'd been working as a middle school English teacher for the last fifteen years, and she loved every second of it. She had a master's degree from Florida State and was almost done writing her own young adult novel that she hoped she would be able to publish one day. She never married, had never even been in any serious relationships, which seemed to be the way she preferred to live her life.

"Dating is just too much fun," she said when I asked her if she ever felt the draw to settle down with just one person. "I suppose if I met the right person, I could see myself making a more serious commitment, but then again, I don't know." She shrugged. "Almost all of my friends who are my age are divorced, and I've seen a lot of the girls I went to college with go through some pretty nasty break-ups. It just always seemed like more hassle than it's worth, you know?"

I shrugged. "I suppose I can see your point. But marriage isn't all bad, for most people that is."

She raised a brow. "And do you know from first-hand experience or...?"

I gave her a look and then sighed, finished off the rest of my wine, and set it on the ground next to my patio chair. The pizza we'd ordered earlier in the night was sitting half eaten on

the table between us, and there was a lovely breeze coming off the ocean and rustling through the palm trees overhead. "Alright, fine, you caught me. I am married."

"I knew it!" she said.

"How could you tell?"

"You just have that vibe about you," she said. "Plus, I could see the tan line around your ring finger." She frowned and pointed to my aunt's ring, which I was wearing on my right hand. "Why'd you switch your wedding band over to that hand anyway? If you don't mind my asking."

I looked down at the silver band, twisted it around a couple of times so that my favorite part of the leaf engraving was facing up. "This isn't my wedding ring," I admitted. "This is my aunt's Susan's old ring. She gave it to me a few years before she died."

"Oh." She looked like she wanted to ask a follow up question, and I was well aware of the fact that I hadn't given her all the information she'd been asking for, but I truly wasn't in the mood to go into everything that tonight, so I took that moment of silence to get up from my chair and start gathering up our plates and glasses.

"I'm going to put these inside and rinse them off before the pizza sauces gets caked on," I said.

"Do you need help?"

"No, that's alright," I said, already walking away. "You just relax. I'll be back soon."

Inside the house, I put the dishes in the sink and rinsed them off with water, then I stood there for a while, trying to collect my thoughts. I could feel some sad, painful emotions welling up inside of me, but I didn't want to let them boil over while Amanda was still here. I could cry about Michael, and the destruction of our marriage, once I was alone. For now, I just wanted to enjoy the rest of my fun, carefree evening with my friend who I hadn't seen in such a long time. I took our glasses back out of the sink, and grabbed another bottle of wine, taking it outside with me.

When Amanda saw the wine, she laughed and said, “Oh so it’s going to be one of *those* nights?”

I shrugged. “Why not? It’s Saturday, we’re on vacation, and if my aunt were here with us, she would’ve already cracked this bottle open and forced us to toast to our health or happiness or something equally as cheesy.”

“I don’t think that’s cheesy,” she said. “I think that’s kind of sweet.”

“Then that’s what we’ll toast to,” I said, sitting down and pouring us each some more wine. I put the bottle on the ground and handed her one of the glasses. “To our health, our happiness, and to this house. May she never be sold to someone who’s going to tear her down and build an ugly mansion in her place.”

“Here here!” Amanda cried out, then we clinked our glasses together, and drank.

* * *

As the night began to wind down, and Amanda and I were halfway through the second bottle of wine, I got up to use the bathroom and to get a glass of water. Amanda met me inside while I was in the kitchen grabbing one of the leftover slices of pizza from the box in the fridge, and she was sporting a goofy looking smile.

“What?” I said.

“I just met your next-door neighbor,” she said. “And goodness gracious, he’s good looking.”

“You met him?” I asked. “What’s he like?”

She raised a brow. “I take it you haven’t spoken to him yet?”

I shook my head. “No, in fact, I’ve only ever seen him in passing when he goes by in the afternoons walking his dog. He’s waved to me a couple of times, but that’s it.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been living here for a week, and you haven’t gone over and said hello to your neighbors! Especially one as cute as him.”

“Did you catch his name or anything?”

“No,” she said. “We only talked for a few seconds. His dog came running outside and jumped up on the fence. I went to say hello to her, and your neighbor called out to me from his back porch. I bet he’s still out there if you want to go and introduce yourself!”

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll get a chance to meet him eventually, but I’m not in a rush or anything.”

“I wonder if he’s single,” Amanda said, going over to the window at the side of the house looking into his backyard. She didn’t really seem to be listening to me anymore. “I’ll have to ask around town and see if anyone knows anything about him.”

“You do that.”

She lingered by the window for a moment or two longer, then either she got bored, or the neighbor went back inside, because she came over to the counter and started gathering up her things. “The nice thing is the house I’m staying in is just one block over, so I don’t have to worry about driving back after drinking all that wine. Is it cool if I leave my rental car here for the night?”

“No problem.”

She smiled and came around to the other side of the island to give me a hug. “Tonight was really fun.”

“Yeah, I had a good time too.”

“I’ll probably be heading to the beach tomorrow if you want to come with me,” she said. “It could be just like old times.”

I laughed. “Sounds like a blast. I’ll be there.”

“Amazing! I’ll text you in the morning.”

I saw Amanda to the door, then waved to her as she started off in the direction of her rental. Once she turned the corner and was out of sight, I went back inside and laid down on the couch to watch a little TV. My phone rang right in the middle of one of my favorite episodes of *The Golden Girls*, and I answered without even looking at the name.

“Hello?”

“Hey mom.”

“Oh, hey Neal!” I quickly scrambled for the remote and muted the TV, then sat up a little straighter on the couch. “How are you sweetie?”

“I’m okay,” he said, but I could tell right away something was wrong.

“You sure about that?”

He sighed. “No.”

“Aw, honey, tell me what’s going on.”

I could hear him shuffling around on the other side of the phone call, and wondered whether or not he was in his temporary dorm or somewhere else on campus. “I just checked my grades online, and I got a C on my first Statistics exam. I studied really hard, and when I walked out of class the other day, I really thought I aced it. I have no idea what happened.”

“Well, hang on a second, a C isn’t so bad. That’s a passing grade, right?”

“Yeah, but c’mon mom, a C is also not very good. I never got below a B on any test I took in high school, and especially not math tests. I can’t even remember the last time I *didn’t* ace a math test. These classes are just a lot harder than I was expecting them to be.”

“You know something, sweetie,” I said, trying my best to tread carefully because I wasn’t sure how my son was going to react to what I had to say. “I think maybe it was a good thing that this happened to you...”

“Mom!”

“Wait, just hear me out!” I pleaded. “The reason I think there might be a silver lining here is because I feel like this grade is telling you something I’ve been trying to get you to see for a long time. It’s okay not to get an A on every single assignment and test. It’s not the end of the world when that happens, and this probably isn’t going to be the last time you walk away with a grade you’re not totally satisfied with.”

“If this is your way of cheering me up, it’s really not working.”

I laughed softly. “Look, answer me this, are you having fun?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve made a couple new friends, and the meetings with the robotics team have been pretty interesting.”

“Alright then,” I said. “And is this exam going to have a major impact on your final grade?”

“It’s about ten percent of my final grade.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “You’ve still got plenty of time to pull your grade back up to an A, and even if you don’t manage to do that, it’s going to be okay. This is your first ever semester of college, and nobody expects you to get everything perfect right out the gate. All I really care about is that you’re having a good time and experiencing all that life at university has to offer. Are you doing that?”

“More or less.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding once. “Then consider me a proud mama.”

I could hear him smiling through the phone. “Thanks. It’s nice to hear that. And I know I’ll be able to pull my grade up, I was never really worried about that. I guess I’m just mad that I did poorly in the first place. I thought I knew this stuff.”

“Maybe you should go sit down with your professor and see what he or she has to say about it. Maybe they can help you understand why all your hard work isn’t paying off in the way you’d hoped it would.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. I suppose that’s what office hours are for.”

“Exactly! So, make an appointment for next week, and then call me to let me know how it goes.”

“Alright,” he said. “I can do that.” He paused for a second or two. “Oh hey, before I forget, I got a call from the financial aid office. They wanted to remind me that we need to finish filling out the application for next semester in less than a month. Are you and dad going to be able to sit down and do that without me, or is that something I’ll have to do with you guys? I guess I could set up a video call or something.”

“Oh, right... that.” I felt a sense of dread welling up inside of me. I hadn’t yet told Neal that his dad and I were getting a divorce, and a part of me had sort of hoped I’d be able to go the whole summer without breaking the news. I wanted him to focus on his classes, and not be overwhelmed by all this stuff going on with his parents. But in order to accurately fill out the financial aid application, Michael and I were probably going to have to let the school know our finances were no longer entwined. I wondered whether or not that would hurt or help Neal’s chances of getting aid.

“Let me talk to your dad about it,” I said. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Okay, sounds good! Thanks again, mom, for talking me down off the ledge. I was really starting to spiral there for a second.”

“I’m glad I could help,” I said. “Now it’s a Saturday night and you live on campus. I’m sure there’s a party or something going on that I’m keeping you from.”

“Some of my friends are getting together in a bit, yeah. I’ll probably head over to their dorm soon.”

“Have fun sweetie. And be safe.”

“Always. Love you mom.”

“I love you too.”

I hung up the call and then let my head drop back and sighed heavily. I hated lying to my son, but then again, after hearing that he was struggling in one of his classes, my decision to keep him in the dark for a little while longer still felt like the right one. He needed to focus, and I needed to work out how I felt about the whole thing myself. I hadn't spoken to Michael in weeks, however, so having to make the call about the financial aid application wasn't going to be easy.

But that was a problem for another day. Right now, all I had to worry about was finishing up the home improvements and spending the rest of my free time lounging on the beautiful beaches of Sunfall Key.

Chapter Six

Amanda and I ended up going to the beach nearly every afternoon for the next week. She would come around in the mornings and help me with whatever house project I was working on that day. Although, her version of ‘helping’ usually consisted of her sitting nearby and entertaining me with stories from her chaotic classroom while I did all the work. I appreciated her company, however, and her funny anecdotes helped pass the time and keep me entertained while I did boring tasks like repainting shutters or dusting the shelving units in the basement. Then, whenever I grew tired of all the manual labor, Amanda would suggest we hit the waves while there was still enough sunlight, and I always happily agreed.

On Friday, Amanda didn’t come around in the morning because she had a video call she needed to jump on for work, so I spent that time enjoying the peace and quiet. As much as I loved being reconnected with my old friend, she was even more of a talker than I remembered her being, and it was nice to get a little time to myself. I took my coffee with me onto the back patio, but stayed under the umbrella the whole time. I’d gotten a little too much sun while at the beach with Amanda the day before, and I didn’t want to make my burn any worse.

As I sipped, I spotted my neighbor through the window of his sunroom. He had his feet up on an ottoman and was reading what appeared to be a paperback novel. He didn’t notice me looking at him, so I took the opportunity to try and learn more about him without actually having to talk to the man. He was wearing khaki shorts and a t-shirt, and even though he looked to be a little older than me, he was in great

shape. His skin was tanned, and what was left of his brown hair seemed to have been made lighter by the Florida sun.

Then, all the sudden, his dog noticed me looking at them and perked up. I quickly tore my gaze away and looked down into my coffee mug, in hopes that the man wouldn't notice that I'd been watching him. I stayed like that, staring into my drink, for a few seconds, and then dared to glance back in the direction of his house for a fraction of a second.

But that was all the time it took.

He'd been looking back at me, and the moment our eyes met, he smiled and waved. I could feel my cheeks growing red, and I waved back with embarrassment, then got up and hurried inside so that our little interaction didn't have to go on any longer. I wasn't trying to be rude, but I also didn't want this man to get the wrong impression. Sure, he was handsome, but what did looks matter when I'd sworn off men and relationships entirely?

Ever since my marriage to Michael came crashing down around me, I'd decided Amanda was right. In the end, it wasn't worth the effort. I gave that man 23 years of my life, and he'd thrown it all away because we'd hit one little rough patch. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, I stood up in front of God, our families, and our closest friends and told Michael that I would love him no matter what, that we would be together till death do us part, and he promised me the same thing. I took those vows very seriously, which was another reason I was so shocked when he served me with papers less than a month ago.

What was the point of getting married, of making that kind of commitment to one another, if you weren't going to follow through with any of it when times were hard?

I truly thought we would have weathered the storm together, and that we might've even come out the other side stronger and more in love, but Michael didn't even want to try, and that hurt more than anything else. He didn't even think I was worth giving it his all. I couldn't put myself in a position where someone might hurt me like that again, not at my age. I

was done putting my heart out there and trusting men. Even the ones with nice smiles and good hair.

No, strike that, *especially* the ones with nice smiles and good hair.

* * *

Amanda dropped by after her meeting was over later in the afternoon. She showed up at my door wearing a bathing suit and shorts. I felt bad, when I opened the door, because I had to tell her I didn't feel up to hitting the beach that day. She looked a little disappointed, but then got over it pretty quickly when another idea occurred to her.

“Oh! I know!” She grinned. “We can go into town and check out that new bar that just opened up.”

“You mean the one that's always overflowing with tourists and college kids?”

“You, that's the one.”

“Why would you want to go to a place like that?” I asked. “They play the music so loud; we won't even be able to hear each other.”

“We'll sit outside on their back patio,” she said. “It butts up against the beach, so we can watch the waves coming in. It'll be just like drinking here!”

“Except way more expensive and we'll be surrounded by people we don't know, including what I can only imagine will be a group of drunk frat boys.”

“I think it sounds like a fun way to spend our evening,” she said. “And how about this, I'll make you a deal, if we get there and it's horrible, we can turn right back around and leave. I swear.”

I sighed. “Fine. Let's go.” Then I looked at her outfit and frowned. “Are you going to wear that?”

“Why not?” she said. “It's a beach themed bar. I'd probably stand out even more if I *wasn't* wearing a bathing

suit. In fact, you should go upstairs and throw on your swimsuit.”

“I’m not wearing a bathing suit out in public,” I said.

“Susan would.”

I shot her a look. “That’s hardly fair. Susan would wear a bathing suit on a trip to the White House if she felt like it.”

Amanda laughed. “That’s what I’m saying! You’re living in your aunt’s house, so don’t you think it’s time you started to channel some of that care-free energy she had when we were kids?”

I rolled my eyes but eventually caved and went upstairs to change. I didn’t put on my bathing suit, but I did swap my cardigan out for a tank top and traded my sweats for jean shorts. I slipped on a pair of flip flops and ran a brush through my hair, and not five minutes later, Amanda and I were on our way into town. We decided to walk since it was such a lovely evening, and she hooked her arm through mine as we made our way down the street.

“I’m so glad we ran into each other,” she said. “This summer would’ve been so boring if we hadn’t. Who would I even go to the beach with?”

“I’m sure you would’ve made friends with someone,” I said. “Or found a cute guy to spend the summer with.”

She smirked. “Maybe. But even still, you’re way better than any summer fling I’ve ever had.”

“High praise.” We shared a laugh, then she looked over her shoulder as we came to the end of the block. “Speaking of summer flings, have you talked to your neighbor yet? I’m dying to know more about him.”

“Nah. And I’m probably not going to go out of my way to.” We crossed the street, and I could feel Amanda’s eyes on me. She wanted me to elaborate, and for the first time since we ran into each other in the store, I felt ready to tell her the whole truth. “I haven’t been totally honest with you about my life,” I said after a few seconds.

“Really?” she said, feigning surprise. “You don’t say?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Of course, it was obvious! The other night, when it came to light that you were actually married, you looked like an animal who’d just been cornered. I didn’t realize that would’ve been such a scary topic to discuss, but then you made some excuse to go inside and get away from the conversation entirely.”

“Yeah... sorry about that. It sounds really childish when I hear it out loud.”

“I mean, I don’t care,” she said, shrugging. “It’s your life, your business, if you don’t feel like sharing it with me, I’m not going to pry.... But that said, I am super interested and want to know everything... If you’re up for sharing, that is.”

I laughed and nodded as we came around the corner and I spotted the multicolored string lights that were draped from the rafters of the bar’s outdoor patio. “I’ll tell you the full story,” I said. “Let me just get a drink in me first. Or two.”

“Deal.” She winked. “First round’s on me.”

* * *

After what felt like forever, we managed to get a couple drinks in our hands and find a spot to sit outside, in a little corner of the patio that wasn’t overly crowded. The sun had already set by the time we got settled, and I wasn’t sure how long this lull in tourists and college students would last, so I decided to make the most of it and try to slurp down my overly sweet mixed drink at a steady rate. Amanda had ordered for us and told me to trust her when I questioned what exactly she was going to get.

“This is strong,” I said, wincing as my second sip crawled down my throat. “What alcohol is in this?”

“It would be simpler for me to tell you what alcohol *wasn’t* in it.”

I shot her a look. “Is this some kind of Long Island Iced Tea?”

She shrugged. “More or less. I like to call it a Florida Coast Iced Tea, and it’s sort of my own creation. I had to tell the bartender how to make it, but once you get a few more sips in, I swear, it starts to taste really good.”

Laughing, I sipped once more, and then settled my arms on the patio railing and looked out at the water. The ocean was calm, and the moonlight was starting to be reflected back on the water’s surface, creating a shimmery, romantic effect that wrapped me up in a feeling of warmth. These were the sort of nights I imagined spending with Michael, back when I thought that we would take this summer to reconnect with one another.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Amanda asked after a few seconds of silent contemplation.

“My soon-to-be ex-husband.”

I could feel her eyes on me as she waited patiently for me to go on. I took one more sip from my drink and found that Amanda’s early assertion had been correct. It was starting to taste better. “I got married about twenty-three years ago,” I began. “To the love of my life. Or so I thought.”

“What happened?” she said, her voice soft and cautious, as if I was a scared deer who might take off running if she asked me anything too direct.

“You know something, I’m not entirely sure,” I said. “You see, when Michael and I met, we wanted all the same things. He was handsome, and he made me laugh, and when we talked about the future, it seemed like we were totally on the same page. We both wanted to buy a house in a cute neighborhood, start a family, and live happily ever after. And that’s what we did. Everything was perfect for most of our relationship.”

“Wait a second, you’re a mom?” She balked. “How could you not mention that before now?”

“Because I knew if I mentioned that I had a kid, you would want to know more about the kid’s father, and then I would have to talk about how Michael served me with divorce papers

a few weeks ago and life as I knew it came crumbling down around me.”

“Oh sweetie!” Amanda frowned and she reached for my arm. “That’s awful. You weren’t expecting it at all?”

I shook my head. “No. And maybe I was being naive... I don’t know. I mean, it wasn’t like I thought our marriage was rock solid or anything. I could see all the cracks in the foundation. But—I didn’t think they were irreparable. Michael and I had been drifting apart for years now, but that was mainly because we both worked long hours and we hadn’t been making an effort to prioritize our relationship. I figured that once we both started to work a little harder at the marriage, we could end up turning the whole thing around.”

“But Michael wasn’t interested in even trying?”

“Apparently not,” I said, working to hold back some of my more powerful emotions. “I came home from the hospital that night, and told him the good news, that my aunt Susan had left me the house in Sunfall Key. I thought we could come here together and use the time away from the stresses of our daily life, and this romantic setting, to rekindle the fire we once had. He had other plans.”

“Dang, Cameron,” she said, shaking her head and letting out a low whistle. “That must’ve been so shocking for you. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah... well... It is what it is.” I took another, much longer sip from my drink, and thought about Neal. “The worst part is I don’t know how to talk to my son about all of this. Michael and I agreed that we would sit him down and tell him together at some point, but who knows when that’s going to happen. I think we’ve both been sort of putting it off, but when I spoke to Neal the other day, he reminded me that we needed to fill out his financial aid forms for the fall semester soon, so that means I need to reach out to Michael in the next few weeks, which I’m really not looking forward to. I haven’t spoken to him since the night he served me the papers.”

“Yeesh. That’s nerve wracking.”

“You’re telling me.” I sighed. “I just wish I knew what he’d been up to this whole time. I wish I had some idea of how he was feeling about all this, you know? Like, has he been celebrating his newfound freedom and having the time of his life? Or has he been dealing with all the same feelings of loss and sadness that I have?”

“I’m sure it’s a combination,” Amanda said. “But who knows? Maybe he’s even more miserable than you are! Maybe the second you walked out of his life, he realized he made a huge mistake and has been spending the last few weeks trying to figure out how he can get you back.”

I scoffed. “I doubt it.”

“But let’s just say he was, for argument’s sake. Let’s say he wanted to get back together,” she said. “Would you want that too?”

I drew back and took a moment to consider this question, that hadn’t, until this moment, even occurred to me. Did I want Michael back? If he came to me with a series of apologies, on his hands and knees begging me to give him another chance—what would I say? I closed my eyes for a second and tried to imagine what our life would be like if we got back together. I thought about how stunted and awkward it would likely be at first, and how I might not ever be able to truly get over just how badly he’d hurt me. I had this sickening feeling that if we gave our relationship another shot, we would only end up in the exact same place as we did last time, and I couldn’t repeat the same mistakes all over again. I was too old to waste time on something that was only ever going to be mediocre at best.

“No,” I finally said, and as the word slipped out of my mouth, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. “Now that you mention it, I *don’t* want him back. I haven’t actually missed him all that much since we broke up, and maybe that’s because we hardly ever saw each other when we were together but... I don’t think so. I think I haven’t missed him because there was nothing left in that relationship to miss.”

“Are you saying you think your husband made the right call by asking for a divorce?”

I let the words sink in, and then found myself agreeing with them, despite everything this surprise separation had put me through. “I guess I do... I’m not saying that he went about it in the right way. I still would’ve appreciated a little bit more warning but... maybe it was the right decision. If I really felt like we were meant to be together, then I would probably be more upset over the loss of our partnership than I would be about the way he served me the papers, but when I think back on all that was said and done, the thing that makes me the most emotional was just the delivery of the divorce...”

“Not the divorce itself,” Amanda finished my thought for me.

I nodded. “Yeah. Exactly.” I stared down into my glass and chuckled. “Now I’m even more curious to know what was in this drink! Not only did it get me to open up, but I feel like it gave me a whole new perspective on life.” Then I smiled at Amanda. “Or perhaps it was you who did that for me.”

She smirked. “As much as I would love to take credit for that big revelation you just had, I’m pretty sure all I did was help you see everything you already knew to be true.”

“Hey, I still couldn’t have done it without you!”

She held her drink up into the air. “Then that’s what we’re toasting too tonight! To discovering new truths and having no regrets.”

I clinked my glass against hers and we drank, and as I was wiping my mouth and putting my nearly empty glass down on the ledge, I laughed and said, “Well, I actually do have one regret.”

“What’s that?”

“I regret not coming back to Sunfall Key sooner. This place always did make me so gosh darn happy.”

* * *

Amanda wanted to stay for another round, but I wasn't in the mood. The bar was starting to get really crowded again by the time we finished our first round of drinks, and whatever concoction Amanda had asked the bartender to make was hitting me a lot harder than I'd expected. I told her she was welcome to stay, but that I was going to call it a night. She didn't want me walking home alone, however, so she came with me and ended up passing out on the couch. I laughed as I tossed a blanket over her shoulders and took a glass of water and a snack out with me onto the back porch.

I sat down and nibbled on some crackers, watching the waves coming in and thinking about everything Amanda and I had talked about that evening. I wondered how long it would've taken me to come to the same conclusions about Michael and our marriage if I hadn't had someone to talk to about everything. It made me feel as if I should've opened up a long time ago, and maybe I even should've told Ronda what was going on before I left on vacation for weeks and weeks. Over the years, it would seem I had picked up a habit of keeping things to myself. It was just easier that way. Michael was never really around for me to talk to anyway, and when he was home from work, he was often tired and excited to watch TV and do nothing for the night.

It didn't feel right to put too much on him when he was already so overworked. And the same thing went for everyone I was friends with at the hospital. Everyone there was stressed and dealing with their own personal trials, and I wasn't about to pile on by complaining about something they couldn't have actually helped with anyway.

I'd been keeping myself locked off from the outside world, pushing my feelings down or at least to the side, to be dealt with at a later date. But now that I was in Sunfall Key and I had nothing but time on my hands, I was starting to remember just how good it felt to let others in and to get things off my chest.

I was so grateful to Amanda for helping to realize this, and was very much looking forward to spending the next few weeks finishing up the work on the house, and otherwise just

having some fun. After everything I'd been through, and all the overtime I'd worked, I deserved to have a true and proper vacation.

Chapter Seven

Later in the week, I arrived back at the house from running a few errands and took a moment to stand on the sidewalk and admire all my hard work. I'd finished painting and re-hanging all the shutters, cleaned out the rain gutters, swept and power washed the front porch, and tidied up the lawn to the best of my ability. I still had a whole front garden to replant, and some patches of dead grass that needed to be dealt with, but otherwise the house was really starting to look good. I was proud of all my hard work, and knew that if my aunt were here, seeing the house all fixed up would make her happy as well.

I would've stood there for a little while longer, taking in the view for just a few more seconds, if my neighbor's dog hadn't rushed down the sidewalk in my direction, forcing me to jump out of the way at the last second. Her ears were flopping around, and she looked like she was on a mission, and a second later, I heard her owner let out a frustrated little yell and then he tore across the street after her. "Terra, no! I already told you; we're not going to the park today!"

Thankfully, the dog stopped before she could get too far, and allowed herself to be caught. The neighbor hooked his fingers around her collar, and once I saw that all was well, I smiled to myself and headed inside, grabbing the mail on the way.

In the kitchen, I put all my groceries down on the counter and did a quick search through the various magazines and envelopes that had been left in my aunt's mailbox. Most of what arrived at the house these days was junk mail, but every

once in a while, Susan would get what appeared to be an important piece of correspondence, and I would open it up to make sure there was nothing I needed to take care of.

I figured my aunt would forgive me for being a little nosey, especially considering there had been a letter in the mail the week before from an old friend she met on one of her many international adventures. The friend said she was so excited to catch up and that she hoped she could make the journey to the states soon to see my aunt, which left me with the unfortunate task of having to track this lady down on social media and let her know that Susan had actually passed away. As sad as it was to have to send that message, I knew it was better this way. Her friend deserved to know the truth, instead of waiting around, hurt and confused, for a reply that would never come.

Ever since then, I'd taken the time to really scrutinize any envelopes that I didn't immediately recognize as being credit card offers or coupons, which is how that morning I came to notice a pale yellow envelope that was entirely unmarked. It wasn't addressed to anyone, nor did it have any return address or name listed in the top corner.

"Huh," I said, frowning and sliding my finger underneath the flap and carefully pulling out a single, folded up piece of paper. "That's odd..."

I put the envelope to the side and spread the piece of paper out on the counter in front of me. It was a handwritten note, addressed simply to "The Lady of the House." The penmanship was scribbly and somewhat hard to read, but the bulk of the text was what really confused me. I read it through twice, trying to make sense of the words on the page, before bringing it with me over to the couch and sitting down to read it a third time.

To the Lady of the House,

"Whoever loved that loved not at first sight?"

I first read these words as a young man sitting in an introductory Shakespeare class in college, although I later learned that he was quoting a different poet. At the time, I remember thinking the sentiment was nothing but flowery nonsense. I've always been a practical thinker, with a mind for science and fact. I've always seen feelings of love and desire through a medical lens, viewing them as nothing but chemical changes in the brain.

Feelings, to me, were always logical, and easily categorized.

Until I saw you.

And ever since that moment I first laid eyes on you—nothing, but especially not my feelings, has made any sense at all.

Whenever my mind wanders these days, it finds its way back to you and your gorgeous face, and when I sleep, I dream of the day we may meet, and I may be on the receiving end of your infectious smile. I know it's unconventional to send letters such as this in our modern age, but you've awoken in me something romantic and traditional, and I find myself wanting to connect with you in ways that are more concrete.

Like the written word, for instance.

It has been years since I've felt my heart flutter in the way it did when I first saw you, and I simply cannot seem to let go of that feeling. Perhaps I should've waited until we officially met to make my feelings known, but they were so overwhelming that I felt I had to get them down on paper before they consumed me and all my common sense.

Then again, many would argue that sending an anonymous love letter like this is a sign that I already lost my mind and allowed my heart to take the reins. And maybe those people would be right—but I don't care. I am no longer a young man, and I haven't the time to worry about convention.

I do hope this letter finds you well, and that regardless of what may or may not happen between us, regardless of whether we end up being star-crossed lovers or ships passing in the night, I just wanted to say thank you.

I never thought I would feel this way about someone again, and just knowing that I have enough love left in me to give to someone else, makes me feel like a whole new man.

Take care.

There was no sign off or any name given at the bottom of the page, which I supposed made sense considering it was supposed to be an anonymous note, but still, the whole thing was so unreal. I almost had to laugh, as I scanned the page once more.

There were only two plausible explanations for how something like this ended up in my aunt's mailbox. The first, was that it had been dropped off at the wrong house and was meant for someone else. And the second explanation was that someone wanted to play a prank on me. I wasn't entirely sure who in the neighborhood would go through the trouble of writing something like this just for the sake of a joke, but then again, I figured there had to be a couple bored teenagers sitting around looking for something to do all summer.

Creating a fake secret admirer to trick your neighbor may be a little cruel, but it also sounded like a great way to keep yourself entertained.

Smiling, I took my phone out and called Amanda. "Hey, you busy?" I asked when she picked up.

"Not even a little. In fact, I was just about to call you and see if you wanted to hit the beach."

"Maybe later," I said. "But first, you gotta' come by and check out this wild letter I got in the mail. I'm pretty sure some kids are just messing around, but since you're the

teacher, I thought you might be able to tell me for sure what kind of pranksters I'm dealing with."

"What sort of letter is it?"

"A love letter."

Amanda gasped. "A what? Read it to me!"

"Not over the phone," I said. I could feel my cheeks growing warm, but I didn't want to admit that I was feeling a little embarrassed. If I read it out loud, I worried I might stumble over the more overly romantic parts and grow even more uncomfortable. I'd felt butterflies in my stomach when I read it in my head to myself, and that was humiliating enough. "Just come over and read it in person!"

"You don't have to tell me twice! I'm already on my way!"

Ten minutes later, Amanda walked inside the house without even knocking. She knew I left the door unlocked during the day and had given up on announcing her presence beforehand and had made a habit of just waltzing in whenever I invited her over. Not that I minded. It was kind of nice to have someone around who also felt at home here. It reminded me of the days at my old house in Naples, before Neal went off to school and we used to have a revolving door of teenage boys coming and going after school and over the weekends.

"Lemme see, lemme see," Amanda said as she came into the living room and plopped herself down on the couch next to me. I handed her the piece of paper, and watched as her eyes lit up the further she scanned down the page. "Oh my god," she said under her breath when she got to the end. "This is the most romantic thing I've ever read."

I groaned and let my head fall back into the couch. "No, that's not what you're supposed to say! Amanda, we can't fall for this!"

"Fall for what?"

"This is obviously a prank," I said, taking the letter from her. "Or a mistake. Either way, the romantic language in this letter is not real, or at least, it's not meant for us."

“I never said it was meant for *us*,” she said. “It’s clearly meant for you.”

“No way,” I said. “Who would be writing me love letters? I don’t know anyone in town, and if this really is from a secret admirer or something, I hardly think they would see me walking around in my stained sweatpants and greasy hair and think ‘oh man, that’s a girl who I want to quote Shakespeare to’.”

“To be fair,” Amanda said. “This isn’t Shakespeare. It’s from one of his plays, but he took the line from a famous Christopher Marlow poem.” She laughed. “Man, I wish my parents were here to see me putting my expensive English degrees to use even when I’m *not* in the classroom!”

“Amanda, focus,” I said. “We need to figure out if this was delivered to the wrong address, because if so, then we should probably work on getting it to the right person. Otherwise, we could wreck this entire love story before it even gets started.”

“Who else would it be for?” Amanda asked. “I know everyone else who lives on this block, and there are no other single women! Everyone’s married or they’re like my grandma’s age. You’re the only eligible bachelorette for miles, Cameron.”

Something clicked, and I read the line about being on the receiving end of a smile again. “Oh my god! It’s your uncle Jerry.”

“What?” Amanda laughed. “Yeah right.”

“No, I’m serious. He said something like this to me when he was here fixing the shower, and he also got me confused with my aunt. Plus, he mentioned he used to have a little crush on Susan. Maybe he got confused again, and thought he was writing a love letter to her.”

“You’re crazy,” Amanda said. “My uncle is a sweet man, but he’s not romantic like this, and he’s never, *not once in his life*, read a Shakespeare play. He’s not the kind of guy who would write something like this. No way.”

“Okay, then it’s a joke,” I said, switching to my other explanation. “And I personally don’t want to give any of the bored, local teens the satisfaction of thinking that I actually *believed* this letter was written to me. I may not be the coolest person in the world, as my son often used to tell me, but I at least know when I’m walking into a trap.”

Amanda made a tsk sound with her mouth. “I don’t know. That doesn’t read like anything my kids write. And I used to sub for high school English, so I know what even the older kids are capable of, and that letter was way too mature and self-aware. Also, teenagers are gross, not romantic. If they were going to write a love letter... Well, let’s just say, it wouldn’t be full of Marlow quotes and admissions from the heart. It would be about something a lot more PG-13 if you catch my drift.”

I made a face. “Eww.”

“That’s what I’m saying—this wasn’t written by some kid trying to prank you. These are the words of a grown, adult man who has fallen in love at first sight. *With you.*”

I shook my head and put my hands up in the air. “Okay, now I’m having regrets about calling you over. This is the exact opposite direction I wanted this conversation to go in. Even if the letter was written for me, *which it wasn’t*, it still wouldn’t matter.”

She raised a brow. “And why is that?”

“Because I’m not interested in this man!”

“But you don’t even know who this man is, so how can you know that you’re not interested in him?”

“Because I’m currently not interested in *any man*,” I said. “The stuff with Michael is still really fresh, and just because I’ve come around to seeing the divorce as a potentially positive thing, that doesn’t mean I’m ready to jump back into a relationship again. I don’t know if I’ll *ever* be ready for that.”

“But Cameron—”

“No, Amanda,” I said, stopping her mid-sentence. “I’m being serious. I can’t think about this kind of thing right now.”

It's all just—too much, okay? Love letters from men I don't know, it's like something out of a movie, and I've only just started to feel like my life was back on solid ground, you know? I need to focus on myself right now, and on this house. I didn't come to Sunfall Key to fall in love, I came here to figure out who I am now that my life has changed so much.”

Amanda smiled sadly and came over to give me a hug. “You're right. I'm sorry. I got a little too excited there for a second, but I hear what you're saying, and I totally understand why this letter has come at the exact wrong time.”

“Thank you,” I said, sighing with relief. “For now, I want to forget that this letter ever showed up in the mailbox and just go on as if I never even read it. Can you help me do that?”

She reached her hand out. “Yes, I can.” I slowly gave the letter over to her, and she folded it up, then grabbed the envelope off the counter and returned the piece of paper to its rightful place. “I'll hold onto this, so you're not tempted to read it again, and hopefully once it's out of sight, it will also be totally out of mind.”

“Good,” I said, although if I was being perfectly honest, I was a little disappointed when I watched her tuck the envelope under her arm and promise to take it far away from here. “Great. We'll put it behind us.”

“I'll never bring it up again.” She pretended to zip her lips, lock them, and throw away the key.

“Alright then, now that that's settled, you still want to go for a swim?”

“You know it,” she said. “Let me just run this letter back to the rental house and change into my suit. Give me five minutes.”

I smiled, and she headed for the door, but I stopped her before she could walk outside. “Oh, and now that I'm thinking about it, you should probably make sure to put the letter somewhere safe.”

She frowned. “Why do you care if it's safe?”

“I don’t.” I answered a little too quickly, and hoped Amanda wouldn’t notice my agitation. “I just thought, you know, if we found out that it actually was meant for someone else down the line, it would be a shame if it got destroyed or something.”

She smiled with a knowing gleam in her eye. “I’ll be careful with it,” she said. “No need to worry.”

“I’m not worried,” I said, trying to convince her.

But also, maybe trying to convince myself a little bit.

Chapter Eight

The following morning, I woke up with a lightness in my heart and a spring in my step. I couldn't remember what I'd been dreaming about just before my eyes fluttered open, but if I had to guess, I would say it was probably a very pleasant dream. I recalled a few images here and there, of the waves crashing against the shore and the vague silhouette of a man, backlit by the evening sun, but no other details came to mind when I tried to think back on what my brain had been doing whilst I was sleeping.

Still, I carried this good mood with me all the way downstairs and throughout my morning. I made coffee and read over a few emails. Ronda still cc'd me on anything hospital related that she thought I ought to know about, but for the most part, even the more important matters of business didn't require my attention. If I wasn't having such a wonderful time on vacation, I would perhaps feel a little sad about this. Realizing that the job I had given so much of myself to, could be done just as easily by a temp with no related experience might have been heartbreaking, but in all honesty, it was actually quite freeing. As much as I loved my work, and I knew I had a way with the patients, it was sort of nice knowing that if I decided to leave for good one day, I wouldn't be making everyone else's lives that much harder.

Laughing to myself, I wondered if the fact that I ever thought of myself as irreplaceable in the first place was maybe just a little arrogant.

I took my coffee outside onto the porch with me, even though there were dark storm clouds in the sky that day. I liked

the rain, and summer storms on the coast were exciting, assuming they didn't get too out of hand of course. I made myself comfortable on the patio chair closest to the fence separating my aunt's house from the neighbors, and stared up at the sky, watching it slowly darken over time. I thought I heard thunder and got up to peer over my shoulder and see if there was any incoming lightning, but then realized it hadn't been thundering at all. It had been the sound of stomping. I heard it again just seconds before I saw my neighbor's dog tear out of the back door soaking wet. My neighbor appeared shortly thereafter, holding a damp towel and looking absolutely flustered.

"Terra, you big lug," he said. "Get over here so I can finish drying you off! Don't you dare—no!"

Both my neighbor and I watched in horror as the dog dove into a muddy, patchy part of his backyard and started to roll around, getting her newly bathed blond hair covered in dirt. The man sighed heavily and let the towel drop to his feet.

"I can't believe I forgot to shut the back door," he said to himself, putting his hand over his forehead and rubbing his temples. "... Again."

I laughed, and he snapped his gaze up in my direction. He hadn't noticed me watching the scene play out, and now I felt bad for having not tried to intervene. Covering my mouth with one hand, I arched my eyebrows sympathetically and said, "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry. I don't mean to laugh, it's just —" I looked at the dog once more, who was now browner than she was blond, and the chuckles started all over again. I actually had to put my coffee down on the table by my feet in order to keep from spilling it, I was laughing so hard.

The man began to laugh along with me as he walked over to the fence. Up close, I could see that his eyes were the most striking shade of green. He leaned one arm on the top of the fence and fixed me with a look that could probably help him get away with murder in some circumstances. He hadn't said a single word to me yet, and still, I felt totally charmed by him.

“She always does this,” he said once our laughter ceased. “And usually, I’m pretty good about remembering to keep the doors shut so she can’t run out, but the weather’s just been so nice lately, I’ve basically had every door and window open 24/7. I should’ve learned my lesson yesterday when she got out into the front yard yesterday and took off across the street, but apparently, I’m just a glutton for punishment.”

“Yeah, I actually saw that too,” I said with a little shrug of embarrassment. “Sorry I didn’t help then... or now. She’s just so fast, and it didn’t seem polite for me to jump over the fence of a neighbor I haven’t even met.”

He smirked. “Yeah, she’s fast. And you must think I’m a terrible pet owner though, if all you’ve seen is me constantly losing control of my dog.”

“That’s not all I’ve seen,” I said, and then added without really thinking about it. “I’ve seen you walk her by my house most days.”

Why did I say that? Now he’s going to think I’m some sort of creep who’s keeping tabs on him.

“Ah well at least I have that going for me.” He smiled. “You know, I’ve been meaning to drop by on one of those walks and say hello. I know you’re new to the neighborhood, and I feel like such a jerk, having not introduced myself yet.”

“That’s okay,” I told him. “I didn’t come over and introduce myself to you, so I guess that means we’re both jerks.”

He laughed. “I’m Gray. Gray Jacobs.” He held his hand out for a shake. I took it, and when our palms touched, that’s when the lightning came. Not literally, but physically between us, there did pass some sort of electrical shock. I wasn’t sure if he felt it or not, but I sure did, and with it came the urge to both pull my hand away and hang onto him forever.

“I’m Cameron,” I said once I collected my thoughts enough to realize we were still in the middle of our introductions. “Cameron Dawson. I don’t know if you knew

my aunt, Susan, but she used to live here before she passed away.”

“Yes,” he said as I let go of his warm, strong hand. “I knew Susan a little. I’ll admit, for the last few years that I’ve lived in this house, I haven’t exactly been the most social person, so she probably thought I was a hermit or something, but the few interactions we did have, she was always very kind and easy to talk to.”

“She could be a little bit of a hermit herself, so I’m sure she understood you wanting to keep to yourself.” I watched his face change a little as I said this, and I could tell there was more to the story than he was letting on. Perhaps there was a reason he hadn’t been as outgoing recently, and maybe his excuse about being too busy to drop by and introduce himself sooner was just that—an excuse.

“Well, listen,” he said after a few seconds of silence. “I should get Terra back inside and bathe her again, but it’s nice to finally meet you and put a name to a face.”

“Yeah, same here,” I said. “Good luck with Terra’s second bath of the day! Don’t forget to close the door this time.”

He pointed a finger gun at me and clicked his tongue. “Good looking out.”

We shared one last lingering glance, and his smile made my heart flutter a little harder against my ribcage, then he turned around and headed inside, calling for his dog to follow. Terra ran in after him, but he caught hold of her collar just as she leaped over the threshold. “Oh no you don’t,” I heard him say. “You’re not jumping on your favorite white couch. Not when you’re this messy.” He then shut the sliding back door behind him and disappeared from my sight.

Sighing pleasantly, I sat back down and picked up my coffee mug once more. I would’ve liked to have spoken to him more, asked him about how long he’d been living in Sunfall Key, and maybe what else he knew about my aunt. I was still trying to piece together what her life looked like near the end, and since he was her neighbor, I figured he would have more

insight than most into whether or not she was leading the life she wanted to in those last few years.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket shortly after returning to my seat and took the device out to see who would be calling me this early in the morning. I was planning on ignoring it, no matter who it was, and calling them back once I got a little more caffeine in my system, but then I saw Michael's name pop up on the screen.

My stomach dropped.

Why is Michael calling me?

After everything we'd been through, combined with the fact that we hadn't spoken since the night he handed me the divorce papers, I assumed the worst. He could only be calling if something was really, *really* wrong. It had to be Neal. Something had to be going on with our son. I answered right away, my voice shaking a little as I brought the phone up to my ear and said, "Hello?"

"Hey, Cam," he said, his voice also sounding a little nervous. It cracked over the word 'hey' and it was higher pitched than normal. This only validated my fears. "Are you at work?"

"What?" I frowned. That seemed like such an odd thing to ask at a time like this. "No, I'm not. Michael, what's going on? Why are you calling me so early?"

"I dropped by the house this morning," he said. "To try and catch you before you headed into the hospital, but you weren't there. And the fern in our old bedroom is dead, so that made me a little worried."

"I went to Sunfall Key for a few weeks," I said. "And I thought about asking Ronda to come around and water the plant while I was away... but then I remembered that you bought that fern as an anniversary gift a couple years ago, and let's just say the pettier side of my personality sort of wanted to just let it die."

He scoffed. "Harsh."

“Are you seriously judging *me* for being harsh?” I could feel the righteous anger boiling up inside me. Michael had been cowering away, keeping quiet, ever since he told me our relationship was over, and now that he was giving me a chance to let him know how I felt, I wasn’t going to hold back. Especially not if he was going to insult me in the process.

“I was kidding!” he quickly added. “Sorry. That sounded funnier in my head, but I can see how inappropriate it was for me to joke like that so soon after...” he trailed off.

“After you walked away from our marriage?”

He sighed, and I heard the scraping sound of a chair being pulled out from a table. It was such a familiar sound, I realized I knew exactly where he was. He was still in the house we used to share in Naples. He was lowering himself down into a chair around the very same table where he’d served me with divorce papers. Perhaps he was even in the exact same seat. “Cameron, do you really feel like getting into all of that right now?”

“Why not?” I said. “I’ve got the time.”

“Alright, well I don’t.”

“How convenient for you. When I want to talk about what happened, you’re suddenly too busy. Just like you’ve been too busy for the last few years to tell me that you were unhappy, and you were going to file for divorce.”

“Was it really that big of a secret?” he asked. “You were unhappy too, were you not?”

“I—well—” I didn’t expect him to throw that question back at me, and therefore I had no response prepared. I thought we were just going to exchange a few more barbs, and I would be given the chance to let loose with a little more of this anger, and then we could be done with it. But if he was actually going to ask me about *my* side of things... then perhaps I didn’t have the time to get into it just then.

“You weren’t happy,” he answered for me. “I could tell you weren’t.”

“Okay, fine. But even if that’s true,” I said. “That doesn’t mean I was ready to give up.”

“At what point is it giving up and at what point is what I did just an example of choosing to do what’s right for everyone involved?”

I looked down at my mug and tried to hold back the tears. I didn’t want Michael to think I was crying over him because I really wasn’t. This whole thing was just so hard to navigate, and the emotions roiling inside me sometimes felt so overwhelming.

“I’m not saying it hasn’t been hard for me too,” he went on. “Because it has been. But... just answer me this, how many times have you found yourself missing me since we’ve been apart?”

“How many times have I found myself missing you?”

“Yeah. Just a ballpark.”

I knew the answer, and despite how much anger I still felt towards him, it struck me as cruel to say the truth out loud. I hesitated, and when I opened my mouth to answer, only a sad little hiccup escaped my lips.

“Even once?” he asked. “Have you missed me even once?”

“No, okay no!” I didn’t mean to shout, but I was just starting to feel a little backed into a corner all the sudden. This conversation hadn’t been going on for more than five minutes, and already, I felt like I’d been riding on a rollercoaster of emotions. “I haven’t missed you! Not a single time. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes, actually,” he said. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

I sat back with a huffy breath that quickly turned into a laugh. Michael laughed softly as well, and for a moment, I was able to let go of all my feelings of betrayal and fury, and actually let what he was saying sink in.

“I know it was the right decision,” I said after a while. “I just wish you would’ve handled it better, that’s all. I wish I

would've seen it coming. It's one thing to have your husband decide he wants to divorce you after more than twenty years of being together, but it's another thing entirely to be so oblivious that you don't even notice he stopped loving you."

"I never stopped loving you," he said.

"You didn't?"

"No. I just, I don't know. We fell out of love. *Romantic* love, but I still have nothing but positive feelings towards you, Cameron. I want you to have a wonderful, amazing life, and I hate that I ever did anything to hurt you or make you feel like you weren't worthy. You deserve to find someone who can give you everything I couldn't."

I sniffled. "You deserve that too, Michael."

"Thank you for saying that. It means a lot."

A bird flew onto a bush nearby, and I closed my eyes as it sang out a cheery little tune. Michael and I needed to have this conversation, and I felt better now that we'd talked through some of what happened. It felt good to get some of my thoughts and feelings off my chest. After this, I hoped we could both start to heal and move on. We'd jumped over the first hurdle of making the initial contact after filing for divorce, and going forward I held onto the belief that it would continue to get easier, day by day.

Then Michael cleared his throat.

"So, listen," he said, and my eyes flew open. I remembered then how anxious he'd sounded when I first answered the phone. He hadn't called me so that we could hash things out. He called me for something else.

"What is it?" I asked. "I can tell something is wrong."

"Well... not wrong per-say," he began. "But the reason I called is because I was on the phone with Neal earlier. He called me on his way to his 8am class. He started talking about how the two of us need to fill out the financial aid application, or update it, or something."

"That's right," I said. "He talked to me about it too."

“Right. So, while Neal was giving me a list of all these things that we needed to have figured out before we started on the application. We needed tax information, stuff about our combined income, etc... and as he was going on and on, I sort of... absentmindedly and without really thinking about it... mentioned that we were getting a divorce.”

“You what?” I nearly jumped out of my seat. “You just blurted it out?”

“Er, I said it under my breath,” he clarified. “I didn’t mean to, I swear! I was just thinking out loud, and before I knew it, I’d said the one thing I wasn’t supposed to say. Of course, Neal caught it, and well... after that, things got ugly. He was really upset. He hung up on me, and when I tried to call him back, he sent me right to voicemail. I just thought I would give you a head’s up that he knows and that he’s definitely mad at us.”

Groaning, I pulled the phone away from my face and put Michael on speaker phone. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this right away! Why did we waste so much time arguing about our divorce when Neal is probably having a full-blown meltdown somewhere, alone, on his college campus!”

“I don’t know if we should jump to conclusions like that,” Michael said. “He probably just needs some time to cool off, process. You know.”

“I’m calling him right now.”

“He’s not going to answer,” Michael said. “He didn’t for me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m his mother,” I said, even though I knew that was a pretty weak argument. Michael and I were both equally responsible for what was happening, and there was no reason to think Neal would be any more willing to talk to me than his father. I hung up the call with Michael without so much as offering him a goodbye, but given the circumstances, I assumed he would understand. Immediately afterwards, I put a call through to my one and only child.

The sound cut out halfway through the first ring, and then I heard a click, and then my son's voice telling me to leave him a message and that he'd call me back later. Somehow, I knew, even if I did leave him a message, I wouldn't be hearing back from him any time soon.

Just as I got up to go inside to refill my coffee, the sky opened up overhead, and the rain started to fall in buckets.

Chapter Nine

I tried to call Neal again three or four times, but he just kept sending me to voicemail. I knew I was bugging him, and that I should take a hint and leave him alone, but that just wasn't in my nature as a mother. My child was struggling, and the thought of just letting him deal with all these powerful emotions completely on his own made me want to cry. The fact that I was part of the reason he was feeling this way as well, made me all the more desperate to get in contact with him.

Finally, a little more than an hour after Michael called, Neal finally responded to one of my texts. He told me he wasn't going to pick up the phone and that I needed to stop calling him because he was going to be in and out of class all day and it was distracting. I sent him a response, asking if he was okay, and after that, it took him nearly forty-five minutes to send another message.

"I'm fine," his text read. "I just need some space. Please respect that."

I stared at that message for a while, wondering if I should respond at all, or if respecting his request for space should start right away, with me not texting him back anymore. I decided in the end to just send a little thumb's up in response, and then turned my phone on silent and left it upstairs to charge. I knew if I had it with me, I would spend the whole day eagerly checking to see if he had reached out.

I then went down into the basement of my aunt's old house and tried to keep myself busy by going through the mountains of junk she'd been stashing down there for years.

Hours went by, during which time I moved around broken furniture and stacks of outdated coupon books, laughing each time I saw something that was even older than my aunt. She had two department store catalogs from the 1940s, which were just thrown into a pile with old magazines and phone books. I blew some of the dust off one of them, and thought it looked like it could actually be some sort of valuable collectible. I had no idea how she would've gotten her hands on something like this, or whether or not it was worth anything, but either way, I liked it, so I put it into the box labeled "Keep". Not much else ended up in that box, however. Most of the things I found in the basement were truly unusable and just taking up space. After a while, I started to feel a little discouraged. It wasn't easy taking apart the building blocks of my aunt's life and putting more than half of those blocks into boxes that would either go straight to the trash or straight to goodwill. But then, thankfully, just as I was about to give up on the basement entirely and call it a day, I made my way back to a shelving unit against the far wall.

There, unlike the rest of the space, everything was neatly organized and labeled. There were cardboard boxes with words written on the sides in sharpie, as well as some plastic tubs with stickers indicating what treasures might be inside them. I took down one of the boxes labeled "Photos" and took the lid off in an excited hurry.

Inside, there were seven leather-bound photo albums with gold lettering indicating the dates of the photos in each. I picked up the one on top and ran my hands across the front.

Susan – 1976-1981

I did a little mental math and realized this photo album would've been full of pictures from when my aunt was in her late teens and early twenties. I flipped open the cover, and the first photo was her at a school dance. Her hair was long, almost to her waist, and was parted right down the middle. She was wearing a pink, floor length dress, with flowy sleeves that went right to her elbow. Her date, whoever he was, had on a terrible powder-blue suit, and had thick-rimmed glasses that took up the whole top half of his face.

My aunt Susan was grinning, and not quite looking directly at the camera. I laughed and shook my head, because it was so like Susan to not worry about how a photo turned out. She was probably only there posing because they made her stop on her way into the event, and knowing her, she would be waiting for the moment when the attention wasn't on her anymore, and she could just dance like no one was watching.

On the next page, there was a series of photos, all of which I could tell were taken somewhere on the Florida coast. Susan had bleach blond hair in these ones, and her skin was deeply tanned. In two of the photos, her old station wagon could be seen in the background, the same one she would sell a few years later to fund her impromptu trip to Europe. On that trip, she would purchase the very same ring I was wearing on my finger right then.

I looked down at my hand and twisted the metal band around once, twice, and a few tears fell from my eyes. I pulled back the plastic that was covering the pictures, keeping them safe all these years, and plucked one of the photographs out of the book. In it, Susan was sitting on the hood of her car, grinning like a big kid. She had on bell bottom jeans and a striped t-shirt, and she looked happy as could be. I wanted to hold onto this photo, put it somewhere that I could see it on a regular basis, but I also knew it was precious and probably the only copy, so I was careful as I placed it on top of the "Keep" box.

I checked the time, and realized it was getting late. I hadn't eaten a proper meal yet that day, and my stomach was growling, so I returned the photo album to its rightful place in the box and put the lid back on. I didn't put the box back on the shelf, however, because I knew I'd be back down there soon enough to go through more pictures. I then took the photograph I'd stolen and tucked it gingerly into my back pocket, hiked the "Keep" box up onto my hip, and headed back upstairs.

Having been in the dim basement for most of the day, I had to squint against the light that was streaming in through the

main floor windows when. I took a moment to blink away the floaties and heard someone's voice calling from the hallway.

“Cameron, you here?”

It was Amanda.

“Yeah, hey!” I said from around the corner. “One sec.” I put the box down by the door to the basement and came around to see Amanda sitting down on my couch, going through my mail. Her hair was wet. Even though the sun was out, it was still raining a little outside, and her muddy rain boots had been discarded on the mat by the door. “How long have you been here?”

She smiled over her shoulder at me. “Just a few minutes. I brought your mail in.”

“I can see that.” I sat down next to her and held my hand out. She gave me all of the envelopes except one. “And you decided to just sit here going through my personal stuff instead of coming to find me? I’m pretty sure that’s a felony, by the way.”

“It’s only a felony if I *open* your mail,” she said. “And I knew you were in the basement, and I thought about calling down to you, but then... I noticed *this*—” She held up another pale-yellow envelope and my heart skipped a beat. “And I knew you would snatch it out of my hands the moment you saw it, so I wanted to have a second or two to try and snoop a little.”

Amanda was right. I did snatch it out of her hands the moment I saw it.

“Is this—no. It can’t be.” I shook my head. Did someone really send me *another* anonymous love letter?

“What else could it be?” Amanda asked. “It’s the same envelope the first one came in, and there is no return address or anything.”

I flipped the thing over a couple times, as if thinking there was a name and address on there, it was just somehow hidden in plain sight. But of course, I couldn’t find anything. The envelope was entirely blank.

“So, are you going to open it or what?” Amanda was bouncing around on the couch like a kid who needed to use the bathroom. “I want to see what it says!”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to open it.”

“Why wouldn’t it be a good idea?”

“Well, because... What good is it going to do me?”

“What are you talking about?” She balked. “Don’t you want to know what it says? Aren’t you *dying* to find out more about your secret admirer?”

“Maybe, but...” I trailed off.

“But what?”

“It’s just... I mean... I’m not sure I really see the point. I’m not looking for a relationship right now. In fact, I’m looking for whatever the opposite of a relationship is! I came here to get away from everything for a while and reconnect with myself and with my late aunt. Bringing a man into the mix sounds like it could get really messy, really fast. Why would I ruin such a nice vacation by giving this strange, secretive person any more my time or energy?”

“Uh, because it’s fun!” Amanda said, laughing a little. “Goodness, Cameron, not everything has to be so serious all the time. It’s not like by opening this letter and reading what this person wrote, you’re agreeing to give him your hand in marriage.”

“I know,” I said.

“Do you? Because you’re acting like reading this letter will uproot your whole life when it doesn’t have to. He doesn’t even have to know you’re *getting* his letters. For all he knows, you could be throwing these unmarked envelopes directly into the trash. So why not just read what he wrote because it’s nice to get compliments? Also, because if you don’t open that letter and read the love note, I am going to take it as a personal attack.”

“What?” I smirked. “Why?”

“Because it feels like you’re slapping us fellow single ladies in the face,” she said. “Do you have any idea how excited I would be if someone were writing *me* love letters? I can’t even remember the last time someone told me I was pretty, nonetheless quoted poetry to me!”

I reached out and put a hand on Amanda’s arm, waited until she looked me in the eye. “Amanda, you’re very pretty. No, you’re gorgeous.”

She blushed and looked away from me. “See! That was nice,” she said. “It’s not the same coming from you, but it was still nice. Being told that you’re beautiful and that people like you is *a good thing*.”

“Not always,” I countered. “We don’t know anything about this person. Doesn’t that change the whole dynamic? Aren’t you just a little weirded out by the anonymity of it all? If this guy likes me so much, then why hide behind unaddressed letters?”

She shrugged. “Maybe he’s just shy. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“... I guess not. But you have to admit this whole thing is odd.”

“I will admit to nothing. Look,” she said, reaching out for the letter now that I’d let my guard down. She held it in her hands up to the sunlight and squinted. “This one looks shorter than the first. The light streams all the way through the envelope, which tells me that there’s just a single page in there, maybe one that’s small enough it didn’t even need to be folded up. So really, how much harm could one, short little love letter do?”

“Fine,” I groaned. “Give it here. I’ll open it.”

Amanda clapped her hands together giddily as I slid my finger underneath the flap and opened the envelope. I took out a single piece of paper. It looked the same as the paper the first one had been written on, only this one was folded a little differently. I smoothed it out on my lap and saw that Amanda’s assumption had been correct—this letter was shorter, if only

because it had no opener. There was no ‘to whom it may concern’ or ‘to the lady of the house’ like last time. Instead, the letter just began, and it felt to me like when someone seems to start a conversation right in the middle.

After I wrote that first letter to you, I decided to look through some of the books in the back of my closet. Once upon a time, I was an avid reader, but for years now, I haven’t been able to find the peace of mind required to actually sit down and enjoy a good story.

Amongst my outdated wardrobe and miscellaneous clutter, I found a stack of Shakespeare’s plays and I knew exactly where I had to start my journey back into the wonderful world of literature. In my last letter, I quoted Shakespeare quoting another, but now, I have another line for you—directly from the source.

“To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays”.

This is from A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and it perfectly encompasses how I’ve been feeling as of late.

I realize that both my feelings for you and the method through which I’ve chosen to express them may seem out of the ordinary, perhaps even unreasonable, to use Shakespeare’s word. But to me, this feels right. Were I to try and tell you all of this in person, the words would come out jumbled and disjointed. For now, this is all I can offer you, and while I know it isn’t enough, I do hope that my affections are at least well-met.

Still, I do not feel comfortable just assuming that these letters are wanted or cherished in any way, so I would like to give you an opportunity to put a stop to all this. If you don’t want to hear any more from me, simply leave the two letters

I've written to you in your mailbox and the next time I go to deliver one, I will see your disinterest. And I will understand.

If I do not see the letters in the mailbox, I will assume you don't mind reading through my sappy, lofty musings, and will happily keep sending them your way.

The choice is entirely yours.

As am I.

And that was where the text ended.

The last line, *As am I*, struck a chord inside me that I didn't even know was there. Even when Michael and I were first falling in love, when everything he did and said seemed romantic and lovely, he never spoke to me like this. He never made me feel like I was the only person in the world who mattered, or like he belonged to me and only me.

I made myself scan the words once more, looking for any clues which might point to this person's identity, but he'd been careful, just like the first time around. I could feel Amanda's eyes on me, and I knew she was sitting on the edge of her seat, waiting for me to either read the letter out loud or hand over the page. I didn't think I would be able to verbalize everything I just read, however, I was still a little in shock, so I tossed the paper over to her so she could read for herself.

Less than a minute later, she gasped.

"Oh my god, this is *so sweet!* Did you read that last line?"

"Of course, I read the last line."

"And the fact that he's giving you the opportunity to put a stop to all of this if it makes you uncomfortable! That's so considerate. Like, what more could you even ask for in a secret admirer?"

"I could ask him to stop keeping his identity a secret," I said. "That's what I could ask."

“That’s no fun,” she said. “C’mon. This addresses all your doubts.”

“How so?”

“You’ve got a guy who not only sends you sweet love notes, but who is willing to stop at any time if you decide you’re not interested. Cameron—this man is perfect. Now, you just have to wait until you get enough letters that you can start piecing together who he is, and then the two of you can ride off into the sunset together!”

I rolled my eyes and pushed myself up off the couch. “Did you hear a word I said before? I’m not looking for a relationship!”

“Yeah, but a lot of times that’s when people end up meeting *the one*! When they’re not looking!”

I frowned at her. “Why do I feel like you’re about to try to use rom-com logic to convince me you’re right?” I headed into the kitchen, and she followed me.

“Rom-com logic?” She shook her head. “No. This is real-world stuff. I know so many people who met the person they married right after deciding that they were going to quit dating for a while. Just because *you* aren’t looking for a man, doesn’t mean a great one isn’t going to walk into your life at any moment! This could be him! This charming, romantic man who’s good with words and respects your boundaries! Don’t you feel like you owe it to yourself to see where it leads?”

“Not really.” The afternoon had stretched into the evening, and I was starting to get really hungry. Plus, I needed a drink in my hand if I was going to address this whole secret admirer thing head on. I grabbed some leftovers out of the fridge and stuck the container in the microwave, then went about opening a bottle of wine.

“Here’s what I owe to myself,” I said. “I owe it to myself to take some time off work and to try and clear my head after everything happened with Michael. I’m doing that. I owed it to myself to come back to Sunfall Key and to fix up my aunt’s house. Did that. I owe it to myself to eat good food and drink

nice wine while watching the sunset over the ocean, which is exactly what I'm *about* to do. But I don't think I owe it to myself to put my heart back out there so soon after it was torn in two!"

"But think about the possibilities!" Amanda said. "We could be talking about the love of your life!"

"Or" I said. "More likely, we could be talking about someone else who is eventually going to do or say something that hurts me, and it will have been all my fault since I let myself fall for another man even though I knew better!"

"Wait..." Amanda eyed me suspiciously as I passed a full glass of wine over to her. "Are you saying what I think you're saying? Are you going to put the letters back in the mailbox so that he doesn't send you anymore?"

I took a sip of my wine before answering. "I'm thinking about it."

"No!" Amanda shouted. "You can't!"

"I can," I corrected her. "And I might. I haven't decided yet. I need to sleep on it."

"But—"

I put a hand up to stop her. "Can we not talk about this anymore?" I pleaded. "I've had a really long, emotional day, and what I'd really like to do right now is get some food in my stomach and just relax. C'mon. It's stopped raining finally, and it looks like we might even see a little bit of the sun before nightfall if we're lucky. Let's go sit outside, drink our wine, and pretend like I didn't receive a love letter in the mail or an upsetting phone call from my soon to be ex-husband today."

"Michael called?" Amanda's eyes widened. "To say what?"

I took a much longer sip and then started putting two plates of leftovers together. "I'll tell you about it later. First, I *need* to eat."

"Alright," Amanda said. "But if you think this conversation about the letters is over—"

“I know it’s not,” I said. “It just has to be over *for now*. Deal?”

She smiled. “Yeah. Okay. Deal.”

Chapter Ten

That night, I didn't send Amanda home with the second letter. I wanted to keep this one, read through it a few more times, and try to figure out how I felt about the whole thing. While I did appreciate that this man had left it up to me, I was having a difficult time trying to determine what I wanted to do going forward. I'd been in such a vulnerable, anxious place ever since Michael asked for the divorce, and one of the few things that made me feel better was enjoying my time as a single woman in Sunfall Key.

For more than twenty years, I had been identifying so closely with my roles as a wife and mother, and now that I was soon to be divorced, and my role as a mother had shifted quite drastically, I was given the space to explore other aspects of my life and personality. For instance, I never would've thought of myself as being 'handy' before I inherited this house from my aunt, but over the last few weeks, I'd spent time learning how to fix stuff up and found that I was pretty good at it.

More than that, however, it just felt nice to not have to worry about anyone else besides myself. Sure, I still thought about my son, even more so now that I knew he found out about the divorce, but that was a 'back of mind' concern. My 'front of mind' concerns, which used to mainly consist of things related to getting to work on time and cooking dinner for my kid, were now mostly made up of questions over which wine to buy and whether or not I felt like going for a swim that day.

It was freeing, being on my own, answering to no one, and somehow a part of me felt like I would be giving it up were I

to let this man even more into my life. Not to mention, I didn't think it was right to get his hopes up.

... On the other hand, I had to admit that Amanda's point about commitment made sense. Just by continuing to receive and read his letters, I wasn't committing to anything. I was simply letting the kind words wash over me, and perhaps there really was no harm in that.

I went back and forth that entire night, making pros and cons lists in my head, but by the time the sun came up the next day, I still didn't know what I wanted to do.

Ultimately, however, as I sat with my morning coffee and really contemplated my options, I decided that I would wait for one more letter. Depending on what was written, and depending on how the words and sweet sentiments made me feel, I would choose once and for all whether or not I wanted to hear more of what this man had to say.

* * *

The following weekend, after the rain stopped and the sun returned in full swing, a heat wave passed through the Sunfall Key area. It was too hot for Amanda and I to even think about hitting the beach. Instead, we drove a few towns over to catch a movie at a cool, air-conditioned theater, and then grabbed some dinner at a drive thru on the way home.

I was in a great mood when we arrived back at the house, and was so distracted by Amanda's impression of one of the actors from the movie, that I nearly tripped over the neatly wrapped present that was waiting for me in front of my door.

Bending down to pick up the wine bottle that was wrapped in cellophane and had a pretty blue bow around the neck, I read the label and noticed it was one of my favorite brands. I smiled and turned back to look at Amanda, whom I assumed had been the one responsible for this kind gesture.

"You shouldn't have," I said.

"I didn't," she replied, holding her hand out.

Frowning, I gave her the bottle and then looked back down at where it had been placed and noticed there was a card included. It was in a pale-yellow envelope. “Oh,” I said. “It’s from him.”

Amanda beamed. “Of course, it’s from him! How romantic! What does the card say?”

I picked up the envelope and instinctively started to scan the area, wondering if maybe I could catch a glimpse of the mystery man. If he’d only just dropped the gift off, there was a chance he might still be nearby. But the neighborhood was quiet, and nobody was outside besides Amanda and I. Sighing, I opened the front door first. Inside my living room, I took the note out of the envelope and read.

The rain has kept me inside the last few days, meaning I’ve had a lot of time to think. No matter what I do, I cannot seem to stop my thoughts from finding their way back to you. I noticed you didn’t put the previous letters in the mailbox, and I hope that means you are still enjoying reading my notes.

*I’ll keep this one short, though, so that my ramblings don’t bore you to tears. I have finished reading the two Shakespeare comedies that I had in my collection and moved onto the historical plays. I must say, while the language in these texts is obviously impressive, I do miss the romanticism of his sillier, more playful love stories. I could relate to the young, lovesick protagonists of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*, if only because the day you walked into my life, I felt like I was a young man again. I am a fool, drunk on just the sight of you, and that is why I have brought you this gift, so that we may both imbibe. I will continue to be made addled by your profound beauty, and you can sip this wine that I sure do hope is as good as the label promises.*

Oh, and stay cool—it’s going to be a hot one tomorrow.

I read this out loud and then scoffed as I threw the card on the kitchen table. “I don’t like this. It’s starting to get weird now.”

“How is this weird?” Amanda asked, putting the bottle of wine on the counter. “I thought the note was nice.”

“It’s not about the note. It’s the wine.”

“So, what if he bought you wine? You love wine!”

“I know,” I said. “And I specifically love *that* brand of wine.”

She furrowed her brow. “And that’s a problem because...”

“Because it means, he’s like, watching me! Or worse, maybe he’s been going through my trash. There’s no way this is a coincidence. He has been paying such close attention to my life, that he knows my favorite brand of wine. It’s creepy.”

“Hang on,” Amanda said, looking a little more closely at the label. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. This is a very popular wine brand, and it’s probably one of the nicest bottles you can buy at the local market. It stands to reason that he has no idea whether or not you drink this stuff, and he just went to the market and bought the bottle that looks the best! If I was buying wine for a dinner party or something, I probably would pick this up too! The label is eye-catching, and it has that big gold seal that says it won some kind of award.” She looked up at me and smiled. “I think it could very well have been a coincidence.”

“I can’t take that chance,” I said. “If he really is watching me, then I want nothing to do with him. That makes me very uncomfortable, and I think it’s time I put a stop to all of this.”

Amanda looked practically heartbroken. “Are you sure? Because I really do think that this bottle of wine is nothing but a nice gift.”

“I’m positive,” I said. “I should’ve never let this go so far in the first place.” I took the bottle and re-tied the bow around the top, then ran upstairs to get the other letter he’d sent earlier in the week. I put the two notes and the bottle of wine,

unopened, back into the mailbox for him to find whenever he came around next. Amanda watched me go through the motions with an obvious look of disappointment on her face, but didn't say anything.

When it was all said and done, I gave Amanda a look and said, "Okay, now swear to me you're not going to sneak back here in the dead of night and take that stuff out of the mailbox so that he doesn't find it."

She gasped. "How did you know I was going to do that?"

"Because even though we haven't seen each other in a long time, *I know you*. I know how your mind works, and I remember all the times you would come up with little schemes to get what you wanted when we were kids."

She folded her arms. "Fine. I won't take the stuff."

"Promise."

She crossed her heart. "Yes, okay, I promise!"

"Alright, good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to call it an early night. Are you good to walk back to your rental alone?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said. "A little disappointed that you decided to put a stop to all this, but other than that, I'm right as rain."

I smiled. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I have to do what's right for me."

She nodded. "I get it." She laughed. "I just wish there was a way for me to let this guy know that he can write love letters *to me* any time he wants." We shared a laugh, then said goodnight, and she headed out the door.

Once I was alone, I sat by the window in the front room and watched the street for a while. I wasn't trying to catch my admirer in the act or anything, but there was a part of me that was curious to see if anyone would go by the house after dark. Nobody came by, however, and soon enough, I fell asleep on the couch. It had been a tiresome and hot few days, and it felt

nice to curl up by the open window and breath in the cool breeze.

I woke up the next morning just as the sun was rising. I had a kink in my neck and my back was talking to me. But despite my aching joints, I leaped up from the couch and headed outside, making a b-line for the mailbox. I opened up the door and saw that all the items I'd left in there the night before were gone, and there was just a single note inside waiting for me. This wasn't in an envelope or anything. It was written on what appeared to be a notecard instead of a full-sized sheet of paper, and all it said was, *I'm sorry to have bothered you. You will not hear from me again. Take care.*

I tried to glean some insight from the way the note was written. It was scribbly and a little hard to read, just like all his notes had been, but other than that, I couldn't tell how the man might've been feeling when he scrawled out this succinct message. I put the card in my pocket and headed inside, feeling both a little relieved and a little sad, as I realized this was the last time I would ever hear from someone who seemed to care about me.

And yet, I reminded myself, he didn't actually know me, and I didn't know him.

We were strangers, so how could anything he said have been real?

Chapter Eleven

Later the following week, I was sitting on my back porch with my cellphone in hand, silently saying a prayer before putting yet another call through to Neal. It had been more than a week since Michael had let slip about the divorce, and I was really hoping that at this point, Neal had been given enough time and space to cool off.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then pressed my finger down on his name, and brought the phone up to my ear. It rang, and rang, and rang. Then the call went to voicemail. At least this time, as opposed to the first few times I'd tried to reach him, it didn't seem as if my son had actually *ignored* my call. There was a chance he didn't pick up because he was still upset, but there was also a chance that he just missed the call entirely. He might've been in class, or otherwise occupied, and perhaps he might even call me back later in the day when he saw the notification that he had missed my attempt to reach him.

But probably not...

Feeling a little deflated, I went to my messages and sent him a text. I knew most kids his age had no problem texting even in the middle of class, and while I would normally discourage him from such things, I was desperate to find out where he and I stood.

"Hey honey," I wrote. "I just wanted to check in. I'd love to talk if you have some time later today. I miss you!"

I only had to wait a few seconds after I hit send for Neal to reply. He wrote back, "Can't talk today. Maybe this weekend. I

don't know.”

He didn't tell me he missed me too, or give me any indication that he was on his way to forgiving me or his father. My heart sank, and I sighed heavily as I put my phone aside and tried not to start crying. I stared out at the water and focused my mind on something else besides my fraying relationship with my kid. I watched the waves, and thought I saw the skinny tailfin of a dolphin breaking the surface. And even though this was a beautiful sight and it was a perfect day out, I still felt deeply saddened by everything going on in my personal life, and a few tears escaped and crawled down my cheeks. I sniffled and wiped my face with the back of my sleeve.

“Is everything okay?”

The voice startled me, and I jumped a little out of my seat as I turned my head to see Gray standing on the other side of the fence, looking at me with a worried smile. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean to scare you. I was just out here pulling some weeds and noticed that you seemed a little... sad. I thought I'd check to make sure you were alright.”

I forced a happy expression onto my face and shook my head. “Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I'm just going through this thing with my son right now, and it's... it's a lot. But it'll all work out in the end I think.”

“I'm sure it will,” he said. He sounded so confident, even though he didn't know much about the situation at all. “But you know... if you ever want to talk about it—or about anything, I'm usually around and I've been told I'm a great listener.”

I laughed and got up out of my chair, then went over to the fence so that we didn't have to call out to each other from across my lawn. “Is that so? Well, I appreciate the offer, but I really don't think you want to hear all about my family drama. At worst, it's depressing, at best, it's boring.”

“I doubt there's anything about you that's boring,” he said. I smiled and looked anywhere but directly into those green eyes. Gray had his arm resting on the fence, just as he did the

last time we chatted in our respective lawns, only now that I was making an effort to avoid meeting his gaze, I noticed that he was wearing a gold band on his left hand. I had no idea he was married, but why else would a man wear a band on that finger? I'd never seen a woman in his house before, but that didn't mean anything. His wife could be on vacation or something.

When I looked back up at Gray's face, I saw he was smiling at me. I wasn't sure what to make of the situation, and the wedding ring definitely threw me for a loop, but his easy, casual confidence put me at ease. Plus, I could use a distraction, and I couldn't think of a better way to do that than to make small talk with my cute neighbor on a lovely summer evening.

"Would you like to come over for a glass of wine?" I asked. "I've been living next door to you for weeks, and yet I've never asked you over for a drink. My mother would be so disappointed in my lack of hospitality if she knew."

His smile widened. "That sounds wonderful, I'd love to. Thanks."

"And if you want to bring anyone else over," I said, glancing quickly down at his hand. "That's fine too."

He laughed. "You mean like my dog?"

"Sure, or whoever." I don't know why I was being so cagey about his wife, but I just felt a little uncomfortable about the whole thing. I wanted him to know that his wife was welcome to drop by as well, and in fact, I would've loved to meet her, but it also felt strange to be the first one to bring her up. Not only had I never met the woman he was married to, but he'd never even alluded to the fact that he was married at all, so it didn't feel right for me to address it directly when I couldn't know for sure what was going on in his personal life.

"Terra and I will be right over," he said, and then headed back inside his house.

I hurried through my back door to pick out a bottle of wine and rinse out my nicer glasses. A few minutes later, there was

a knock at the door. I went to let Gray and Terra inside. The dog greeted me with a wagging tail and a few licks, and I scratched between her ears. “She’s so sweet,” I remarked. “How old is she?”

“Almost ten.”

“Really?” I laughed. “But she has so much energy!”

“You’re telling me,” he said. “I swear, this dog hasn’t slowed down *at all* since the day I adopted her. Back then, when she was still under one, she would run around the yard for hours and I would wonder how she hadn’t tired herself out yet. Now, she still runs around the yard for hours, and I’ve basically just accepted the fact that she’s an alien or something.”

“A very cute alien,” I added. Then I went into the kitchen to get our wine and led Gray out onto the back patio. We sat down in the patio chairs while Terra went around exploring all the new smells that my yard had to offer. We watched her explore for a while, not saying anything. It was peaceful.

“So,” Gray said after a while. “You feel like telling me more about what’s going on with your son, or do we need to wait until we’re on our second glass of wine to get into something that personal?”

I smirked. “Usually, I would say we have to wait, but actually, I’ve been wanting to have someone to talk to about this.” *So much for using him a distraction.*

“You don’t have anyone else to talk to?”

“No, I do,” I said. “I told my friend Amanda what was going on, and she had some words of wisdom, and I probably should’ve taken what she said to heart because it was pretty spot on. Plus, she’s a teacher who spends time with broody kids all day long, so she really knows what she’s talking about but still... I know she’s right, but she just said all the things I didn’t really want to hear.”

“Like what?”

“Like how I need to keep giving my son space and let him come to me when he’s ready.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding. “I can see how that would be frustrating. You want to do what you can to fix the problem, but your friend is telling you to just wait out the storm. I take it you’re usually a ‘doing things’ type of person.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Big time. And you know, for a while there, I thought I was getting better at *not* doing things. I went from working 50-hour weeks on average, to lounging by the water without a care in the world practically overnight. It was great, and I thought I was growing as a person. But then bam, something goes wrong in my life, and I’m right back to being that anxious, gotta’ get everything done right now, mindset. At least three times last week, I thought about jumping in my car and driving to my son’s college campus and *forcing* him to talk to me. Can you believe that?”

Gray made a face. “I can’t imagine that would’ve worked out well for you in the end.”

“Definitely not,” I agreed. “But just sitting here doing nothing is driving me crazy. What if Neal never reaches out to me? What if he’s mad at me and his dad for the rest of our lives?”

“I highly doubt that’s what’s going to happen,” Gray said. “But then again, I don’t have all the details so perhaps I shouldn’t make any judgment calls. What exactly did you and Neal’s dad do to make him so upset?”

“We didn’t tell him right away that we decided to get a divorce.”

Gray nodded. “That’ll do it.”

“Do what?”

“Make a kid mad,” he said. “But not indefinitely,” he quickly added.

“Nice save.”

He smiled. “I’m serious though. I don’t think he’ll be mad at you forever. My parents got divorced when I was a teenager, and it was jarring at first. For sure. But I was able to get over it eventually, and so will Neal.”

“Did your parents keep the divorce from you?”

He took a moment to think. “For a little while, yes. Maybe a couple weeks. Why? Do you think Neal’s more upset about you keeping the truth from him than he is about the divorce itself?”

“I wish I knew,” I said. “But he truly hasn’t spoken to me about any of it since he found out.”

“Is he talking to your husband at all? Excuse me—ex-husband?”

“I have no clue. I don’t talk to Michael very often these days, which I think is for the best.”

“Messy divorce?”

I looked at him with raised brows. “Now, if you really want to get into *that*, then you’ll definitely have to wait until I’m on my second glass of wine. Maybe even my third.”

He smiled. “That’s fine with me. I’m a patient man.”

* * *

Gray and I ended up sitting and chatting pleasantly through the evening and into the night. I told him a little more about my divorce and what led to my decision to come back to Sunfall Key for the summer. I left out the more dramatic parts of the story because I didn’t want to bring the mood down, and then thankfully after a while, we moved onto less personal topics of conversation. Gray told me more about himself, and I couldn’t help but be a little fascinated by his exciting life.

“Yeah, I was a trauma surgeon for a while,” he told me. “But retired early because working in the ER is a young man’s game.”

I nodded. “I hear you. I work in hospital administration and have been stationed in the ER section of my hospital for a while now. It’s very rewarding work a lot of the time, but it also takes a lot out of you, emotionally and physically. I can’t even imagine being a surgeon though!”

“Honestly,” he said. “It was great. Hard, and definitely emotionally taxing, but I loved my work. I was so sad when I retired, that every once in a while, I still show up where I’m needed and do what I can.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like when there’s a natural disaster somewhere,” he said. “Or a huge pile up on the freeway. Sometimes I’ll get a call from one of my connections. I’ve worked at hospitals all over the state, so I know a lot of people still in the field. They’ll call me up and see how quickly I could get there and lend a hand. Since I also have my pilot’s license, I can also get from place to place faster than a lot of other doctors in the state.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s amazing! It must be so nice to still be able to help people, but to no longer have to be in the hospital or on-call 24/7. As much as I’ve enjoyed being able to take some time off and vacation, sometimes I really miss the patient interactions and stuff. The best part of my job was being able to help people when they are having one of the worst days of their life.”

“I totally know what you’re talking about,” he said. “All the pain of watching people suffer or losing someone on the table is worth it because sometimes you get to be the one who goes out into the lobby and tells someone that their loved one is going to pull through. But that said, I wouldn’t say I miss the late shifts and the back pain I would get after hunching over the table for hours on end.”

“I’ll bet.”

I leaned back in my chair and sighed happily. I enjoyed getting to know Gray better, although I found it odd that he hadn’t mentioned his wife a single time, even though we’d been talking for hours. I was about to bring her up, actually, when he put his glass down on the table between our chairs and patted his knees. “Well,” he said. “I think it’s time Terra and I head home. She hasn’t eaten her dinner yet, so soon enough she’s going to start getting antsy. At which point, she’ll start chewing on your furniture or go digging in your yard.”

“Sure, yeah, of course,” I said. We both stood up and he called to his dog, who had been rolling around in the sand. She came running and tore into the house in front of us.

“Oh shoot,” he said. “Now she’s going to get sand all over your floors.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Do you have any idea how much sand I track in on a daily basis?”

He chuckled. “If you say so.”

I walked him to the door, and he clicked Terra into her leash and paused on the other side of the threshold. “I had a really nice time tonight. Thank you for inviting me over.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said. “You’re welcome to drop by anytime.”

He smiled. “I’ll hold you to that.” Then he took off down the path and headed back towards his house. I waited until he disappeared through his own front door before shutting mine and going back into the kitchen. I’d also had a really nice time with him, and there was even a moment when we were outside talking in which I thought about how nice it would be if Gray had been the one who wrote me those letters. But he was married, and even though he was an easy conversationalist, he didn’t speak in a way that was reminiscent of the letters at all.

It was definitely not him. Which was a shame, because maybe if it had been him writing to me, I would’ve considered going back on my decision to swear off men for good.

Chapter Twelve

The next day, after running some errands in town and buying some materials at the hardware store to make a birdhouse, I invited Amanda over to help me. It felt like a middle school art project or something, and I had secretly hoped she'd built one before, but she looked at a complete loss when she met me in the backyard and stared down at the planks of wood and nails.

“What exactly are we doing?”

“I want to build a birdhouse,” I said. “My aunt used to have one that sat on the windowsill in the kitchen. She used to love to watch the birds come and go while she was cooking or washing the dishes. But that little wooden house was gone when I got here a couple weeks ago, so I'd like to replace it.”

“Yes, but you do realize that you can just buy birdhouses that are already made at the store, right?”

“I want it to be special!” I said. “I don't just want any old birdhouse. Now sit down and help me make sense of these instructions I downloaded off the internet.” I took out the page that Tilly was kind enough to print off for me in the back room of the hardware store out of my back pocket.”

“They were on a website that was partially in German, but I was pretty sure the directions were in English.” I flipped the paper over twice, frowning at the foreign words written on each side. “Now, I'm not so sure...”

“These are in English,” she said, taking the paper from me. “It's just that neither of us knows the first thing about carpentry, so it might as well be another language.” She put

the page down and huffed. “I really thought you invited me over so that we could sunbath and gossip like usual.”

“For the record, *we* do not gossip,” I said. “*You* gossip to me, mostly about people I don’t even know.”

“Whatever,” she said. “The point is, I would’ve worn different clothes if I knew you were going to put me to work.”

“Will it make you feel any better if I told you that I actually did have something interesting to share? About someone we *both* know?”

She perked up. “Yes. Yes, it would.”

“Okay then,” I said. “I’ll tell you my news, but only if you start organizing all the different pieces we need into piles so that we don’t have to go looking for the right nail every time we get to a new step.”

“You got it, boss,” she said, suddenly very eager to help out. Amanda went about organizing the nails, wood, and glue into separate piles while I went through the directions one more time in my head. I was pretty confident I knew what to do for the first couple of steps. It was the latter ones I was a little worried about, but I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

“Alright,” I said, grabbing two pieces of thin, square-shaped wood. “First things first, we have to make the base and one of the walls. I’m going to put the glue down this one side, and then stick the two pieces together, and then your job will be to hold them tight while the glue dries.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“Not too long,” I assured her. “And once it’s holding pretty well, I’m going to put a couple nails in it for good measure. It’s just impossible to hammer stuff in and hold the pieces in the right place at the same time.” She handed me the bottle of wood glue, and I put a generous amount along the edge of one of the pieces of wood. Then, I placed it down on the other, forming the floor and the first wall of the house, and held it firmly.

After a few seconds, Amanda took over the task of holding the pieces of wood together, and I started to tell her what happened the night before. “So,” I said. “I was outside last night, having a moment because Neal is still screening my calls.”

“I thought you said you were going to give him space. Don’t you remember all that stuff I told you about how teenagers appreciate it when you treat them like adults, and how respecting boundaries is even very important when it comes to having a relationship with your child as they enter adulthood?”

“I did give him space!” I said. “I’ve been trying to respect his boundaries. I’ve been leaving him alone for more than a week. Maybe I should’ve waited longer, but I don’t know. Last night, I just lost my patience and I tried to call him. He sent me a very dismissive text that only made me feel worse, and so I was out here crying a little, when Gray appeared on the other side of the fence.”

“Oh, your cute neighbor?”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “He saw me crying, which was pretty embarrassing, but thankfully he didn’t make me feel too awkward about it. We got to talking, and before I even knew what I was saying, I had invited him over for a glass of wine.”

“What?” She was so surprised, she let go of the two planks of wood. They fell to the ground between us and broke apart. “Shoot! Sorry!”

I laughed. “It’s fine. We’ll just have to glue it again.” This time, Amanda reached for the glue and got to work putting the pieces back together, but not before prompting me to tell her the rest of the story. “Anyway, Gray came over and we had a lovely evening together, drinking wine and chatting. It was nice. But the weird thing was—”

“Wait a minute!” she interrupted, her face lighting up with excitement. “What if *Gray* is your secret admirer?”

I smiled but shook my head. “I thought that too, but if you’ll let me get to the good part of the story, you’ll see why

that can't be the case.”

“Oh, we haven't even gotten to the good part. God, you really know how to bury the lead. What's the good part?”

“Gray is *married*.”

“Married?” She frowned, clearly unsatisfied with what I thought was going to be a big reveal. “No way. He can't be married.”

“Why not?”

“Because—because I would know if he was married,” she said. “*You* would know if he was married. I mean, c'mon, I've been snooping on that guy every time I come over to your house, and I've never, not once, seen a woman anywhere on his property. I haven't even seen signs that someone else lives there. He only ever has one car in his driveway, and I've never heard him talking to someone else out on his patio, have you?”

“No, but that doesn't mean he's not married,” I said. “Maybe his wife left town for the summer or something.”

“Did he *tell you* he was married?”

“No, but I saw his wedding ring.”

“Well, that's hardly proof!” Amanda said. “You wear a wedding ring, but you're not technically married!”

“I don't wear it on my left hand,” I said. “And this isn't even my wedding ring. This is a ring—”

“From your aunt, I know, I know,” she said. “But even still, when I first saw that ring on your hand, I assumed you were married too. I just thought you might've switched it to your other hand without thinking about it or something. So maybe Gray did the same. Maybe he normally wears that ring on his right hand, but switched to his left without even noticing.”

“But Amanda,” I said. “It's a simple gold band. What man wears a gold band on his ring finger if it isn't a wedding ring?”

“Florida men sometimes have a strange sense of style!” she said. “My dad wears rings!”

“Yes,” I said. “But your dad’s rings are huge, and there’s always a stone or something on them. Plus, your dad also wears Hawaiian shirts and cargo pants, so we can’t base any conclusions off of how that man dresses!”

“It’s just... you of all people have no room to talk. You wear a wedding ring that doesn’t signify that you’re married, so why not assume it’s the same for him? Especially considering he’s never mentioned his wife a single time.”

“I guess...”

“I think it was probably just a misunderstanding.”

I sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. But whatever.” I shook my head and tried to act like the whole thing was inconsequential in the end. Because it was. “It doesn’t matter if he’s married or not, because he and I are just friends and that’s all I’m looking for right now.”

“But what if he was the one writing the letters? Would that change anything?”

“No,” I said, hoping that I sounded more convinced than I felt. “It wouldn’t change anything. Regardless of who wrote those letters, I’ve sworn off relationships and men. Besides, it’s not him. He didn’t sound *anything* like the person who wrote the notes.”

Amanda’s face fell. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” I said. “He’s not the guy. I can just tell. But you know what, that’s actually sort of a good thing. I’m not sure how I would feel about knowing he was the one writing them. That would prove my theory that he was probably watching me and actually did know what my favorite kind of wine was. That’s just a little too much for me. It’s better this way. Gray is a nice man, and we get along well, so I’m looking forward to getting to know him better *as a friend*. I could use more casual and drama-free relationships.”

“You say that as if our relationship isn’t causal and drama-free!”

I laughed. “It’s casual, but not drama free. You’re always finding ways to stir up drama.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Amanda said. “Did I tell you about the passive aggressive email one of the other middle school English teachers sent me last week? Oh my god, you’re going to die. It was from that one woman I was telling you about, Nancy. I swear, she has it out for me or something.”

I smiled and tuned in for the rest of Amanda’s story, slowly making my way through the steps of building the birdhouse, and happy to longer be talking about me, my secret admirer, or Gray Jacobs.

* * *

I walked Amanda back to her rental later that afternoon, and we stopped along the way to get some ice cream. Mine started to melt fast, however, so I ate it as quickly as I could, and then had to walk back home slowly, so as to not upset my overly full stomach. Thankfully, it was another gorgeous night in paradise, and the temperature was perfect, so taking my time was not a problem at all. The sun was out, but there was a nice breeze and a few clouds in the sky, which offered little patches of shade every once in a while.

My peaceful bliss was interrupted, however, when I came around the corner onto my street, and was nearly bulldozed by a golden retriever, stretching out to the farthest her leash would reach.

“Oh, hi there Terra,” I said when I saw her. She jumped up on me and I had to catch her with my hands and put her paws back down on the ground.

“Terra, down!” Gray hurried to shorten her leash and pull her back. “Sorry!”

“It’s fine,” I told him. “I know she’s just excited.”

He came up to her side and told her to sit, a command she obeyed. Then he looked up at me and smiled. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I was just coming back from walking Amanda home.” Terra sniffed my hand and then started licking me like crazy.

“We also stopped for ice cream, and a lot of it spilled down my hand, so that’s probably what Terra is tasting right now.”

He laughed. “She loves ice cream.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Good point.” He looked over his shoulder. “Well, we were just going to do one more lap around the block and then head back to the house. Would you care to join us?”

My stomach was feeling better at that point, and I had no other plans for the rest of the day, so I shrugged and said, “Sure, why not?” I fell in step with Gray and Terra led the way down to the next block. The wind rustled through the palm trees overhead and I breathed in the smell of brine and sunscreen as a family walked past us who had obviously just been at the beach.

“Oh hey,” he said. “I was thinking about taking my plane out to this little island I know not too far from here. Maybe sometime this weekend. Would you have any interest in accompanying me?”

“You want me to come with you to an island?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I thought it could be fun. I could give you a flying lesson and everything.”

“A flying lesson?”

He laughed. “Are you just going to repeat everything I say back to me?”

“No—I—I’m sorry. I’m just a little confused.” Going with Gray to an island, just the two of us struck me as an incredibly romantic suggestion, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it at all.

“Confused about what?”

“Well... uh... Can I ask you a question?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Are you... I mean... You wear a wedding ring.”

He smiled when I said this and looked down at his hand. We continued to walk a few paces before he said anything. “Ah yes, I was wondering whether or not you noticed that. I didn’t have it the first time we met, but I was wearing it the other day when I came over to your house.”

“And you’re wearing it now...”

“Indeed, I am,” he said.

“So... does that mean you *are* married? Or are you just married *sometimes*?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not married. Not anymore. My wife, Francine, passed away a little less than five years ago now. For the longest time, I never took her ring off, but then one day I almost lost it down the drain while I was giving Terra a bath, and I decided I needed to be a little more careful. I would hate to lose it now, when it’s something that reminds me so much of her.”

I had stopped in my tracks, but it took Gray a few seconds to notice. He glanced back and saw that I was standing still in the middle of the sidewalk and frowned. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m so sorry about your wife,” I said. I wasn’t sure why this news was affecting me so much. I didn’t know this woman. But it really did break my heart a little, thinking about Gray having to go through something like that. “If I had known... I wouldn’t have just blurted out the question like that. I didn’t mean to make you talk about something so—so sad.”

“It’s okay,” he said, motioning for me to keep walking with him. “Really. It’s been long enough now that I’m able to talk about it without feeling totally devastated. Now, if you’d asked me about Francine even just a year ago, then I might’ve had a different reaction, but most of the time these days, I can think about her, and it doesn’t hurt so much. I feel a lot more like myself these days than I have in a long time.”

“I remember you saying that for the last few years of my aunt’s life, you mainly kept to yourself... was that because you

were grieving?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I really went down a dark path when I first lost Francine.”

“Was it sudden? Her death, I mean.”

“Death is always sudden,” he said. “But if you’re asking whether or not I knew she was going to die, the answer is a yes and no. They caught her breast cancer when it was still stage three, so we thought she might’ve been able to pull through, but it spread too quickly and eventually, the fight was over. So, in a sense, I perhaps could’ve tried to better prepare myself for the possibility that I was going to lose her but... I don’t know. I was in denial. I guess a part of me worried that if I let myself think too much about her dying, I might end up somehow giving her cancer more power or something. Which is ridiculous, especially since I’m a doctor and I know better.”

“No, I get it,” I said. “When I first came back here, I looked for signs from my aunt, even though I’ve spent enough time in hospitals to know that looking for signs from those we’ve lost will often make things worse, not better.”

“I guess we as humans can only hang onto so much of our good sense in the face of something like death,” he said. “Even those of us who witnessed death on a regular basis, don’t know what to do with ourselves when it comes to losing the people we care about the most.”

I nodded, and let his words wash over me. They were well-spoken, and perhaps even a little... literary. I snapped my head to the side and frowned at him. “Gray,” I said softly. “I have another question.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you—do you read Shakespeare?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Shakespeare?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Or poetry? Or both?”

He looked away from me and shook his head. “Can’t say that I do. If I am going to pick up a book, it’s most likely going to be non-fiction. I like to keep up with what’s going on in the

worlds of medicine and science, so my stack of to-be-read books looks like something you might find in the office of a biology professor. I would like to branch out and read more stuff, like Shakespeare, but just haven't made the effort. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," I said. "I just thought... never mind. It's not important. Tell me more about Francine. What was she like?"

"Francine was the best," he said, and his face lit up when he started talking about her. "She was a painter, and she had this amazing eye for color. I'll have you over sometime and I can show you some of her paintings. They are just the most gorgeous things I've ever seen in my life, and I find myself getting lost in them on a regular basis. Let's see, what else? Well, she was fun. Like, *really* fun. She was the one who suggested we adopt a puppy, and when we showed up to meet the litter, she picked out Terra who was by far the most hyper one in the bunch."

"So, Francine is to blame for this chaotic little tornado that lives in your house?" I asked reaching out to bet Terra as we came around a corner.

He laughed. "Oh yeah. But we worked well together in that sense. I've always been a pretty practical man, but she helped me see the beauty in letting loose and doing something just for the heck of it. I never would've taken flying lessons if it hadn't been for her, and I most certainly wouldn't have spent all that money on my own plane if she hadn't convinced me it was a good idea. I didn't buy the plane until after she was gone, but I could hear her voice in my head while I was contemplating whether or not to pull the trigger. She always used to say that money was nothing but some thin slips of paper, but the stuff you can do with it—now that was real."

"I like that philosophy," I said.

"Yeah, I do too." Then he grinned. "Although, if Francine had it her way, we probably wouldn't have saved any money at all. That's what I mean about us working well together. We evened each other out. She helped me be more carefree and

fun, and I helped her see that being practical isn't always a bad thing. Especially when you've got bills to pay."

"That's beautiful. I can't imagine a better pairing, honestly."

"Yeah, it was pretty lucky that we met each other."

I could see a little bit of sadness in his expression as he said this, and I tried not to be weighed down too much by the thought of what it would be like to lose the love of your life. We talked more about Francine as we concluded our walk, and at the edge of Gray's driveway, he smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. "So... anyway, about my idea of going to the island, I just thought it would be a fun way for you to see the area around Sunfall Key, that's all. But if you're not up for it, I swear, I won't be offended."

"It sounds like fun," I said. "I'm just not sure what projects I need to finish up around the house this week, so I'll have to get back to you."

This was a lie. I had a very well-laid out schedule for all the remaining house projects, of which there really weren't that many. Not only that, but I had plenty of free time built into said schedule and could've easily carved out a few hours one afternoon to go with Gray up in his plane. But there was this voice in the back of my head warning me against moving too fast with this friendship. There was no denying that I thought Gray was attractive, I'd have to have been blind not to notice just how cute he was. I also found him charming and easy to talk to, but all of that gave me pause. I was determined not to let this thing between us develop into anything romantic, and I was pretty sure that meant I would have to be careful when it came to spending too much alone time with him.

I was doing this to protect myself. And maybe it would protect him as well. He probably wasn't ready for a new relationship either.

"Just let me know," he said. "I can take you up in the air pretty much whenever you want, so if you have some free

time, just come on over and knock on my door. Chances are, I'll be around."

"Sounds good," I said, nodding. "I'll, uh, see you later then."

"I hope so."

He smiled once more, and I turned and headed back towards my house. My face was warm and my hands were a little sweaty when I went to unlock the door. I shook my head and wiped my palms off on my pants once I was inside.

"Get it together, Cameron," I said to myself as I shut the door. "He's cute, but he's not *that* cute."

But even as the words slipped off my tongue, I knew that too was a lie.

Chapter Thirteen

“I wouldn’t say I’m *actively* avoiding Gray. I’m just... not going out of my way to see him, that’s all.”

Amanda and I were sitting in the living room on the couch, eating lunch together a couple days later. She had suggested we sit outside, but I told her I wasn’t in the mood to be in the sun. She saw right through that and accused me of avoiding my neighbor.

“Yesterday,” she said. “When I came over, you made up all sorts of excuses to stay inside, and even tried to get me to go into town for no reason. Then just now, you asked *me* to take the garbage out and throw it in the bin, and now you’re saying it’s too hot to eat lunch outside when it’s a perfect 72 degrees today! This is about Gray, and you can’t deny it!”

“Okay fine,” I said. “It’s about Gray.”

“I knew it!”

“Yeah, well congrats on solving the case, Sherlock.”

She gave me a look. “Woah, don’t bite my head off. I was just trying to figure out what’s actually going on with you.”

I sighed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be snippy. I just feel like all we do these days is talk about Gray. Even when I’m avoiding him, I can’t seem to get him out of my life.”

“So you admit you’re avoiding him, but why?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know... It’s hard to explain. Remember when I told you that I found out his wife passed away?”

“How could I forget? That was one of the saddest things I’d heard in a long time.”

“Me too,” I said. “And hearing him talk about her and their life together, it was just so... so romantic. And all the sudden, I started getting these wild ideas in my head. I once again thought that he might’ve been the one who wrote me the letters, and next thing I know, I’m daydreaming about spending the afternoon with him flying around in his plane, laughing, and having a grand old time.”

“Wait, so you do think he’s the one behind the letters?”

“No,” I said. “I asked him if he ever read Shakespeare or poetry and he practically laughed at the suggestion. But that’s not even the point, the reason I bring this up is because at that moment, I just totally fell into the fantasy of it all and forgot all about my plans to take care of *myself* this summer. I got lost in those gorgeous green eyes of his, and couldn’t even remember why I had sworn off men in the first place. Spending too much time around him is going to get me in trouble, I can feel it.”

She frowned. “You really think you won’t be able to control your emotions around him? Because if that’s true, then doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Tell me what?”

“That this is real,” she said. “That you need to follow your heart and take a chance on something that could be great.”

“No,” I said. “That’s not what’s going on here. First of all, I don’t have the energy for something like that. Not to mention, it’s way too soon. For both of us! He lost his wife just a few years ago, and I’m not even sure whether or not I’m officially divorced yet! I have to call my lawyer to see if all the paperwork has been filed.”

“But you said it yourself, your marriage was over long before you actually made it official.”

“... I don’t think I used those words exactly.”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “And it seems to me like Gray is well on his way to getting over the loss of his

wife. He told you that he used to really keep to himself, but now he's as friendly as ever. That shows that he's probably coming out of the sad, dark cave of grief and maybe even that he's ready to think about moving on. With you."

"No," I said. "I can't even let myself go down that road. Gray has been friendly to me because he is a friendly guy who just wants to get to know his new neighbor. And that's great! That's all I want too, but I just need to make sure I'm taking things slow so that everyone is on the same page. I know a few people who got divorced and then immediately found someone to 'rebound' with and the whole thing just got really ugly, really fast. I don't want anything like that to happen, especially when my relationship with Neal is still so fragile. He would be so heartbroken if he found out I was dating someone else so soon after divorcing his dad."

This seemed to convince Amanda more than anything I'd said so far. She nodded along as I explained and when I was done, she agreed with me immediately and outright.

"You know what, that makes sense," she said. "I don't think you should do anything that might lead to you rebounding with Gray."

"Yeah... thank you." I furrowed my brow. "But why are you so suddenly on my side?"

"Truly? Because I think there might be something really great between you and Gray, and it would be a real shame if that got messed up because you two got together when the timing wasn't right."

I opened my mouth to argue, but then shut it again and smirked. "Actually, the way I see it, as long as we're on the same page, I'm going to consider that a win. It doesn't matter if we got to the same conclusions by taking completely separate paths. All that matters is that you're going to help me avoid being alone with Gray for the rest of the summer, yes?"

"I'll do my best," she said.

* * *

The next day, I was out watering some of the newly potted plants on the front patio of my aunt's house, when I saw Terra running around the corner, coming from a completely different direction than Gray's house. I balked and called out to her, wondering how long the dog had been out and about. When she heard me say her name, she came barreling over to me, and nearly toppled me over. I gently pushed her down, but not before she got a bunch of muddy paw prints all over my shirt and pants. Laughing, I finally managed to get her to calm down enough so that I could hook my fingers around her collar. She tried to make a run for it the second I did, however, and I was almost brought to the ground. Thankfully, I managed to hang onto her and keep my stability. Though just barely.

"Gosh, you really are a handful," I said, shaking my head. I straightened up and shielded my eyes from the late afternoon sun, looking to see if Gray was anywhere in sight. After a while, it seemed safe to assume that he was either out searching for his lost dog, or he was in his house having no idea she'd gotten out in the first place. I felt like the best thing to do was stick Terra in the backyard and make sure she couldn't get out, then leave a note for Gray on his door.

Well, if I was being perfectly honest, the *best* thing to do would be go over there and ring the darn bell, but I was still trying to avoid being alone with my neighbor if possible. Showing up on a lovely day such as this, having just found his lost dog, seemed like a really good way for me to get myself invited in, which was the exact opposite thing I wanted. He'd invite me in and then what? We'd have a glass of wine together? Sit and chat, make each other laugh?

I couldn't let that happen.

"C'mon," I said to Terra. "Let's get you home."

The dog clearly didn't want to be taken back to Gray's house, and she tried more than once throughout our short journey to wriggle free from my grip. Eventually, we made it next door, and I put her on the other side of the fence and then made sure the swinging metal gate was secure and locked. She jumped up, put her paws on the top of the gate, and tried to

lick me a couple times. I scratched her between the years. “You’re lucky you’re so darn cute, otherwise nobody would let you get away with *half* of your shenanigans.”

I stood around for a while, trying to make sure there were no other escape routes I was missing, then I went around to the front door to leave a note. I felt pretty stupid, however, because by the time I reached the top step of Gray’s porch, I realized I didn’t have any paper or a pen. How was I going to leave a note without the two things a person needed to write one? Smirking at myself, I was about to turn and run back home to get the necessary supplies, when I noticed Gray’s front door was open.

So that’s how she got out...

I took a step closer, gazing around to make sure nobody was watching. I didn’t want anyone to think I was snooping, or worse, trying to break in. Still, I couldn’t help myself. I pushed the door open a little wider and peered into the entryway. There was a painting hanging on the wall to my right, and I assumed it was one of Gray’s late wife’s pieces. I looked at it from this odd, dimly lit angle, but had trouble making out any of the shapes or imagery.

Before taking a step inside, I cleared my throat. If Gray was anywhere on the main floor, he probably would’ve heard me. I waited a couple seconds, but nobody came to the door and there was no sound coming from inside the house. Even though I knew it was wrong, I pushed the door open all the way and stepped inside. I wanted to get a better look at Francine’s painting, and since I had resolved myself not to spend any more time with Gray that summer, I thought this might have been my last chance to do so.

The painting was stunning, and the color choices mesmerizing. The image was definitely abstract, but I could see what appeared to be the outline of two people walking along what I was fairly certain was the beach. The ocean water was a beautiful swirl of blues, greens, and whites, and the sand under their feet was a pinkish orange color. Their bodies were strangely proportioned, but still very pleasant to look at. I smiled, seeing the salt and pepper details of the man’s hair,

and realized I was looking at a portrait of Gray and his wife. I felt a tear forming in one of my eyes and reached up to brush it aside as it began to slide down my cheek.

Then I heard something that sounded like a door closing upstairs and panicked. I made a mad dash to the door, but didn't look where I was going. I ended up ramming my hip into the corner of a little table next to the door and hissed as my bone made contact with the wood. The pain was sharp, but not so bad that I cried out or anything. The table had wobbled a little, but that wasn't enough to call anyone's attention either. I held still for a moment or two, just to make sure everything was fine, then just as I was about to leave, I noticed two stacks of stationary were positioned perfectly on the table I'd just run into.

One of them was a stack of plain white paper.

The other was a stack of pale, yellow envelopes.

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. Then reaching with my free one, I plucked an envelope off the top of the pile and brought it closer to my face to better inspect. It was definitely the same envelopes that my love letters had come in. There was no doubt about it.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

A floorboard creaked behind me, breaking the silence, and startling me out of my moment of distraction. I whipped around and saw Gray standing at the top of the stairs. He was clearly fresh out the shower, with dripping hair and dewy skin. He was wearing shorts but no shirt, and for the first time since I'd moved in, I realized that Gray, the retired doctor and weekend pilot, wasn't just cute.

He was totally hot.

I was at a loss for words as I scrambled to put the envelope back on the pile and make my exit. I stuttered my way through what could only be described as a discombobulated explanation, all the while inching closer to the door and silently praying that he wasn't going to ask too many questions. “I—uh—sorry,” I said. “This must look—I mean—

You see Terra got out and was running around the neighborhood. I brought her back, but then the door was open, so I just thought I would leave a note, but then—-anyway— she's in the backyard and I have to go."

I turned around and reached for the door handle.

"Cameron, wait," he said. "Can we... talk?"

I forced a laugh. "About what?" I said, purposefully not looking back at him.

"About what you just found," he said. "About the letters."

I let out a heavy sigh and turned back to him slowly. "Oh. Right. Those." I shrugged, trying to act like this whole thing really wasn't that big of a deal. "If you want to talk about them, that's fine I guess..."

"Okay then," he said. "Let me just finish getting dressed. You can open a bottle of wine if you'd like. The nicer bottles are in the pantry in the kitchen."

"Yeah... alright."

"Corkscrew is in the drawer by the sink," he added as he disappeared around the corner.

I stood there, alone once again, wondering just how the heck I'd landed myself in this situation, when *this situation* was the exact thing I'd been trying to avoid.

Chapter Fourteen

Five minutes after I'd opened a bottle of white, Gray appeared in the doorway to the kitchen wearing a t-shirt and the same shorts. He smiled and went to the cupboard to get us some glasses. "Thanks for bringing Terra back," he said.

"It's not a problem," I said. "Thankfully she came right over when I called her."

"Yeah, she's usually pretty good about coming back, but I still haven't quite figured out how to stop her from running off in the first place."

"Does she also know how to open doors?"

He laughed. "No. At least I hope not. I think what happened was I was bringing in some groceries from the car earlier, and tried to kick the door shut behind me while my hands were full. It's an old door, and sometimes it doesn't click into place right, so it must've opened again while I was in the shower and Terra took off."

"Makes sense to me," I said.

I wasn't sure why we were both avoiding the elephant in the room, but I was glad to be given a few more seconds to collect my thoughts. Besides, I didn't want to have this conversation without a glass of wine in my hand. Gray poured, then brought one of the glasses over to where I was standing by his back door. I was looking out at the water, thinking about some of the more romantic lines I remembered verbatim from his letters.

“So...” He said after a short bout of awkward silence. “Do you want to go sit outside?”

I nodded. “Yeah, alright.”

He opened the door for me and I walked out just as a calming ocean breeze wafted on by. I breathed in the familiar smell and felt just a little bit more relaxed as the two of us came to sit on his striped, weather-worn patio chairs. He took a sip from his glass, and I waited patiently for him to start this conversation which I was pretty sure neither of us knew exactly how to navigate our way through.

“Alright,” he said eventually. “You found the envelopes, which means you found out that I was the one who was writing you those love letters earlier in the summer.”

I nodded. “That’s pretty much what happened, yes...”

“And now you’re probably wondering why I wrote you the letters...”

“I want to know everything. Why did you write them, why did you decide to stay anonymous... How did you know what wine to buy me? All of it.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “You deserve to know everything... And I’ll tell you the whole story. I’m just trying to figure out the best place for me to start. I guess if I’m being perfectly honest, this all started before you even arrived in town.”

My eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing weird,” he quickly explained. “It wasn’t like I knew about you before then or anything. I had just, uh, set some goals for myself in regard to this summer.”

“Goals?”

“Yeah, I decided this was going to be the summer that I finally started to put myself back out there. And not necessarily in a romantic sense, just in general. Like I told you before, during the first couple years after I lost Francine, I really closed myself off from the world. I didn’t spend time with my friends, I stopped answering any work-related calls

unless I knew it was a true emergency, and I truthfully never thought I would find love again. I resolved myself to live as a widower, sad and alone, for the rest of my life.”

I drew back. “That’s... heavy.”

He laughed under his breath. “I know. It’s a real bummer. But don’t worry, I promise the story gets more uplifting. The thing you have to understand, though, is that after you lose a spouse, it can really feel like your life is over. That’s the head space I was in for what felt like forever.”

He brought his glass to his lips and drank. I said nothing, waiting for him to get to the uplifting part.

“Thankfully, after I went through the grieving process and started to think about what Francine would’ve wanted me to do with the time I had left,” he went on. “I realized I needed to make some changes. At the beginning of this year, I reached out to all my friends, and put up a sign in the coffee shop in town to let locals know that I would be offering free flying lessons. I really pushed myself to be a participating member of society again, and it felt great. As the days grew longer and the temperatures rose, I decided that I was going to keep this going for the whole summer. I knew there would be tourists coming to town, and I would have opportunities to meet new people. Make new friends. Then... you came along. And... Well, I don’t know exactly what happened.”

I laughed. “*You* don’t know what happened? No. I’m the one who doesn’t know what happened. At least *try* and explain it to me.”

“You’re right,” he said, laughing a little too. “I guess that wasn’t totally honest. I do know what happened, it just sounds so crazy to say it out loud. I saw you, the first day you were here I think it was, and it just hit me.”

“What hit you?”

“These—feelings. They were really powerful and unexpected, and next thing I knew, I was looking out my window, watching you watch the waves, and thinking you were one of the most beautiful creatures I’d ever laid eyes on.”

I looked down at my lap and took a sip of wine. I didn't know how to respond to that, so I simply chose not to. Gray continued.

“At first, my plan was to introduce myself and ask you out on a date,” he said. “You know, like a normal person would do.”

“What a novel idea.”

“I know, right?” We shared a quick smile, but then I looked away again. I didn't want him to see how much I was blushing. “But I chickened out at the last second. I spent more than twenty years with the same woman, never even thinking about pursuing someone else. Then I spent nearly five years swallowed up by my own pain and heartache. And even though I was doing better mentally, the idea of jumping into the deep end of the dating pool again after all this time was terrifying. I didn't know how to express myself, how to come off as cool, as someone you'd like to spend an evening with. So, I wrote it all down instead.”

“In a letter?”

“No,” he said. “Not at first. Originally, the plan was just to write it down and study what I'd written, and then try to hold onto those words when I came over here to talk to you in person. But then once I started writing, all this other stuff came out. I was no longer writing a guide to help me ask you out, I was writing a declaration of love.”

“So, I recall.”

“And I realized I couldn't say all of that to you! You would think I was a total weirdo! I stashed the letter in a drawer and tried to forget about it. But over time, those feelings grew stronger, and on a whim one night, I found myself putting the letter in an envelope and going to deliver it to your mailbox. Shortly after that, I had a little too much to drink and wrote you another letter, then dropped that one off before I could sober up and talk myself out of it.”

“And then the wine?” I asked with a raised brow. “What made you do that?”

“That was also a sort of spur of the moment thing,” he said. “I was at the store and I saw this nice bottle. I knew you liked red wine, so I decided to buy it and drop it off as a gift.”

“So... you didn’t know it was my favorite brand of wine?”

“It is?” He grinned. “How lucky.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said. “Which is why I gave you the signal to stop sending stuff after you dropped it off. I thought you were, like, I don’t know, watching me. I thought you’d maybe gone through my trash and seen that I’d drunk that wine before. It freaked me out a little.”

“Oh my god, no!” he said. “I wouldn’t do something like that. Sure, I saw you sitting outside every now and then, and I took note of the fact that you drank more red than white, but I swear, that’s it. I wasn’t keeping *that* close attention to what you did, and my intention was never to freak you out or make you uncomfortable.”

“I thought that was the case,” I said. “The fact that you gave me an option to stop the letters, and then respected that choice when I made it... I was pretty sure I knew your heart was in the right place. But yeah... the wine totally changed my perspective on the whole thing.”

“So does that mean... If I hadn’t sent the wine,” he said. “Or if I’d sent a kind that didn’t happen to be your favorite, would you have still told me to stop writing to you?”

I sighed. “Honestly... I’m not sure. I was feeling really torn for a while. On the one hand, I didn’t know who you were or what was going on, which definitely made me a little uncomfortable. But on the other hand, I can’t say the letters didn’t touch me. They were really beautifully written, and it’s been such a long time since someone has shown that kind of affection towards me. It felt nice.” I took a sip of my wine and then remembered something else I needed clarification on.

“But the other day,” I said. “When we were walking together, I asked you if you read Shakespeare... and you lied.”

He smiled, sheepishly, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. You’re right. That was a lie. I realized you were onto

me, and I panicked. I'm sorry. I felt awful about it when we parted ways that night. I should've been honest with you right then." He shook his head. "I really let this whole thing spiral totally out of my control, and I just hope we can find a way past it all."

"I think we can," I said. "But... just so we're on the same page, I should tell you that I'm really not looking for a relationship right now. Everything you wrote was amazing, and if I were in a different place in my life, then these romantic gestures would have me totally melting. Truly. But —"

"I get it," he said. "You just got divorced, and this is all happening too fast."

I smiled sadly. "I hope this doesn't discourage you from putting yourself out there. You've clearly got a lot of love to give, and you're going to make some woman very happy one day."

"Why does it sound like you're breaking up with me?" he said with a laugh.

"I just want us to be able to stay friends," I said. "And I need you to know that under different circumstances, you would be, like... my dream man."

He looked at me for a few seconds, then said, "Really?"

"Yeah, really," I said. "You're smart, and funny, and you know how to fly a plane! Not to mention, you're very, um... well... you know."

"Know what?"

"Just—that—you're cute. I mean, you have to know that, right?"

He grinned. "You think so?"

I suddenly felt as if I'd said way too much. I put my glass of wine down and opened my mouth to make up some sort of excuse to leave when he spoke first.

"I'm sorry the timing is off," he said. "But even though we can't be any more than friends, I just want to thank you."

“Thank me?”

“Yes,” he said. “As much as I hoped I would be able to get my life back together and find happiness again, I never really thought there was a chance I would fall for someone else. I thought that part of my life was in the past. But then I saw you, and I got to feel that astounding, unforgettable sensation again.”

“What sensation?”

“The sensation of falling in love,” he said, lowering his voice a little. “My heart skipped a beat every time I saw you and it was like I was walking on air after the first time we spoke. You showed me that I hadn’t locked the door to my heart. Not for good, anyway. And for that, I will always be so grateful.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

No man had ever spoken to me in such a real and romantic way before, and the feelings that were bubbling up inside of me were conflicting and overwhelming. Part of me wanted to pull Gray in for a kiss, while the other half of me was screaming ‘Run! Run!’

My head was commanding my body to stand up and walk away, while my heart felt weighted down with the beauty of this moment. Gray was looking back at me with his breathtaking green eyes, and I had just enough alcohol in my system to do something stupid.

But at the last second, my head won the battle against my heart.

“I have to go,” I said, getting to my feet and heading for the door. “Sorry. I just—have to go.”

Gray reached out and started to say my name, but I was already halfway through his house. If he said anything else, or continued to chase after me at all, I didn’t notice because I didn’t look back.

Not once.

Chapter Fifteen

I called Amanda the second I got back inside the house and had collected myself enough to think straight. She answered after the third ring, and I could hear the sound of waves crashing in the background of the call.

“Hey,” I said. “You got a minute to talk?”

“For you,” she said. “I’ve got a full five minutes. Why don’t you come outside and join me?”

I frowned and walked over to my backdoor. I looked out and saw Amanda sitting on the sand at the edge of my aunt’s property, waving. “How long have you been there?”

“No long,” she said. “I walked down from the public beach access and sat down literally right as you called me. I was about to send you a text to let you know I was lounging outside and could use some company.”

“From where you’re sitting, can you see if Gray is still out in his backyard?”

I watched Amanda glance over her shoulder and squint, putting her hand over her eyes to block out the rays from the early evening sun. “Uh, maybe? Yes! Yes, I see him. Why? Do you want me to call him over and see if he wants to join us too?”

“No!” I didn’t mean to yell, but there was no taking it back now. “No, don’t do that.”

“... What’s wrong? Did something happen between the two of you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “That’s why I called you to begin with. But if you want to hear the story, you have to come inside. I absolutely cannot risk seeing him right now, so I won’t be going outside in my backyard any time soon. Maybe not ever again.”

“Wow. Whatever happened must’ve been pretty dramatic if it made you feel this strongly about seeing him again.” She popped up and took off running towards the back door. “I’m coming to hear the story right now!”

I opened the door just as Amanda reached the porch, and she hurried inside with a flurry of nervous excitement. “Alright, I’m here.” She wheezed a few times, then seemed to catch her breath. “Tell me everything.”

“Living room,” I said, motioning with my head. She followed me and we both slumped down on the couch. I curled my legs up underneath me and prepared to start from the beginning. “Okay. It’s a good thing you’re sitting down for this because if you weren’t, you probably would’ve fallen over when I told you. Gray is the one who wrote the letters.”

“Uh huh, and?”

“What do you mean ‘uh huh, and?’! Aren’t you totally shocked?” I balked at her. “I was totally shocked when I found out.”

“Oh please,” Amanda said. “You couldn’t have been totally shocked. It was obviously him the whole time. I said as much at least twice, maybe even three times.”

“Don’t act like you knew all along,” I said. “Remember all that stuff I told you about the person who wrote the notes talked in a completely different way than Gray did? Or when I said that he told me he didn’t even like Shakespeare?”

“Yes, but that was hardly concrete evidence,” Amanda said. “Besides, who else could it really have been.”

I sat back on the couch and pouted. I knew I was being childish, but I couldn’t help it. I hated feeling like the truth had been in front of my eyes this whole time and that I had been too blind to see it. Admitting that I could’ve easily figured out

who my mystery admirer was if I'd allowed myself to go down that rabbit hole, made it harder for me to stay frustrated at Gray for trying to throw me off the scent in the first place.

"Well, fine," I said after a while. "So, you knew it was Gray. But *I didn't*! I believed him when he said he didn't read Shakespeare! I trusted that he would've told me if he had written the letters!"

"... If he didn't tell you, how'd you find out?"

"His dog got out of the yard earlier today," I explained. "And I caught her and brought her back to his house. His front door was ajar, so I may or may not have stuck my head in."

"You broke into his house!"

"Of course not! The door was open, I just said that."

"Yeah, but just because a door is open doesn't mean you can just go into someone else's house without permission. There's no way that would hold up in a court of law. You totally broke into his house." She smiled and put her hands up. "Not that I'm judging you or anything. I would've done the same thing. No doubt."

"Look, regardless of whether or not anyone broke into any houses, the point is, while I was standing in his entryway, I saw a stack of yellow envelopes. He caught me in the house, and I tried to run off before he could say anything, but I wasn't fast enough. He asked if we could talk, so I agreed to sit down and have a glass of wine with him and let him explain."

"And what did he say?"

"A lot of stuff... A lot of really, *really* romantic stuff."

"Oh my god, Cameron!" Amanda grinned. "This is amazing! I'm so happy for you. Does this mean there's something going on between you two now?"

I shook my head. "There can't be."

"Why not?" she cried out, sounding like a kid who had just been told she couldn't have an extra cookie after dinner. "I don't get it."

“It’s too much, too fast,” I said. “Remember when we were talking about him last night, and I said I didn’t want a rebound. You agreed with me! You said you didn’t think the timing was right either.”

“Yes, but that was *before* he admitted to writing the letters,” she said. “Now that we know for sure it’s him, that changes everything. Gray doesn’t just have a little crush on you. He *really* likes you. He might even love you. You can’t just walk away from something like that.”

“I can when I have other people I have to consider in all this. My son, for one.”

“Neal would understand,” Amanda said. “If you told him you met someone who made you happy, don’t you think he would support you moving on? He doesn’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone and miserable.”

“Maybe not,” she said. “But he also probably isn’t ready to hear that I’m going out with another man. That’s not fair to him and I won’t do it.”

“So, what then?” Amanda asked. “How exactly did you leave things with Gray?”

“I told him we could only be friends, and then... I sort of... ran away.”

“You ran away?”

“It was all too much!” I threw my hands up in the air and got off the couch to get some water. “It all happened so quickly, and he was just saying all this stuff that was nice, but also really intense. I got freaked out and started to feel like I couldn’t breathe. I just had to get out of there. So, I ran back over here, and that’s when I called you.”

Amanda sat back and whistled. “Sheesh. I guess that’s one way to tell a man you’re not interested in him. Just take off running in the opposite direction when he declares his love for you. Poor Gray.”

I filled a glass up from the sink and walked back into the other room. “Well, you don’t have to make me feel guilty about it. I did what I had to do, okay? And now that you’re all

filled in, can we just pretend like this whole thing with Gray never even happened? I'm hoping if I can avoid him for a couple weeks, maybe the awkwardness will melt away, and we can go back to just being neighbors. Maybe friends. But that's it."

Amanda laughed. "If you think it's only going to take Gray a couple weeks to get over his feelings for you and go back to just being your neighbor, then you and I were reading two different sets of letters."

I eyed her over my glass as I took a long sip, having no idea how to respond to that, but on some level, knowing she was right.

* * *

A little before 10 that night, Neal finally called me back. I was lying awake in bed, thinking about everything that had happened that day, and I bolted upright when I saw his name pop up on my phone screen.

"Hey honey!" I said excitedly when I answered the phone. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Neal said. His voice was a little quiet, but thankfully he didn't sound overly upset or angry. "How are you?"

"Better now that you called."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I'm sorry I took so long to get back to you. I was just going through a lot, and I didn't feel like talking about any of it. But now I'm ready. To talk about it, that is."

"You mean about the divorce?"

He laughed. "Uh, yeah mom. What else would I be referring to?"

I smiled. "You're right. Sorry. That was a dumb question. I'm just so happy to hear your voice that it's making me a little distracted. But yes, let's talk about it. I will answer any

questions you have, or if you just want to tell me what you've been feeling, that's good too."

"I guess I have some questions," he said. "But mainly I just want to know what happened. I knew you and dad didn't have a perfect marriage, but I truly thought the two of you were happy. I never thought things had gotten so bad that you were thinking about separating."

"You know, sweetie," I said, choosing my words very carefully. I wanted to tell Neal the truth, but what I didn't want was to make his father out to be the bad guy in all this. "I can't say for certain what happened in our relationship. Things started to fall apart a long time ago, but it happened slowly. Over the course of the last few years, your father and I drifted apart, and I think by the time either of us noticed how much distance there really was between us, it was too late. He was the one who ultimately asked for the divorce, but in the weeks since, I've come to realize it's what is best for me as well. It's what's best for all of us."

"So, you guys aren't going to try to work it out at all? I've been reading some stuff online, and a lot of people have great success with couples counseling."

I smiled sadly. "No, Neal. I don't think we're going to try anything like that. I know this might be a little hard for you to hear, but I hope it will help you understand why we've come to the decision that we have. In the time since your father served me with the papers, we've both really been enjoying our time apart. It was hard at first, naturally, but it didn't take very long for either of us to start living our own lives again, and it felt really good. I for one haven't felt this happy, this excited for the future, in a long time. And I can tell the same goes for your dad. If we tried to make it work now, we'd just be forcing it, and I think that would only lead to an even uglier divorce further down the line."

Neal was quiet for a moment or two.

"You still there, bud?"

"Yeah, I'm here." He sniffled. "And I appreciate you telling me the truth. I understand what you're saying, and I

would definitely prefer for you and dad to end things on a good note rather than see either of you go through something as rough as a bad divorce.”

“Thank you sweetie. That means a lot.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m happy about any of this.”

“I don’t expect you to be,” I said. “Not this soon after finding out.”

“I want you and dad to be okay,” he said. “And if this really is the right decision, then I guess I’m glad the two of you were brave enough to make such a hard choice... but it still just really sucks.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “But thankfully we can keep talking about this, keep processing. I hope you’re going to call your dad back soon as well. He’s been just as worried about you as I’ve been.”

“Yeah, he’s next on the list.”

“Good.”

We were silent for a short while. I wished more than anything that I could somehow travel through the phone and give my son a hug. “Hey, you have a break between your summer classes and the start of your fall semester, right?”

“I think so, why?”

“Maybe you could come to the beach house and spend some time here before you go back to school! I’m telling you, it’s a great place to clear your mind and relax.”

“Sounds nice. I’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Well, I better call dad before it gets too late. I love you mom.”

I hiccupped as tears welled up in my eyes. “I love you too, Neal. Thanks for calling.” We hung up the phone, and when I laid my head down to rest moments later, a blissful sleep came easily and effortlessly.

Chapter Sixteen

The following weekend, I was sitting in the living room reading a novel I'd found dogeared in a drawer of my aunt's bedside table. I guessed it was the book she'd been reading before she passed away, and in an attempt to feel more connected to her, I picked it up one day and was immediately sucked in. It was an old paperback from the 70s, with a tattered cover and a story that just kept getting crazier and crazier. I was only fifteen pages from the end, totally engrossed in the culmination of wild events, when someone knocked on my door. Without even looking up from the pages, I went to the entryway and opened it, expecting my visitor to be Amanda because nobody else ever came to see me.

"Hey," I said before even tearing my eyes from the paragraph I was on. "Just one second. I'm almost done with this section."

"Take your time."

The voice was smooth and deep and definitely not Amanda's. My head snapped up and I let out a little surprised yelp when I saw Gray standing on the front porch instead. "Oh, hi." I turned down the corner of my page and tossed the book over my shoulder onto the couch. "I didn't know it was you. Sorry, that must've seemed so rude."

He laughed. "That's okay. I know what it's like to be engrossed in a good book." He pointed to where I'd thrown the paperback. "What's that one about?"

"Nothing really," I said. I pushed some hair out of my face and tried not to think about the sexy scene I'd just been

devouring, in which the two lovers were finally reunited after months apart. “And I wouldn’t say it’s a good book, just an okay book, and I don’t think it would really be your thing. It’s *very* different from Shakespeare.” I laughed awkwardly and then saw that Gray was holding a picnic basket behind his back. “What’s that about?”

“Oh right!” He smiled and brought the basket in front of him. “I came by to see if you’d like to go up in my plane. I was planning on taking it out, and packed myself some lunch, and then realized I packed way too much food for just one person.”

I raised a brow. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “It was a total accident. But a happy one, I would say. Anyway, I didn’t want this food or this beautiful day to go to waste, so I thought I would come see if you were busy.”

“I—uh—” I looked over my shoulder as if a task or some other plans would manifest behind me while I searched my brain for a believable excuse. “I’m not sure that I can. I’ve got some, uh, cleaning to do, and I might’ve even made plans with Amanda already, I can’t remember...”

“Cameron,” he said, and I looked back at him. “I hope you know; I’m just inviting you as a friend. I have a lot more fun when I fly with other people, and I’d already promised you I would take you up one of these days, so... why not today?” I hesitated, and in that time, he went on pleading his case. “I swear, I have no ulterior motives. You made yourself very clear the other night, but I thought it would be nice for the two of us to at least try to be friends despite everything. We are neighbors after all, and if you’re going to be coming back to Sunfall Key a lot, I think it only makes sense that we dispel the awkwardness as soon as we can. Don’t you?”

I shifted from one foot to the other and then nodded. “Yes, no, of course. You’re right. We should totally try to be friends, and I don’t even think there’s that much awkwardness. I would love to go up in your plane.” But even as I said this, I could feel the tension pushing down on my body, and a little voice in

the back of my head was screaming, 'No! Don't do it! It's a mistake'.

I hushed that voice and told Gray to wait while I went upstairs to change. Not only was Gray a trustworthy guy, but I considered myself to be a very capable, smart woman, who wasn't going to get swept up in the moment. I had a slight fear of flying anyway, so I would likely be too distracted by my nerves to feel anything else.

In my room, I threw on one of the few sundresses I owned, which was black with white flowers on it, and came to just pass my knees. I paired that with some sandals and snatched the sunglasses that Amanda had left there the day before. She wouldn't mind if I borrowed them. I took a moment to look at myself in the mirror, and for the first time in a long time, I felt really cute. Attractive even. Then I frowned at my reflection and whispered, "What am I doing? It doesn't matter what I look like! I'm just going out with a friend."

I turned on my heel and marched away from the mirror. Downstairs, Gray was patiently waiting for me by the open front door. "Ready?"

"Yup! Let's do it."

He smiled and led the way to his car, and soon enough, we were driving over to the seaside hangar just a few miles outside of town. We parked, and then he led the way towards a row of many different airplanes, all of various shapes and sizes. As we walked, I wondered which one was his and secretly hoped it wasn't the dingy looking plane in the back corner with chipped paint.

"You've been awfully quiet," he said as he came to a stop in front of that very one. "Are you nervous?"

"Truthfully? Yes. A little."

"It's going to be fine. I know what I'm doing, and I've taken this baby up for this exact journey hundreds of times. I could do it with my eyes closed."

"Please don't."

He laughed. “Really, you’ve got nothing to worry about.” He walked over and slapped the side of the plane and grinned. As he hit the metal, there came a concerning groaning sound from somewhere inside the flying deathtrap.

“I didn’t like the sound of that,” I said. “Maybe this was a mistake. I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

“No, wait!” He hurried over to me as I started to back away. “That sound was nothing. Don’t get me wrong, this plane is definitely a little old, but that’s a good thing. She’s solid, and her mechanisms are really simple and straightforward, which means it’ll be super easy for me to show you how she runs.”

“I—I never agreed to a flying lesson.” I put my hands up. “And I reserve the right to go back on my agreement to go up in the air at all.”

He reached for one of my hands and the moment his fingers curled around mine, my breath caught in my chest. “Cameron,” he said, and the way he spoke my name made me feel immediately more safe and secure. “I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. I won’t make you fly the plane, and of course, you don’t even have to go up if you don’t want to. *But* I also want you to know that if you do decide to come with me, I won’t let anything happen to you. I swear.”

I finished sucking in the breath that had stopped halfway to my lungs and then let it out slowly. I stared into Gray’s beautiful eyes, and he ran his thumb along my knuckles a few times. I exhaled and then nodded, pulling my hand away before I could get too comfortable with touching the feeling of being so near to him. “Okay. I’ll go.”

He beamed. “Thank you for trusting me.”

I looked down at my feet and shrugged. “Yeah, well, I really just don’t want to miss out on the island picnic. That’s all.”

* * *

I gripped the edge of my seat as Gray picked up speed going down the airstrip and then suddenly, the plane's wheels lifted off the pavement, and we were climbing up towards the clear blue sky. The sun was shining overhead, and I soon enough found the courage to look down through the side window and watch as the ground below us got further and further away. I gasped as a moment of fright took me over, but then Gray straightened out the plane, and everything seemed to settle. The engine was no longer roaring, and the ride became surprisingly very smooth.

“How was that?” he asked. “Did I go slow enough?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that was okay. Not too jarring.”

“Good,” he said. “Glad to hear it. Now, just sit back and relax. We've got just about thirty minutes to go before I have to start getting ready to land.” He flipped a few of the switches and pressed a little green button by his steering wheel and then sat back in his seat.

“Is it on autopilot now?”

“Yes ma'am,” he said. “But don't worry. I never actually let my guard down when I'm up in the air. I always keep one hand on the wheel and my eyes peeled for anything unexpected.”

My eyes widened. “What do you mean unexpected? What could happen up here that's unexpected?”

He winced. “Poor word choice. Forget I said that. Nothing unexpected is going to happen. We are perfectly safe. Just—hey—look at me.” He must've noticed I was starting to panic as I gazed around at the small, enclosed space which was now starting to feel very suffocating. “Look at me.”

I did.

“It's okay,” he said when our eyes met. “We are totally fine. And we can turn back at any time if you want. Just try to breathe. I'll do it with you.”

We both breathed in and out at the same time once, twice, and on the third one, I started to feel a little more secure. I

pressed my shoulders back into the seat and stared at the open sky straight ahead. "I don't need to turn back. I'm fine."

"Would it make you feel better if I showed you how to operate some stuff?" he asked. "Just so you knew what was going on, instead of feeling like you were totally at the mercy of this rickety old machine."

I frowned and thought about this for a second. "Yeah, actually. I think that would help. I don't want to be in charge of anything, but I guess learning about what all the buttons do would be nice knowledge to have."

"Alright then. Well, first things first, let's start with the basics. This is the steering wheel."

I laughed. "I knew that one already, but okay. What else?"

"This is the altitude indicator," he said. "You want to keep your eye on this to make sure you're not going too far out of range. Planes like this can't climb too high, but it's also very unsafe to fly too close to the ground. Plus, it's a little rude if you're flying over a populated area."

"But we're just over the water right now," I said. "So, does that mean we can go at any height we want?"

"Not really," he said. "But we could get a little closer to the water if you wanted. Not that you'd really be able to see much. One time, I saw what I thought might've been a whale breaching when I was coming in for a landing and was just above the water for the last 100 feet or so of my descent, but thinking back on it later, it couldn't have been. Those waters were too shallow. But I've had friends tell me they've seen dolphins jumping out the waves and whales coming up for air from a distance."

I took another look out the side window down at the dark blue ocean below. "I don't think my eyesight is good enough to catch anything from this height."

"Yeah, me neither. Not to mention, I forgot my glasses."

I shot him a look of sheer terror. "What?"

He grinned back at me. "Sorry, that was a joke."

I slapped him on the arm. “Why would you do that to me?” But as I scolded him, I started to laugh. “I was just about to start screaming my head off!”

He chuckled along with me. “I know, I know. The moment I said it, I knew it wasn’t a nice thing to do. I won’t make any more jokes like that I promise.”

I sighed and shook my head at him. “And you said you wanted us to be friends. Friends don’t give each other heart attacks; in case you didn’t know.”

“Fair enough,” he said, flashing me a quick smile, then facing forward once again. “No more jokes. Let’s just get back to the lesson.”

Chapter Seventeen

Gray landed the plane almost exactly thirty minutes later on this small, secluded island. It wasn't too far from the mainland, and in fact, I could see the Florida coast off to the East if I squinted and cupped my hand over my forehead. "Did we go North?" I asked as he helped me out of the plane.

"Yeah," he said. "We were going North most of the time. We're really just a hop, skip, and a jump from the mainland, which should also make you feel better. Even if my plane ran out of gas or something, we could probably just swim back. Just have to look out for sharks."

I frowned at him. "I thought we agreed you weren't going to make jokes like that anymore."

"That was the last one," he said, running his finger across his chest. "Cross my heart. Now, follow me. There's this perfect little patch of sand on this side of the island, it's not too rocky. I say we lay our blanket out there and eat."

"Sounds good to me."

I followed him down to the shoreline, and then helped him spread the blanket out, being careful not to let too much sand get on it. We put two rocks down in opposite corners so the breeze wouldn't blow the edges of the blanket up, and then took a seat. Gray placed the picnic basket between us and started to unload all the goodies. He'd brought cheese and bread, olives, some sliced prosciutto, and a bottle of sparkling wine. He'd also thought to bring a container of ice water and a couple brownies.

“Can you drink if you’re going to be flying us back?”

“No,” he said. “That’s just for you. If you want any.”

I narrowed my eyes. “When you dropped by my house, you said you packed too much food *by accident*, but if you were never intended to drink the wine anyway, what’s it doing in the basket?”

“Alright, fine, you caught me,” he said, acting like the two of them didn’t both know all along what his true plans had been. “I never intended on going up in the plane by myself. I was very much counting on you agreeing to come with me.”

“I knew it.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly trying to hide it,” he said with a laugh. “To be honest, I’m really not interested in keeping anything from you anymore. I learned my lesson about keeping secrets, and I’m done doing anything sneaky.”

“Hmm,” I said, grabbing the wine bottle and twisting off the metal top. “I’ll believe it when I see it...”

“Hey, as long as you keep giving me chances like this to prove myself to you, you will see it.” He looked at me as I poured the wine into the plastic, stemless cup he retrieved from the basket for me. “I really want us to get to know each other better. Again—just as friends.”

I brought the glass up to my mouth and sipped. The wine was crisp and refreshing, and the sun overhead was warming up my skin and putting me in a good, trusting mood, so I smiled after putting my glass down and said, “I would like that too. You can never have too many friends.”

* * *

We ended up spending most of the afternoon together on the island, chatting and enjoying the stunning day. As the hours stretched on, however, the heat started to get to me, and during one of the rare lulls in our conversation, I stood up and kicked my shoes off and headed towards the water’s edge. I let the waves crash over my feet and ankles, and then brought my

hands down to cup some water and then carried it up over my head. Gray laughed as I got my hair and face soaking wet, but I didn't care. What was the point of being right next to the ocean if you weren't going to take advantage of the refreshment it has to offer on a hot day?

Gray joined me a few seconds later and waded in up to his knees.

"This island truly is gorgeous," I said.

"I know." He nodded. "Everywhere around Sunfall Key is." He glanced back at me. "You want to hear something crazy?"

I smiled. "Sure."

"After I first lost Francine, I thought about moving away from the coast."

"Really?"

"Yup," he said. "The beach reminded me too much of her, and I started to really resent all the things I used to love about living in a place like Sunfall Key. I thought about selling my house and buying a shack somewhere in the woods, far away from people and miles and miles from the ocean. I thought that might make me feel better, that I might miss her less." He put his hands on his hips and looked out at the horizon. "I'm so glad I didn't actually pull the trigger and leave."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I eventually just realized that I was going to miss Francine no matter where I lived. It wouldn't matter if I was by the ocean or not, I would still encounter tons of things that reminded me of her, so there really wasn't any point in leaving my home, walking away from all my friends and family. After that, I tried to find the good in having all those reminders around. I turned my perspective around, and let the stuff that Francine used to love put a smile on my face, because I could remember how happy it used to make her."

"That's really beautiful, Gray," I said. "But I'm sorry you were ever in so much pain that you felt you needed to leave

your home just to try to get away from it. That sounds really awful.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Of course, it was hard at first, but life goes on, and the pain subsides. Nowadays, even when I feel like I’m really missing Francine, it doesn’t hurt like it used to. I still get sad, but... it’s different.”

I simply nodded, but refrained from suggesting that I understood what he was going through. I knew what it was like to lose people, and even though I’d been very close to my Susan, I knew that her death was nothing like losing a spouse.

“Sorry for bringing the mood down,” he said a few seconds later.

“No, you didn’t,” I assured him. “I actually like hearing you talk about Francine. She seems like someone I would’ve gotten along with had I been given the chance to meet her.”

“Yeah, I think you would’ve liked her,” he agreed. “And I *know* she would’ve liked you.”

“You know, I never got the chance to tell you how much I loved that painting she did. When I brought Terra back to your house the other day and was in your entryway, I stood there staring at it for a long time. It’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t it? That one was always my favorite piece she did.”

“Did you guys use to walk along the beach a lot?”

He nodded and smiled over his shoulder. “Every single night.”

Chapter Eighteen

When Gray dropped me off at the house later that day, Amanda was waiting for me on the front porch. I'd locked up all the doors when Gray and I left, not knowing how long we were going to be gone and didn't have reliable cell service on the island so I also missed a few texts and calls from her. I ran up the steps when I noticed she was there waiting for me and apologized right away.

"Shoot, Amanda, I'm so sorry! Did we have plans?" I'd said that earlier as a possible excuse to get out of going in Gray's plane, but now I had to wonder if we really did set something up that slipped my mind.

"No," she said, and her tone sounded as cheerful as could be.

Oh good, she's not mad.

She got up and gazed over my shoulder. "Not officially that is. I just came around to see why you weren't answering the phone, but now I understand." She shot me a knowing smile. "You were busy."

"Gray and I just hung out for a little while *as friends*," I said, going past her to open the door. "It was nice, but I'm glad to be home and back on solid land."

"What do you mean back on solid land?"

"He took me in his plane," I said, walking through to the kitchen to get myself a glass of water. "We went and had a picnic on this little island. It was nice, and super relaxing." I

turned around from the sink to see Amanda standing there frowning at me. “What?”

“I’m so confused. First, you say that you need to stay away from Gray and that you can’t be anything more than neighbors, but then he invites you on a romantic trip to a secluded island for a picnic and you say yes? What am I missing here?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I said. “He just wanted to clear the air, and he was going up in his plane anyway, so I just tagged along. Seriously. No big deal.”

Amanda folded her arms. “Are you sure you’re not just hiding the truth from me because you don’t want me to say ‘I told you so’? Because if that’s the case, I promise, I won’t gloat. Just tell me you have feelings for Gray, and I swear, I won’t say anything snarky.”

“I don’t have feelings for Gray!” I laughed. “I’m serious, Amanda, it’s not like that. And if you’re really so convinced that there’s more to the story, then let me tell you this, we spent most of our time together talking about his late wife! He clearly still thinks about her all the time and hearing him talk about Francine made me even more sure that I’m making the right choice here. Gray and I are just friends, and I would really appreciate it if you could just be happy about that because I don’t have that many friends and the whole point of coming to Sunfall Key this summer was to have fun and not stress so much.”

“Am I stressing you out?”

“No,” I said. “But if you keep questioning everything I do with Gray or everything I say to him, then you will start to stress me out.”

“So, you’d rather me just keep my mouth shut, is that what you’re saying?”

I could tell from the shift in Amanda’s tone that I might’ve actually said something to hurt her feelings, which was absolutely not my intention. I put my water glass down and walked around to the other side of the kitchen island where she

was standing. “I would never tell you to keep your mouth shut,” I said. “I don’t want that. Not at all. It’s just that everything is complicated enough as is...”

She raised a brow. “What does that mean? What’s so complicated?”

“Navigating my life through all these major changes,” I said. “A lot has happened to me and my family the last few months, and when I got here, I really just wanted to simplify everything. But then I started getting those letters, and you started telling me that I was in the middle of some epic love story, and next thing I know, the cute guy who lives next door is taking me up in his plane! It’s all just so unexpected, and I’m trying my best to keep my eyes on the road and keep doing what’s best for me, but that’s really hard to do when you’re always saying I should be doing something different!”

Amanda pursed her lips, but then the frown fell from her face and she dropped her arms. “Ugh, okay, I see your point.”

I laughed. “If you see my point, why does it sound like you’re still angry with me?”

“I’m not angry with you. I’m just frustrated because a few seconds ago, I was in the right, and now I feel like I’m in the wrong and that’s a terrible feeling.”

I pulled her in for a hug. “You’re not in the wrong. I always want you to tell me what you think, and what you’re feeling, but I also need you to trust me when I tell you what I want to do, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “That’s a fair trade.” We pulled apart. “Let’s just forget I said anything about it being a date and just tell me what *you* think about Gray and the day you two spent together.”

“I think—I think that Gray is a really great guy,” I said. “And that he probably was a wonderful husband, and if he and I had met decades ago, or if perhaps we meet again a few years from now, maybe there could be something between us. But right now, he just has to be the nice man who lives next door. That’s it.”

Amanda nodded. “The nice man who lives next door who used to write you love letters.”

I smirked. “Yeah, okay, if you want to be technical about it. Gray is the nice man who lives next door, who used to write me love letters but now is totally over me and just wants to be my friend.”

Amanda opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said, waving her hand in the air nonchalantly. “I’m doing what you asked, and not questioning everything you say. Starting now, I am going to let you get away with saying stuff, even when I think it’s totally bananas.”

I had to laugh. I hooked my arm through hers and started heading for the sliding back door. “C’mon,” I said. “Enough about my day with Gray. Let’s go sit outside and you can tell me the latest gossip going on with your coworkers.”

Amanda grinned. “Oh, you know just what to say to get me to change the subject, don’t you? But okay, I actually do have some hot gossip. Do you remember that cute substitute teacher I told you about? The one that always used to flirt with me but never ended up asking me out. Well, he found me on social media, and we’ve been messaging nonstop for like three days straight.”

“What? How did you wait so long to tell me this!”

“It wasn’t easy! But why do you think I sat on your porch like some sort of lost puppy waiting for you! I had big news. And I need you to read through all of our messages and tell me if you think he’s a keeper or not.”

“But didn’t you say you’ve been messaging nonstop for days? How many messages are there?”

“Hundreds,” she said. “Which is why you gotta’ start reading right now!” She took her phone out of her pocket as we stepped outside onto the patio. “Oh wait, I already got a new message. At this rate, it’s going to take forever for you to catch up.”

I smiled. “Luckily, I’ve got nothing else to do today, so hand over that phone.”

* * *

Over the next few weeks, Gray dropped by on a regular basis to see if I wanted to tag along on any more of his adventures. Most of the time, I said yes. I didn’t have much else going on, and the things Gray invited me to do often sounded fun and exciting. We went snorkeling one day, and then on a trip to a local nature preserve that was breathtaking. Two weeks after our first trip in his plane, he asked me to go up in the air with him again, and this time he gave me a more formal flying lesson. I even took over the steering for a few seconds, but then I quickly asked him to take control again so that I wouldn’t have a panic attack in the sky.

One night, at the beginning of August, he told me a friend of his had opened up a new restaurant and that he was going to see the place and show his support. When he first asked me if I’d like to join him for dinner, I said I would have to think about it. The whole thing sounded all around too romantic, and I had been having a hard enough time as it was trying to keep things platonic between us.

Ever since I found out Gray had written those letters to me; I’d started to see him in a different light. There was something so intriguing about a man who wrote down his feelings in such a way and shared them with someone he hardly even knew. Not to mention, it was really nice knowing that someone could still think about me like that in the first place. Even if those feelings were now gone, the fact that he’d felt them at all made me feel so special.

And as much as I insisted that there was nothing going on between us and that we were both equally devoted to just moving on as friends, that didn’t stop me from dreaming of him almost every single night. My affection for him only grew the more time we spent together, and on some level, I knew each time I said yes to one of his invites, I was digging myself deeper and deeper into this hole, but I didn’t care.

Now, however, I was less than two weeks out from when my son was scheduled to come visit me in Sunfall Key, and I was finally starting to realize just how foolish I'd been. I couldn't go out to dinner with Gray, and we had to stop spending the day together, or sitting on my porch in the evenings drinking wine. I had to pull back now, before things got too serious.

So, I ultimately said I couldn't go to dinner. Then, when he came around just half an hour before his reservation at the restaurant, wearing a nice suit and smelling of nice cologne, I held strong and told him once more that I wouldn't be able to make it.

"Yeah, of course," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "I understand. I just thought I'd double check before I drove into town, in case your other plans got canceled or something." As he said this, he glanced down at my paint-stained sweatpants and bare feet. It was painfully obvious that I didn't have anything important going on that night, and I cursed myself for not having come up with a better excuse originally than just saying, "I'm busy."

"Look, Gray," I started to say. I didn't see a reason to drag this out any longer. I needed to break things off with him, completely, and it would only get harder the longer I waited. "I've had a lot of fun with you these past few weeks. Like, *a lot* of fun."

He smiled. "I have too."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "And I want you to know how much I appreciate that you've been inviting me on all these wonderful adventures, and showing me all the amazing things Sunfall Key and the surrounding area has to offer but..." I trailed off.

"But what?"

God, why is this so hard?

"But I—I don't know if we should be spending this much time together." Some of the words stuck in my throat as I tried

to speak, but eventually I managed to get the whole statement out. Gray was quiet for a few seconds.

“Did I do something?” he asked after a while. “I know you were a little uncomfortable at first, worried that I was inviting you to hang out because I still had feelings for you or something, but I thought I’d been doing a pretty good job of just keeping things totally non-romantic.”

“You have been!” I said. And it was true. Not once since we started hanging out had Gray done or said anything that would lead me to think he was flirting or trying to make me fall for him. That was actually one of the reasons I ended up falling for him anyway. I was so grateful that he wasn’t putting any pressure on me and impressed by his ability to stay true to his word. It made him all the more attractive. “You’ve been a perfect gentleman, as cheesy as that sounds. That’s... that’s part of the problem.”

He frowned. “How do you mean?”

I bit my bottom lip and contemplated how honest I wanted to be at that moment. But when I saw the look of concern in Gray’s eyes, and when I thought about how good he’d been to me these last few weeks, I knew I couldn’t hold back. He deserved to know the truth.

“Gray, the real issue is that *I* think I’m starting to have feelings for *you*,” I said. “I’m not entirely sure when they came about, or if there was anything I could’ve done to avoid this from happening, but I woke up not too long ago from a dream in which we were walking on the beach holding hands... sort of like that painting your wife did of you and her. And I found myself desperately trying to go back to sleep so I could return to that dream world, and that’s when I knew.”

“Knew... what?”

“That I had fallen for you.”

Gray smiled, and his eyebrows shot upwards on his forehead. He was surprised to hear this, and I couldn’t blame him. I was surprised to be saying it. “Wow. Of all the things I thought you were going to say when I came over here tonight,

this was not on the list. I expected you to say no to dinner, maybe even tell me it was inappropriate that I invited you in the first place... but this. Not in a million years would I have guessed this was going to happen.”

“Yeah, well, the feelings caught me a little off guard too.”

“But—what I don’t understand is why this means we have to stop seeing each other. I mean, if you have feelings for me, and I have feelings for you—”

“We can’t,” I interrupted him.

“Can’t what?”

“Can’t even think about going down that road,” I said. “My son is going to be coming to see me soon, and he would be absolutely devastated if he found out that I was dating someone already. It would crush him, and I won’t let that happen.”

“What if we took things slow?” he asked. “Your son wouldn’t have to know anything was going on right away. We would wait to tell him. We would see where this thing went, and if we ended up getting serious further down the line, *then* you could tell him.”

“No,” I said. “He would know I was lying.”

“I never said you should lie, I just—”

“Gray, I said no.”

He took a step back as my voice rose a little. “I heard you,” he said softly. I could tell I’d hurt him, and it broke my heart to see the look on his face. “I just thought we should look at the situation from all angles...”

“I get it, but trust me, I’ve already thought about it, and this is the only way I can protect my kid,” I said. As much as I hated seeing him like this, as much as I wanted to take it all back and leap into his arms, I had to stick to my guns. “I need you to respect my decision. We can’t see each other anymore. At all.”

“At all? Is that really necessary?”

I nodded and fought back tears. “I’m afraid so. If we don’t walk away now, we’re only going to make things harder on ourselves in the future.”

“Is this really just about your son?”

For some reason, I wasn’t expecting this question, even though it was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask. I sighed and leaned my shoulder into the side of the doorway. “Yes,” I said. “It’s mostly about him. It’s about making sure that my relationship with Neal stays strong throughout this tough time. If you were a parent, you would understand.”

I knew it was a little unfair, underlining my point by playing the parent card, but it was also true. I would do anything for Neal, and after everything me and Michael had already put him through, I owed it to my son to put his needs first for the time being.

I was protecting Neal.

But also, I was protecting myself.

Realizing that I had feelings for Gray should’ve been a happy occasion, but instead, it was a terrifying one. I sat up in bed after struggling to return to my dream, and immediately felt like someone had poured a bucket of cold water all over me. My muscles tensed up and my heart started to pound, and I was launched into fight or flight mode. I felt this overwhelming urge to run away, to put as much distance between Gray and I as possible, so that he couldn’t get the chance to break my heart. So maybe just then I was being a little disingenuous when I insinuated that this whole thing was just about Neal, but I couldn’t find the courage to tell him what else I was feeling.

“Okay,” he said eventually, not looking me in the eye. “I’ve received the message. Loud and clear. I won’t come around anymore. I hope you have a nice visit with your son.” He didn’t sound angry at me, but I could tell he wanted to get out of there nonetheless.

“Take care, Gray,” I said, reaching for the door.

He nodded and turned to walk away. “You too.”

I shut the door without saying another word and that was it.

Chapter Nineteen

Amanda did her best to keep my spirits up in the days that followed, and even went so far as to help me clean and get the house ready for Neal's visit before he arrived. He ended up only being able to stay for a few days, and then he had to return back to campus to get ready for his fall classes.

We did, thankfully, get to spend quite a bit of quality time together, however, and it felt nice to reconnect with my son after two very long, emotional months. He told me that his relationship with his dad was also getting better, and that day by day he was starting to feel less sad about the divorce. When I said goodbye to him the morning he had to leave, he hugged me for longer than usual.

"I love you, mom," he said.

I teared up. "I love you too."

When we broke apart, he looked up at the house behind me and smiled. "This place is really nice, and you seem really happy here. I think you should really think about sticking around even once the summer is over."

I laughed. "I'm not sure that's really up to me. Technically, I was supposed to be back at work by now. I'm lucky I haven't already been fired. Ronda managed to find me a few extra vacation days, but if I don't report back to her soon, or at least give her some sort of ETA in regard to when I'm going to be back at the hospital, she's probably going to have to hire a permanent replacement."

“Would that be such a bad thing?” he asked. “Do you even want to go back to that job?”

I frowned. “Well, sure. It’s a good job, and even though I worked a lot of long hours, I enjoyed myself most of the time. This summer has been a nice getaway, but I have missed my work.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But you could find a similar job in the area, couldn’t you? Live in this house and go to work in town.” He shrugged. “Could be something to consider.”

I made no promises, and since Neal really did need to hit the road, he didn’t dally just to argue his point further. I waved goodbye as he drove off, and then when I turned to go back inside, I noticed Gray was standing on his porch rifling through his mail. He looked up and saw me, and I waved. It appeared as if he smiled, but it was hard to know for sure from that distance. Either way, he didn’t wave back, and he went inside without saying anything. I sighed and hurried inside my own house, carrying a weight on my shoulders that hadn’t been there before.

Throughout the rest of that morning, I thought some more about what Neal said, but eventually laughed it off as a crazy idea. I couldn’t stay here. Amanda would be heading back home to start the school year in just a couple days, at which point I wouldn’t have anyone left in Sunfall Key to hang out with. I could try to go into town more, to make new friends, but to what end? So that I could stay here, living next door to a man I really liked but who I had to stay away from?

The thought depressed me, and so I decided to put it out of my mind.

I washed the dishes and tidied up the rest of the kitchen, then texted Amanda to see if she wanted to come over and have some wine. I didn’t mention that I was in a bad mood or that I needed a distraction, but perhaps she picked up on that anyway, because she texted back right away saying, “Already out the door!”

* * *

After Amanda left, that's when things took a turn for the worse.

I stopped going for walks on the beach.

I stopped having wine on my back porch and watching the sunsets.

Similar to how Gray told me he started to resent all the aspects of Sunfall Key that used to make him happy before his wife died, I began to avoid doing all the activities that had brought me joy at the beginning of the summer. This stemmed not only from my need to avoid any further contact with Gray, but also simply because I was just feeling very emotionally drained. Amanda was back home, Neal was so busy with schoolwork and fall orientation activities that he hardly ever picked up the phone, and Ronda had stopped CC'ing me on hospital emails.

My blissful, carefree summer was coming to an end, and I felt as if I had nothing to show for it. Sure, my aunt's house was fixed up and I would be leaving it cleaner than how I found it, but what good was that going to do anyone? I most likely wouldn't be back in Sunfall Key until much later in the year, and that was even assuming I could get the time off after taking such an extended vacation, so who cared how clean the place was?

Once I locked the house up and left, it would be sitting empty and collecting dust for months. Maybe even years.

And what would I be doing?

After nearly three months in paradise, after walking away from my old life and trying to find myself, I still had no idea what direction I was headed. I couldn't stay in Sunfall Key, but I also couldn't just go back home and fall into the same rut I was in before. I remembered when I first arrived in this small, seaside town, when I first stepped foot into my aunt's perfect little beach cottage, I had such high hopes for what was to come.

Flash forward to the end of the season, and I was feeling nothing but disappointment and listlessness.

That was enough to bring me down as is, but then, something terrible happened.

The AC went out.

It happened on a Wednesday evening, smack dab in the middle of the hottest week of the summer so far. I'd been sitting in the living room with my feet on the coffee table, trying to distract myself from my own sorrows by watching some god-awful reality TV show, and all the sudden, I heard a click, and then a clunk. I sat up, because even though the first sound had been a familiar one—it was the sound the AC always made when it was taking a break—the second sound was definitely not something I was prepared for. Since I didn't know the first thing about air conditioning, however, I just decided I would wait a little while and see if the darn thing came back on without me having to do anything. But as I waited, the temperature in the house started to climb, and by the time my reality show was over, I was starting to sweat.

Cursing under my breath, I got up to go fiddle around with the thermostat, but that of course did nothing. It wasn't too late in the evening, so I gave Tilly a call to see if she had any advice. She answered the shop phone right away.

“Hello, this is Rodger's Hardware store. I would ask how I could help you today, but we are about to close in just a minute or two, so maybe you should think about calling back tomorrow.”

“Hey Tilly,” I said. “It's Cameron. Remember me?”

“Oh, hey Cameron!” She sounded excited to hear from me, which put a smile on my face for the first time all day. “How are you? I haven't seen you since last month when you dropped by for another gallon of paint.”

“I know,” I said. “Sorry I haven't been in to say hi recently. I finished up all the housing projects and have been pretty busy lately. My son came to visit and before that I was—uh—just hanging out with some friends. Anyway, I hate to call

so late, and I know you're closing up shop soon, but my AC just called it quits and seeing as it's still 92 degrees out, I was really hoping I wouldn't have to spend the whole night in a sauna. Any chance you, or your dad, or your uncle Jerry could come around and take a look?"

She sucked air through her teeth and I had a feeling that meant she had some bad news for me. "Sorry, my friend, but dad's outta town and Jerry's retired."

"Retired?" I balked. "But he was just here fixing my facet a couple months ago."

"Don't I know it. The family was just as shocked as you were when a few weeks ago he told everyone he was hanging up his toolbelt. He said something about how he didn't want to keep working until the day he died, and you know something else, he mentioned your aunt Susan."

"He did?"

"Yeah, he said that he admired how she'd lived her life to the fullest all the way up until the end, and that he wanted to do a little bit more of that while he still had the energy to. So yeah, he retired and has been spending pretty much every day down at the community center talking to tourists and seeing if anyone wants to play checkers with him."

"Huh. I don't know any specifics of what my aunt got up to in those last few months, but living life to the fullest sure does sound like her. Maybe she and Jerry were closer than we thought, and he knew more about her than I did."

"Could be. But anyway, I would come around and give you a hand if I knew the first thing about heating or air conditioning. Of course, I know a guy you can call, but he's probably not going to pick up at this hour. You'll have to wait until morning. Your aunt got fans in her house?"

"Yeah, but they're old and don't really spin very fast."

"Then my advice is to go spend the night with one of those friends you said you'd been hanging out with. I don't know what the forecast is for tonight, but I do know that tomorrow

it's supposed to get to almost 100, so it's not likely to drop that low in the meantime."

"I hear you." I sighed, and for a second, I thought about asking Tilly if I could crash at her place, but then held back. Tilly had already done me enough favors, and I didn't want to take advantage of her kindness. "Well thanks anyway. I'll ring you tomorrow to get the number of that guy."

"For sure," she said. "I'll be in the shop as early as six or seven and come on into town if you get overheated. The AC here at my dad's place runs like a dream."

I smirked. "I'll keep that in mind."

We hung up, and for the next couple of hours, I turned on all the fans, opened all the windows, and prayed for a cooling ocean breeze. I tried to focus on what was on TV instead of on how overheated I was getting, but after a while, my head began to hurt and I started to feel like I did after getting a bad sunburn. My skin was hot and even though I was exhausted, I couldn't find a comfortable position to lay in. The couch cushions were sticking to my skin and my hairline was slick with sweat.

A little after 10, I got up off the couch for good, and did the only thing I could think of. I went next door to Gray's house. There was a light on upstairs, so I was pretty sure I wouldn't wake him up. I stood in front of his door for a while, however, searching for my mind for any other possible solution to my problem. I couldn't come up with anything, so after about five minutes of hesitation, I reached my hand up and knocked.

He came to the door shortly thereafter. He was wearing sweatpants and no shirt, and he had his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth. He frowned when he saw it was me, said nothing, but motioned that I come inside as he walked down the hallway and hung a right into the nearest bathroom. I closed the door behind me and waited until he was done rinsing his mouth and was back in the hallway to say anything.

"Hey." I waved awkwardly. "Sorry to drop by unannounced, and this late at night..."

“I assume you need something?”

Everything about him was hard to read. He didn't look or sound annoyed, but he also didn't appear to be happy to see me either.

“Umm, yeah,” I said. Terra came around the corner just then and ran up to me. I stopped her from jumping up by grabbing her collar just in time. I'd gotten pretty good at anticipating her jumps back when I was spending more time over at Gray's place. I scratched her behind the ears and tried to get her to calm down a little. Once she stopped licking me and sat by my feet, I got back to what I was saying. “My AC is broken, and I tried to just suck it up and deal with the heat, but it's actually sort of killing me and—” I laughed. “And gosh it feels nice and cool in here.”

He smiled, but only with half his mouth. “Yeah, I don't normally run my AC full blast, but this week has been something else.”

“Right,” I said. “Which is why I was wondering if I could crash here tonight? I wouldn't ask if I had any other option, but Amanda's no longer in Sunfall Key, and I don't think I'm going to be able to get anyone to come take a look at the problem until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

He stared at me for a short while, and in that time, I started to feel like I'd made a huge mistake. I never should've come here. It was so selfish of me to think I could ask Gray for a favor after telling him that we couldn't even be friends anymore.

What was I thinking?

“You know what,” I said, stepping back towards the door. “It's actually not a big deal. Now that I've stood in here and cooled off a little, I feel much better and I think I'll be able to go back home and get some sleep.”

“Cameron, it's fine,” he said. “There's a pullout couch in Francine's old studio. You can sleep there.”

“Really? Are you sure it's okay?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said. “Do you need a toothbrush or anything?”

“No,” I said. “I already got ready for bed back home, so I just need a place to lay my head for the night.”

He nodded. “Follow me.”

We went upstairs and down the hall to the left. At the end, there was a door, which he opened for me. It was dark, but then he flipped the switch, and the corner room came to life in front of me. It had windows taking up most of the space on two of the walls and there were canvases everywhere. Some of them blank, some of them with half-finished paintings on them. Paint brushes were scattered around on easels and windowsills, and the couch pushed up against the back wall was decorated with colorful pillows and a handmade woven blanket.

“Wow,” I said, looking around. “What an amazing room. I bet these windows give you some of the best views of the ocean this town has to offer.”

“They do,” he said. “But they also let in a lot of sun, so make sure to close the blinds before you go to sleep because otherwise, you’ll get woken up and blinded at the crack of dawn when the sun comes up.”

“Good thinking.” I smiled at him. “Thanks again, Gray. This is really nice of you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “It’s really easy to pull out the bed, and there’s extra sheets and pillows in the closet right there. I’m going to head down the hall to my room. Holler if you need anything.”

“Okay, I will. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Cameron.”

For just a split second, it felt like he was going to say something else. We held each other’s gaze for a moment or two, but then he closed the door and walked away. I went over to the couch and started putting my makeshift bed together. It wasn’t too hard to do on my own, but I also couldn’t help but notice that Gray didn’t offer to help me. It seemed like

something he would've at least thrown out there. I took that as a sign that he wasn't too thrilled with the idea of me staying there that night, and so I decided I would get out of there first thing in the morning.

Maybe I'll even sneak out before he's up. Avoiding any sort of awkward goodbye.

A clean break was good. Especially since I'd be heading back to Naples soon, and it didn't make sense to leave any unfinished business or lingering feelings behind.

Chapter Twenty

My plan to get away before Gray woke up the following morning actually went off without a hitch. I snuck back to my place without him noticing, and figured that when he saw the fold out couch put back together with the sheets placed neatly on the cushions, he would know I'd simply left early and hadn't gone missing in the night.

I called Tilly as soon as the hardware shop opened, and she gave me the information for the heating and AC repairman she knew. I waited around for an hour for him to show up, then sat outside while he worked and flipped through another one of my aunt's old paperbacks. Every once in a while, I heard sounds coming from Gray's backyard, but he never came outside. After last night, I wasn't as concerned with avoiding him as I'd been before. I didn't want to talk to him necessarily, but I knew now that I could at least handle seeing him. We could wave or share a smile over the fence, and it would be fine.

Once the AC was fixed, I paid the man and thanked him profusely for coming on such short notice and doing his work so efficiently, and walked him out. He got into his truck and drove away, and I stopped to check the mail on my way inside.

There wasn't anything inside the mailbox except a single pale-yellow envelope.

My heart skipped a beat, and I glanced in the direction of Gray's house. The lights weren't on and Terra wasn't outside in the yard, so I figured he'd dropped this off on his way to take her for a walk. It was around the time of day that he usually took her around the block. I pushed the envelope into

my chest and ran inside before he could come back around the corner and surprise me.

In the house, I sat down on the couch and stared at the envelope for a long time. I truly wasn't sure whether or not it was a good idea to open it. I thought about just putting it back in his mailbox unopened, to let him know that I was totally and completely uninterested, since apparently, he hadn't gotten the message. But on the other hand, I knew this very well might be the last time I received any word from Gray, and I couldn't bring myself to leave the letter unread. So, I slipped my finger under the flap and opened the envelope, taking my time and giving my nerves a chance to settle.

The page inside was folded as it had been in the first letter, and I smoothed it out on my legs before reading it. Finally, once I felt I was ready, I took a deep and held the page up to my face.

Dear Cameron,

I am writing this as you are down the hall, sleeping in the room that used to be Francine's studio. You're just a few doors down, and if I wanted to, I could come to you and say all of this in person, but I fear the words won't come out right. I fear I will end up saying the wrong thing and pushing you away even more.

Before tonight, I had every intention of letting you go without sending another letter, without speaking another word to you even. You weren't ready to have a relationship with me, and I should've heard you the first time. Instead, I tried to form a connection with you platonically, and... well... we know where that led.

You were right to cut things off because up until then, I'd been lying to myself. I wouldn't have been able to just be friends with you either, and the more time we spent together, the more deeply I fell for you. On the day you decided we couldn't see each other, in any capacity, I think what hurt the

most was the fact that I knew all along I was going to force you to make that decision. But I didn't care. I was so desperate to spend time with you, to get to know you, that I pushed all my common sense aside and just let my heart make all the decisions.

I apologize for any part I may have played in hurting you or causing you strife. That was never my intention. And I'm also sorry for writing and sending this letter, after you've been so clear about wanting nothing to do with me going forward. It's just—when I saw standing on the other side of my door earlier tonight, I realized I still had so much left I wanted to say to you. I knew I would regret it if I didn't at least try to make my feelings known one last time, before the summer came to a close and you went back to Naples.

Cameron—this summer has been one of the best seasons of my life.

You know that I loved Francine with all my heart, and our connection was unbreakable, but so too is the connection I feel to you. I feel as if you and I... we just click. And because of how well we get along, because of how much joy you've brought into my life, I sometimes wish I had never sent you that first letter. If only I'd introduced myself in a normal way, and if only I'd allowed our relationship to start out as a friendship, and then wait to see if anything blossomed from there.

I went about all of this in the wrong order, and I can't help but feel like that's the reason we ended up where we did.

Anyway, I've already taken up enough of your time and this letter is starting to ramble... I'm not sure what happened, the first ones I wrote were so eloquent and to the point. I suppose that was back when I was writing as a man in love, and now I'm writing as a man with a broken heart.

Not that I have anyone but myself to blame for that.

I do hope you know that I will always care about you Cameron, and I wish you nothing but the best. I hope one day we can move past the events of this summer entirely and find

our way back to being friends. But if not, then I simply hope that you have a wonderful and happy life.

I once said that I was falling in love with you, but now I'm no longer falling. My feelings are grounded, and while I know you likely do not feel the same way, I have to say these words at least once. But then, I swear, you will never hear them from me again.

I love you.

... And I will miss you.

Take care,

Gray

Tears were streaming down my face by the time I got to the end of the letter, but really that wasn't so surprising because they had formed in my eyes the moment I read my name at the top of the page. This was the first letter Gray had written that was actually addressed to me directly, and it was the first one which he'd actually signed his own name to. There was something so personal and poignant about seeing these identifiers, and unlike the other letters, this one actually felt real. It wasn't that I didn't take the first few notes seriously, but the words written on them were easier to dismiss when I didn't know who they were coming from.

Now that I knew who had actually put pen to paper, now that I could picture his face and hear his voice, it made everything that much more genuine.

And it made my emotions that much more powerful.

Staring down at the page, my crying turned to weeping, and I had to toss the letter aside because I could hardly stand to look at it any longer. I was feeling so many emotions at once, and they all seemed to contradict each other. The stress of it all was making it hard for me to breathe, and I had to just

let myself breakdown for a moment before I could even bring myself to get up off the couch and go about the rest of my day.

There were still a few things I needed to do before leaving Sunfall Key, and I hoped that by focusing on those tasks, I could keep my mind from wandering back to what Gray had said at the end of the letter.

Because he was right, there was a difference between saying “I’m falling in love with you” and definitively telling someone you loved them. I’d fallen in love with actors over the course of watching a good movie, and back when I was a lovesick teenager, I fell in love with nearly every cute boy who smiled at me. But as an adult, I’d only ever *loved* a handful of people in my life. And in regard to romantic love, I’d only ever felt that way about one other man.

Thinking about these feelings and the intensity of what it would mean to actually do anything about them, started to make me feel panicked all over again, so I pushed them to the side and went downstairs. There were a few more boxes that needed to be sorted through, and once that was done, there would be nothing left to keep me in Sunfall Key, which at this point, for my heart’s sake, was definitely a good thing.

* * *

In the last box on the shelf, pushed all the way back into the far corner of my aunt Susan’s basement, I found a stack of diaries that dated from right around the time she moved to Sunfall Key, all the way up to the time she found out she was sick. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t found these earlier, because not only were they a goldmine of information, but they were also incredibly fun to read. I had forgotten how funny Susan was, and that she had this entertaining way of telling even the most mundane stories.

I spent the entire afternoon sitting down in the basement, tearing through page after page of some of her older journals, then when my stomach started to growl, I took the last one of her diaries upstairs with me to flip through it while I ate.

One of the things I noticed right away when going through these diaries was how much Susan practiced what she preached. She used to tell me to live my life to the fullest, and to dream big, and she wasn't all talk. She really did those things. She prioritized her happiness above all else, and therefore created a wonderful life for herself.

In her later entries, she talked about what she was doing with her time after finding out she didn't have a lot of it left. Her entries became shorter, as it was clear that she wanted to be experiencing life more than she wanted to write about it. She spoke of spending long days lounging on the beach and enjoying the amazing view from her own backyard. She mentioned some of the people in town, including Tilly's uncle, and how she had been making an effort to venture out more often so that she could stay connected to all her friends up until the very end.

In one of her last entries, she mentioned me.

Seeing my name written on the page sent me reeling, just like it had when I'd seen my name written in Gray's letter, only the second time around the sensation was much more intense. It was as if my aunt was speaking to me from the other side, and I had to take a moment to steady myself before going on to read what she'd written about me.

And then there's Cameron.

She's such a smart, strong woman, but sometimes I worry that her life isn't what it could be. I try not to tell her what to do, or question her choices, because I never wanted to be that kind of old person. I always resented the people in my life who tried to suggest I was doing everything wrong, and so I've gone out of my way to not do that to her.

That said... She doesn't seem happy.

Is that unfair of me to say?

She tells me she's happy, and I can tell she really loves being a mother. Neal is such a wonderful son, and I always knew Cameron would make an amazing mom. But Neal is

grown now, he'll be out of the house in less than a year, and I worry where that might leave her. I would hate for Cameron to feel isolated or alone. As much as I enjoy my alone time, I have also felt the sting of loneliness throughout my life, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

If I had more time, I would try to convince her to move down here to Sunfall Key. She used to love it here, when she'd come for the summers as a kid, and I think she would fit in great with the community. I suppose I would let her bring her husband as well, although if I'm being perfectly honest, I do enjoy her visits more when Michael doesn't accompany her.

I've never told her this, because it's not my place, but it's always been my opinion that you should only stay with someone if they make you painfully happy. And if they don't, if you ever find yourself preferring your own company to being with them, then perhaps it's time to ask yourself why you're sticking around at all? I think Cameron would do well to ask herself such a question.

Of course, this is very harsh, and I see no point in telling Cameron any of it. I love her too much to hurt her like that. She's going to do what's right for her, and the last thing I want to do is cross any lines. Not when relationships like the one we have are more important to me than ever before.

From there, Susan went on to talk about some of the things going on in town and made reference to a few people I didn't know. I slowly put the diary down and closed it. I was sitting at the kitchen table, and I'd only taken a few bites of my food, but I found that I'd lost my appetite. It would seem that in the months leading up to Susan's passing, she not only took up new hobbies and tried all the stuff she'd been too scared to try before—like scuba diving and singing karaoke in public—but she also spent some of her time worrying about me. She had picked up on the problems in my marriage when nobody else had, and she'd been questioning whether or not I was telling the truth whenever I assured her I was happy and generally doing well.

But most importantly, she'd kept her opinions to herself. I likely wouldn't have been mad, had she shared her worries and doubts with me, but the fact that she respected me, and our relationship, enough to try and let me live my life my own way made me want to cry. I was so touched by her love and consideration, that I felt an ache in my chest. I missed my aunt so much, and while finding her diaries did make me feel more connected to her, it also reminded me of how much time I let go by in between visiting her.

If there was any lesson to be learned from hearing my aunt's thoughts on life, it was that life was short, and I never should've let stupid stuff like work get in the way of what really mattered. I should've continued to spend every summer in Sunfall Key with her. Perhaps not the whole three months, but at least a couple weeks. I could've brought Neal with me, so that he could've had the same kinds of childhood experiences I did, and perhaps if I'd convinced Michael to take more time off and come along, our marriage wouldn't have fallen apart in the first place.

"Woulda', coulda', shoulda'," I said to myself, sighing. There was nothing I could do to change the past. Just like Gray couldn't go back and stop himself from sending that first letter, I couldn't go back and make different choices in regard to my family.

But just because I couldn't change the past...

"I could still make choices right now to have a better future."

Standing up slowly out of my chair, it dawned on me that it was actually a good thing I didn't find these diaries until later in the summer. If I'd read them when I first got to Sunfall Key, they probably would've just made me a little sad, but I likely never would've taken what my aunt said so seriously. But now that I was feeling so lost, so confused and vulnerable, everything she'd written hit me like a sack of bricks.

I knew exactly what I needed to do. I needed to start living my life the way Susan would've, by putting my happiness first and not being afraid to do things that scared me. There were

no guarantees in this world and nobody ever knew how much time they had left, so I had to stop worrying so much about doing what was 'right' or 'conventional' and just ask myself what was going to make me happy.

And once I did that, the answer was obvious.

Chapter Twenty-One

“**W**ait, wait, wait, go back to the last one you read to me.”

“I can’t. I threw that one out the window.” I was sitting on my bed with my phone resting on the bedside table next to me. Amanda was on speaker phone, and I had a pad of paper balanced on my knees, my fingers curled around a pen that was probably going to run out of ink soon. There was a pile of discarded drafts on the floor next to me.

“Cameron, that’s littering! And you live on the beach! Go outside right now and get the last draft of your letter to Gray before some poor seagull comes by and dies trying to eat it.”

I sighed. “Alright, I lied. I didn’t throw that one out the window, because I’m not the kind of person who litters. But I also really don’t want to grab the last draft because it was way too vulnerable and there’s no way I’m going to deliver that one.”

“I just wanted to hear one of the lines at the beginning,” Amanda said. “You wrote something about how he found inspiration for his letters in Shakespeare, and you found it in your aunt’s old diaries. I really liked that.”

“You don’t think it was cheesy? You don’t think comparing my aunt’s diaries to some of the most famous works of literature was a little... forced?”

“No, I thought it was cute.”

I groaned and got down on the floor next to the pile, starting rifling through for the draft that this line was from.

“You know, I called you to help me get this done faster, but so far, all you’ve done is slow down the process.”

“I’m sorry!” she said. “But without being there in person, I’m having to hold all the details of the various drafts in my head at once, and it’s a lot! Not to mention, I’m still totally freaking out over the fact that you’re doing this in the first place, it’s making it hard to concentrate.” She squealed for the third or fourth time throughout the course of the hour-long phone call. “Oh my god, it’s just so exciting! I knew you two were meant to be since day one!”

“I wish I had as much confidence as you do,” I said. “But right now, it feels like if I don’t find a way to tell him how I feel, and to apologize for how I’ve treated him lately, we aren’t going to end up together after all.”

“Just speak from the heart!”

I sat back on my heels and sighed. “Easier said than done. It’s funny,” I said, scoffing a little. “Gray decided to write me a letter initially because he was worried he wouldn’t know how to tell me everything in person, but here I am struggling to write him a letter in return, when if I had him standing in front of me right now, I think I’d be able to express myself pretty well actually.”

“So just go over there and talk to him!”

“But I’m trying to do some sort of romantic gesture!” I said. “He worked so hard on those letters. He found romantic quotes and delivered one of them with my favorite bottle of wine. Now it’s my turn to show him that I can be romantic and demonstrate just how much I care about him. I thought the idea of giving him a letter in return would be, I don’t know... cute?”

“It is cute,” Amanda agreed. “But it gets less cute the more you freak out about what you’re going to write. Oh!”

Her sudden increase in volume made me jump. “What?”

“I’ve got an idea!” she said. “Just write him a letter telling him to meet you somewhere. That seems totally like something out of a movie. You write him a letter and leave it

in his mailbox just like he did for you, but instead of trying to write everything you're feeling down on paper, you just ask that he meet you in person, so that you can deliver the message in real time."

A smile began to dance across my face. "Amanda, that's brilliant!"

"Thank you," she said. "I thought so too."

"I'll write him a letter and tell him to meet me on the beach. Tomorrow night. I'm leaving town the next day, but I can't ask him to meet me any sooner because there's a chance he might not see the letter in time."

"Tell him to meet you at sunset," she added.

"Why sunset?"

"Uh, because that's the most romantic time of day, duh."

"Right. Okay. Tomorrow at sunset." I hopped back up on the bed and got cracking on my last draft of the letter.

Gray,

I know you're probably surprised to find a letter from me sitting in your mailbox. Trust me, I didn't expect to be writing you one. But I have a lot I need to tell you, and I'd like to see you one last time before I go back to Naples. I would understand if you'd rather leave things how they are, but if there's any part of you that's curious to know how I really feel about you, meet me on the beach tomorrow night at sunset. I'll be right on the edge of our property lines, watching waves come in... waiting.

With love,

Cameron

I read the letter back to Amanda, who gasped and said it was perfect. “Now, don’t change anything. Seal it up and put it in his mailbox before you have time to change your mind. Go, go!”

“Alright, I’m going, I’m going.”

I folded the letter up and got off the bed. I didn’t have any envelopes, so instead of putting the paper into anything, I just wrote Gray’s name across one of the folded sides and ran downstairs. I poked my head out of the front door and looked out at the quiet street. It was dinnertime, and my heart fluttered as I realized that in about twenty-four hours I would be sitting on the sand, waiting for Gray, getting ready to tell him the truth of what was in my heart.

God, I hope he shows up.

Confident that nobody was around, and that Gray wasn’t outside with Terra or anything, I darted across the lawn over to his house and stuffed the letter inside his mailbox. Then I ran back as fast as I could, leaped over the threshold, and slammed the door shut as if something were chasing me. I struggled to catch my breath after all the excitement, and then when I started to take stock of what I just did, the dread slowly settled in. I ran upstairs into my bedroom and began pacing back and forth on the rug.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” I said. “What was I thinking?”

“Cameron?”

The voice from the phone startled me yet again. I forgot that I’d left Amanda on the hook his whole time. I grabbed the device and took her off speaker, bringing the phone from my ear. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were still on the line.”

“How’d it go? Did he see you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And how do you feel?”

“Like I’m going to throw up.”

“Good!” she said.

“Good? How is that good?”

“Because the stuff that scares you in life is usually the best stuff! Now, what I recommend you do is go downstairs, pour yourself a glass of wine, and just try to relax. And remember, this is a good thing. Telling people how you feel, being brave and openhearted, is the way you want to start living your life, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I grumbled. “But—”

“No buts. You did the right thing.”

“Are you sure?”

I could hear her smile through the phone. “One hundred percent.”

* * *

That night and the following day I spent in a constant state of fear. I considered running back across the street and taking the letter out of his mailbox at least a dozen times, and as the afternoon dragged on, I kept trying to think of ways I could get out of the meeting I had specifically asked for.

Thankfully, I managed to keep my cool, and by the time the sun was sitting low in the sky, I found that I was actually looking forward to this conversation. Sure, it was scary, but it was also exhilarating. It had been such a long time since I’d felt this passionately about something, or *someone*, and while I knew there was still a distinct possibility that Gray wouldn’t show up, just the fact that I’d made the choice to put myself out there felt like a step in the right direction. As I put on some flowy pants and a tank top Amanda let me borrow and never remembered to take back, I thought about how proud my aunt would be if she were there with me that day. I imagined her wrapping her skinny arms around me, and even thought I caught a whiff of her favorite perfume when I closed my eyes and breathed in.

She was there with me.

I could feel it.

I didn't particularly believe in that sort of thing, but that moment, everything just felt different. I felt more alive than I had since the day Neal was born, and I swore, if I focused really hard on the sensations in my own body, I could feel the weight of a loving hand on my shoulder, guiding me down the steps and towards the sliding back door.

There was a salty, delicious breeze wafting over the sand as I walked out towards the water, and the sun was just minutes away from beginning to set. I glanced over my shoulder at Gray's house, but saw no sign of him.

That's okay, I thought. There's still plenty of time.

I gathered the hem of my pants up a little and sat down only a few feet from the water's edge. I dug my toes into the sand until I reached the layer underneath the surface that was sticky and cool. Then I rested my weight back into my hands and sighed with relief. It was a gorgeous day, my aunt Susan was watching over me, and everything was going to be okay.

* * *

An hour later, Gray still hadn't shown up.

The wind was picking up and now that the sun was more than halfway disappeared over the horizon, I was starting to feel a little cold. I hadn't brought my phone out with me because I didn't want to have any distractions during what might've ended up being the most important conversation of my life, but that also meant I didn't have any way of entertaining myself while I waited. All I could do was sit there, coming up with a million different reasons why Gray would decide not to come talk to me, and every once in a while, check my watch.

I tried my hardest not to let the disappointment take over, not to let my sadness get the better of me, but as I watched the last few inches of the sun slip away, my eyes started to water. I looked down at the sand beneath my feet with a trembling lip, and then pressed my hands into the ground to push myself up. Just as I stood and turned to walk back into my house, I heard

a dog barking and looked up to see Gray and Terra running down the beach towards me. Terra wasn't connected to her leash, so when she got close enough, I hooked my fingers into her collar and held her still.

Gray got to me a few seconds later and clipped his dog into the leash he'd been holding as he chased after her.

"Sorry," he said, in between labored breaths. "I'm so sorry—the letter was chewed—and then Terra ran jumped over the fence when she saw you on the beach—and—"

"It's okay," I said, smiling ear to ear. "Catch your breath, it's all good. I mean, for a second there, I was starting to worry that maybe..." I trailed off. I didn't want to say what I'd been thinking out loud. It was too depressing. "Never mind what I thought. I'm just glad you came."

"Of course, I came," he said. "I'm sorry I'm so late. I brought the mail in early today and left it sitting on the couch while I ran upstairs to take a shower. Terra then chewed most of it up, and it took me the entire afternoon to put the note back together again, and only about five minutes ago was I able to decipher the part where it said you would be waiting for me at sunset. Her drool made the ink run, so it was nearly impossible to read." He shook his head and sighed. "I feel terrible, leaving you out here for so long."

"It's fine." I laughed. "Really." I bent down and patted Terra's head. "I don't think she meant to do it."

"No," he said. "If anything, I think she only chewed the letter up because it smelled like you and she got excited. She doesn't normally do that."

"Well, then I'm flattered."

He smiled and then rubbed the back of his neck and for a moment, neither of us said anything. He cleared his throat and looked down at the sand, kicked a little of it around with his foot. "So... uh... I know it's a little unfair of me to be so impatient, when I'm the one who kept you waiting, but I am very curious to know what this is all about."

“Yeah, no, of course,” I said. “I get it. And I’m ready to tell you.”

Okay... here it goes... After this, there’s no turning back.

I took a step closer to him and stared up into his perfect green eyes. “Gray, the last letter you sent me—it was—well, it was a lot.”

He grimaced. “I was worried it might’ve been crossing the line, but—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It wasn’t crossing a line. It was a lot in the sense that it just made me feel a million and one things at once. I had made up my mind to go back to Naples without having any further contact with you. I’m actually supposed to be leaving tomorrow morning, but that’s beside the point.” I waved a hand in the air.

“I thought leaving here and leaving all of this behind was going to be for the best, but then I read what you wrote... and after that, I knew I couldn’t just walk away. I hadn’t admitted it to myself just yet, but at least some part of me knew I needed to see this through. And shortly after that, I found some of my aunt’s old diaries, and I learned about how she spent her last months after finding out she was sick, and how even in her old age, she was determined to take advantage of every opportunity life threw her way. It was just so inspiring, and it got me thinking—why haven’t I been living my life that way?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and I sucked in a deep breath and gave myself a couple seconds before going on to the real reason I asked him to meet me.

“I’m sick of just letting life happen to me,” I said. “I’m sick of going through the motions and doing what I think I’m supposed to. I stayed with Michael even though I was unhappy because that felt like the thing a good wife did. Look where that got me. And I shielded my son from the truth because I thought that’s what a good mom should do, and that only ended up making him feel more confused and upset. And then with you...”

“With me what?” Gray asked, raising his brows.

“With you, I thought that I needed to keep my distance,” I explained. “I thought that people would judge me if I started dating someone so soon after my break-up with Michael. I thought that it would hurt my son, and that you weren’t ready to date someone else after you lost Francine. And maybe some of those things are true, maybe they are all true, but that doesn’t change the fact that I—” I squared my shoulders back and reached for Gray’s free hand, the one that wasn’t holding tightly onto Terra’s leash.

“I love you, Gray.”

His face cracked open into a huge smile. “You do?” he asked, laughing a little.

I nodded. “Yes. I do. And I’m sorry it took me so long to figure that out.”

“Hey, as someone who’s more than an hour late to our sunset meeting,” he said. “I have no room to judge your timing.” He tugged on my hand and I fell into his broad chest. He wrapped his strong arms around me and held my gaze.

“I love you too, Cameron. As you already know.”

I smiled. “Just because I already knew it, doesn’t mean I don’t like hearing you say it.”

“Then I’ll say it again. Just not with words.”

He pressed his lips into mine and I brought my hands up to the side of his face. He tasted like summer strawberries and white wine, and when he lifted me off my feet, my stomach erupted with butterflies. I wanted to stay there all night with him, bodies entwined and lips locked as the moon rose and the stars began to appear one by one in the sky.

But then Terra pulled on her leash and we were broken apart all too soon. Gray struggled for a second to hold onto me and keep his dog from taking off after a bird that had just landed a few feet down the beach. I covered my mouth and laughed joyfully as Gray cursed under his breath. He started laughing too and once he got Terra under control once more, he put his arm back around my waist.

“So,” he said. “I know you said that you’re leaving for Naples in the morning, but is there any way I can convince you to come inside and have a glass of wine with me anyway? I swear, I won’t keep you up late.”

I smiled. “That sounds lovely. And don’t worry about my travel plans.” I winked at him. “I have a feeling those are going to change.”

“You think you’ll leave later in the day?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I think I’ll probably just go ahead and not leave at all. How does that sound to you?”

He beamed and kissed me once more.

“It sounds like the best news I’ve heard in my entire life.”

Epilogue

THE FOLLOWING SUMMER

There came a knock at the door, and I was so excited that I launched myself off the couch and darted across the living room. When I ripped the door open and saw Amanda standing on the porch with a bottle of wine in her hand, I grinned and threw my arms around her.

“Yes! You’re here! You’re here!”

We hadn’t seen each other in almost a year, but Amanda was thankfully planning on staying in Sunfall Key once again for most of the summer. We’d been texting and calling a lot throughout the school year, but it wasn’t the same as having her there in person.

“Yes, the party has arrived,” Amanda said, holding the bottle up as she walked inside. “Where’s Gray?”

Gray and I had basically been living together for the last few months, switching back between both of our houses when either one of us felt a little homesick. We’d been officially dating ever since the day I said I loved him on the beach, and in the past month or so especially, things had really started to get serious between us. Gray had recently been saying things like ‘when we chose which house we’re going to live in for good’ or ‘when we go on vacation together again’. These types of sentiments were leading me to think that he saw us being together for the foreseeable future.

And so did I.

“He’s actually one town over,” I said. “He’s helping out at a hospital a little North of here, but he’ll be back tomorrow.”

Amanda smiled. “So that means we get to have a girl’s night? That’s exactly what I need after wrapping up the school year. I have so much to tell you, it’s crazy. Starting first with the drama between me and that substitute teacher I’ve been on again, off again with for a while.”

I clapped my hands together. “I’m so excited for the gossip.”

She laughed. “Remember back when you used to make fun of me for telling you all this stuff. Now, you can’t get enough.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? The ins and outs of your life as a school teacher is a lot more riveting than I thought it would be. It’s like a soap opera, and I’m hooked.” I took the bottle from her and grabbed the corkscrew out of the drawer. “Plus, we gotta get the girl talk in while we can. Not only will Gray be back tomorrow, but then Neal’s coming into town the following week.”

“Neal’s coming? That’s awesome.” But then her smile shifted into a frown. “Wait a second... I thought you and Neal were still on bad terms?”

“Thankfully, no,” I said. After Neal found out that I started dating Gray, he didn’t take it well. I knew he wouldn’t, but that didn’t make it any easier when he went nearly a month without answering my calls. “I went to see him while he was on his spring break, and we hashed everything out. He apologized for cutting me off again, and I explained to him that I truly didn’t mean to meet and fall in love with Gray so quickly... it just happened.”

“So, he’s cool with it now?”

“Mostly,” I said. “I’m hoping that while he’s here, he’ll be able to get to know Gray a little better, and then maybe he’ll see that we’re good together and that’ll dissolve any remaining doubts he might have.”

“That’s wonderful news! Congrats, Cameron.”

I smirked. “Congrats on what?”

“On starting over and making a new life for yourself.”

I poured us each a glass of wine and handed her one. “It’s not that big of a deal. A lot of people start over.”

“Yeah, but a lot of people *don’t*,” she said. “A lot of people get stuck in their ruts, and they are too afraid to make changes,

so they just sit and wallow and keep going through the motions until... well, until they die.”

“Amanda, that’s so bleak!”

“I know!” she said. “But that’s why it’s so amazing that you didn’t do that.” She laughed and then held her drink up into the air. “All I’m saying is that I’m proud of you, okay? And I’m going to toast you for all your hard work.”

“Alright,” I said, holding my glass up. “As long as I can toast to all *your* hard work. I know this year wasn’t easy for you. And then after this toast, we have to get back to talking about this substitute teacher guy.”

She nodded as she clinked her glass against mine. “Deal.”

* * *

Two weeks after Amanda arrived back in Sunfall Key, she took me out for a girl’s day at a spa in town. At first, I was hesitant to go, since it would mean leaving Gray and Neal alone all day without me there as a buffer, but then Amanda reminded me of the perils of working too much and not taking enough breaks, and I could hardly argue with that. I’d taken a job at a nearby clinic, working in a similar position to the one I had in Naples, only on a much smaller scale. The pay was significantly lower too, not that I cared. Michael and I sold our old house, and that, combined with the fact that I had a free place to live, made it pretty easy to make ends meet even with the meager salary. Plus, I loved the work, even if the hours could be a little long sometimes.

So, when Amanda suggested we go get massages and facials, I was pretty excited to have some time to myself to relax. I did check my phone quite a few times throughout the afternoon, however, to make sure I didn’t have any SOS texts either from work or from my son.

Our spa day ended around sunset, and when we were driving back, Amanda had this goofy look on her face, which made me think she was up to something.

“Why do you keep looking over at me with that weird smile on your face?” I finally asked as we came to a stop in front of the house.

“What weird smile? I don’t have a weird smile!”

“Yes! You totally do!” I laughed. “You look like you have a secret or something.”

“Oh, you know I can’t keep a secret,” she said. “If I knew something that you didn’t, I would’ve already told you all about it by now.” She turned the car off. “Now stop scrutinizing my facial expressions and let’s go inside.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. But you’re acting strange. There’s no doubt about it.”

I got out and headed for the front door. Amanda followed me, but at a distance, which only added to my apprehension. At the door, I glanced back at her, and she was staring down at her phone. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry!” She put her phone to her ear. “I gotta’ take this, it’s a work call. I’ll be inside in just a sec.” Then she waved and walked back over towards the edge of the driveway.

I still didn’t know what was going on, but decided just to wait until Amanda was ready to tell me the truth, and opened the door. As I stepped inside, I saw right away that all of the lights were off, and that there was a trail of rose petals leading outside. The pathway through the house was lit with dozens of flickering candles, and there was soft music coming through the sliding back door. I gasped, and looked around for any sign of Gray or Neal in the house.

All was quiet inside, so I slowly followed the string of rose petals down the hall and through the kitchen, and back outside again.

Gray was there, standing on the back patio, which was also lit up with many, many candles. He was wearing a suit, and there was a speaker off to the side playing jazz music in the background. I looked around in complete and utter shock, and then finally brought my gaze back to him. I opened my mouth to say something, but found I was speechless.

“Hey,” he said, laughing a little as I came further out onto the porch.

“Umm, hi,” I said, laughing too. “What’s—what’s going on?”

“I asked Amanda to take you out for a few hours so that I could get this all set up,” he said. “Originally, I had planned on taking you up in my plane, and having a message written for you in the sand, but it turns out, it’s really hard to keep a message written in huge block letters in the sand. Amanda and I spent the whole morning yesterday dragging our feet in the sand, only for a group of kids to run through and mess it all up, or for the wind to rush past and ruin all our progress.”

I chuckled. “What was the message going to say?”

“The message was going to be short, and to the point,” he said. “Sort of like those letters I sent to you exactly a year ago. It was going to be a message that conveyed how much I loved you and made it clear that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you.” He got down on one knee. “It was going to be a message in the form of a question.”

He reached out for my hand, and I gave it to him. “It’s a message made up of four simple words, and ones that I wouldn’t be stealing from Shakespeare this time.” He reached into this back pocket and took out a little velvet box and flipped it open to show a sparkling diamond ring.

“Cameron—will you marry me?”

I looked down at Gray and took a second to appreciate every single little detail that went into this moment. I stared at the ring, memorized its shape, then I listened more closely to the music, and breathed in the smell of roses mixed with sea water. Finally, I tried to take a mental image of Gray’s face at that moment.

I wanted to document all of this. So that I could remember how happy I was, how perfect everything was.

So that after I said no, I would at least be able to hang onto this moment.

Because I had to say no... didn't I? Neal and I were only just starting to mend our relationship, and it was much too soon for me to remarry... wasn't it?

I snapped back to reality a second later, and felt Gray's fingers curling around mine, and the feeling of the cool air brushing across my face. I thought about how much I'd changed this past year, and how great my life had been ever since I decided to start living it *my way*.

Then I looked into Gray's endless, forest green eyes and said the only answer that truly felt right.

"Yes. Yes, of course I'll marry you!"

He put the ring on my finger, then scooped me up in a hug and spun me around. I threw my head back and laughed, and let go of all the things that had been worrying me mere moments ago. Gray and I kissed, and then we held each other on the back porch for a while, swaying along to the music and smiling at each other.

After a while, I pulled away just enough to look up at him, and said, "So... does Neal know about this?"

Gray sighed and then nodded. "He does. I asked for his blessing when he got into town a few days ago."

"You did?" I balked. "And he gave it to you?"

"Well, yes and no," Gray said. "He said that he wasn't sure about the whole thing, but that ultimately, all he cared about was that you were happy. I told him I was pretty sure I could make you happy, and he said that if I didn't make good on that promise, he was going to come for me."

I laughed. "Neal said that? *My* Neal?"

"Yeah," he said. "And I can tell he meant it. More or less. I don't think he'd actually come for me or anything, but it's obvious how much your son loves you, and the part about him just wanting you to be happy, that was definitely true. I'm not sure if he ever said the words 'you have my blessing' but he knew I was going to ask, and he didn't try to stop me."

“You know what?” I said. “That’s good enough for me. He needs time to adjust, and that’s perfectly alright. We don’t have to rush anything, so he can take all the time he needs, right?”

Gray pressed his forehead into mine. “Right. We can have a long engagement if we want! I’m not in any rush. I don’t care what we do or when we do it, as long as we’re doing it together.”

I reached up and pushed some hair out of his face. “Me too. This—this is all I want. What we have right here. Me, you, and this amazing ocean view...” I then laughed under my breath. “Well, and my family of course, and Amanda, and Terra. But for right now, I just want this.”

He held me a little closer. “Then we’ll stay here as long as you like. Or—until the speaker runs out of battery.”

I laughed and shook my head. “God, I love you.”

“Not nearly as much as I love you,” he said. Then he dipped me down into his arms and kissed me like I’d never been kissed before.

The end.

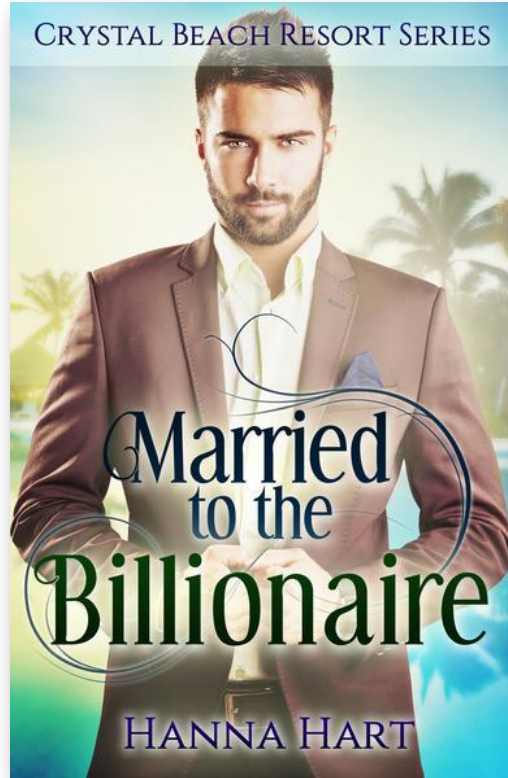
* * *

Enjoying the Sunfall Key Series? It is only just getting started! Make sure you look for the rest of this warm beach saga! Book two, *Something’s Missing in Sunfall Key*, will continue on the beachy romance with a match-making love story. Madison Hawthorne has good reason not to believe in happy ever after’s anymore, but I have a feeling Grandma Bea has a little something up her sleeve to change Madison’s mind and change her life in the process.

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About the Author

Hanna Hart is a passionate, sweet clean contemporary romance author who has found a love for writing since the age of 6.

Hanna lives in the beautiful Santa Cruz California, with her loving husband, two children, and dog Milo. Other than dreaming up extremely sweet and romantic stories, Hanna enjoys spending time with her family, going to the beach, cooking great food, traveling the world, and getting a lot of exercise.

Hanna's purpose is to deliver very sweet romantic stories to her readers that will touch their hearts in a very meaningful way, taking them to another place that will positively impact their life.

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