

FIONA GRACE

A  
CHANCE  
LOVE

THE INN AT DUNE ISLAND (BOOK 1)

A CHANCE LOVE

(THE INN AT DUNE ISLAND—BOOK 1)

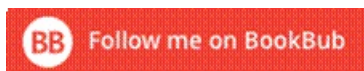
FIONA GRACE

## Fiona Grace

Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books; of the DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY series, comprising three books; of the BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY series, comprising six books; of the CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising nine books (and counting); and of the INN AT DUNE ISLAND ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting).

[MURDER IN THE MANOR](#) (A Lacey Doyle Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [AGED FOR MURDER](#) (A Tuscan Vineyard Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [SKEPTIC IN SALEM: AN EPISODE OF MURDER](#) (A Dubious Witch Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [BEACHFRONT BAKERY: A KILLER CUPCAKE](#) (A Beachfront Bakery Cozy Mystery—Book 1), and [A VILLA IN SICILY: OLIVE OIL AND MURDER](#) (A Cats and Dogs Cozy Mystery—Book 1) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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# CHAPTER ONE

April stared out the window on the cool September day, praying for a way to touch the leaves on the trees. The top floor of the New York City skyscraper looked right over a park by the East River. She pondered how fresh the air would feel in her lungs, how loud the crunch would be as she walked through the early fallen leaves and branches.

“April?” One of the partners came into view, his suit perfectly tailored and horribly plain. As her reality snapped back into place, she felt the shame rise along her cheeks. She nodded at her boss, who continued talking. “Anyway, we’re under crisis control, people. I’m going to need everyone to start brainstorming now.”

She looked around the room at the intelligent people surrounding her. They would probably find a way for the company to get out of this one. Their client, Reed Industries, had put out another robot vacuum which hadn’t gone through all the proper safety tests. So far, it’d started four home fires because of the lack of proper function in the fan to cool down the electronics.

It was a complicated way to say that Reed Industries put out a bad product and now needed legal help getting them off the hook.

At the long rectangular table sat the CEO of Reed Industries, a large man with extremely muscular arms. His brows were almost constantly turned downwards in a kind of anger.

Everyone had their heads down, looking at the files in front of them. April had already looked them over before the meeting. In fact, she’d been looking them over all night to distract herself from the new emptiness her house held.

The house had been quiet since her daughter left for college just a few days before. It was nice at first, but then yesterday the meaning of the silence hit her harder than she ever thought it would.

A breath caught in her throat as she’d almost started to make a second breakfast to feed Georgia. Her heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces. April hadn’t had much time with her daughter during the day, so she tried to make every minute count. Which meant that now those minutes felt lonely.

Her daughter wasn’t there to laugh with her at the crazy people on reality



tv, or gossip about the neighbors who always had their fights with the windows open for the whole neighborhood to see.

She thought about calling Georgia, but realized that she was probably out trying to make new friends. College was a whole new experience for her. April's loneliness wasn't a reason to interrupt this precious time in Georgia's life.

But then April got to thinking about it - was it really loneliness? It felt like more than that. It felt like dread. Like she was stuck inside of a fishbowl, everyone else looking in on her and waiting for her to do a trick; then they'd just ignore her until she died from being in such a tiny bowl.

She was drowning in the misery she felt with her everyday life. It took a genuine effort to feel like things were worthwhile.

She was guilty, lonely, and most of all, dissatisfied with the life she chose. The life where she couldn't even help her daughter move into her college dorm because she needed to work on a case to save billionaires a penny.

It was depressing, and she knew it. Look at her, pretending to read a file she'd already gone through. And she knew the solution. They should recall the bad products and issue full refunds and apologies. But the company and the firm would never go for that. They wanted their clients to maintain the most amount of money possible, so that they could make the most money in return.

"Look, what I think we have here is a defense. In the handbook, it states various fire codes to ensure the products don't catch the house on fire. That should be enough for us to explain that users have been using the product incorrectly."

*Using the product incorrectly?* thought April. *If consumers are using the product as the instructions in the manual suggest, then it doesn't matter if they put a fire warning in. A fire warning only tells consumers the possible consequences for incorrect use. This is ridiculous. They won't listen to anything I say.*

It made her want to throw up. There was no reason to punish consumers for things the company did wrong. But it was just like them to suggest something like that.

Morals and ethics were thrown out on a daily basis. In fact, it was April's job to find ways to throw them out so that the 'good guys' could win. But those good guys were usually the true villains.

“Very well,” Maxwell, the senior partner in charge of the meeting, said. “I don’t think that’s a terrible idea. Eliminating liability can help your company by keeping consumers calm and continuing to buy.”

George at the other end of the table nodded. “As long as we can get them to blame consumers, we run from the liability. Which is what we really want here, right?”

The CEO and other men at the table laughed. April tried to smile, but she knew it wouldn’t look real. Because it didn’t feel real. It felt like she had a stomachache.

Maxwell was the director who took this type of business theater seriously, always in charge, but never knowing what was right and wrong for the production. George was the senior who got all the lead parts, even though everyone knew he wasn’t right for the role. Lilian was in the chorus, but always acted like it was a Broadway show and gave even the simplest of things full drama.

And April, well April was working backstage. She dealt with all the crappy parts of the job, the paperwork, the cases that no one else could figure out. Even though she dreamed of being anywhere other than this theater, here she was, trying to look like she belonged.

“April, do you think you could come up with a plan of action by tomorrow morning?” Maxwell asked. The entire cast looked over at her, judging her every move.

April gulped, then cleared her throat. “You want me to take charge on this account?”

Maxwell nodded his head. April tried her best not to look like a deer in headlights, but this was the exact opposite of what she wanted. With the holidays coming up, she was sure she would be able to get more time off and spend it outside of this office. If she took this account, she’d be stuck in here for sure. This was the last thing she needed right now.

“Yes, and they’ll need it by tomorrow morning,” he said to her.

With everyone staring, April thought of ways to turn down the job. But the CEO was glaring at her from the other end of the table. If she didn’t take this, what would they say? Her boss would probably be angry with her. Could she lose her job over something like this? Over saying no to corrupt business owners?

She began to sweat as they all waited for an answer. Did it get hotter in

this room? Was the bird chirping outside mocking her? “April?”

“Uh, sure,” she said. “I can do that.”

Immediately after she said it, she regretted it. All those walks in the park, the time spent outside of the office with Georgia, the hours she would spend decorating the house this holiday season, they all drifted away.

“April, can I see you in my office?” Maxwell asked as the others began to filter out of the conference room.

She hated those words the most. Not only did he ruin her weekend, but he had to give her a talk for daydreaming during work hours. The office didn’t have room for things like joy and dreams.

Max’s office was just like the others. Bland, beige, and boring. She took the seat opposite his tall office chair.

“So, April,” he began. He stared at her with a smile that she didn’t return. “This needs to be perfect. I know you’re the person for the job, but I’m just reminding you that Reed Industries is one of our most important clients. I trust you to put in what it takes to get this done.”

April didn’t expect any thanks for picking up the extra work, but she wanted some kind of understanding that she would be making sacrifices for the job. “Of course.”

Maxwell smiled. “Great. I think in ten years’ time you’ll be sitting in this chair, talking to your own team about clients.”

Ten years? After everything she did for the firm, she would still need to wait ten years to become a partner?

Her life began to flash before her eyes. Her daughter’s graduation, vacations, anniversaries, birthday parties. It was all replaced with time at her desk or at home on her laptop.

All those sacrifices for another ten years. Maxwell was less than ten years older than April and he’d been partner for the past five years.

“April?”

Her eyes snapped back up to her boss. Another ten years of this.

“Happy to be here,” she lied through her teeth.

## CHAPTER TWO

As April walked into her house that same evening, it felt like every other day. She'd stopped for groceries on her way home, even though it was late. She couldn't eat fast food every night like when she was twenty. No, at twice that age, she thought she should at least try to maintain a somewhat healthy lifestyle.

The lifestyle where you would work hard, come home, and cook a nice meal, maybe workout and then grab wine with some friends on the weekends. April thought about that perfect life as she grabbed her own bottle of wine from the wine cooler built into her kitchen island.

Carl had always said they didn't need one, but April argued that she did. And now she was glad she became a lawyer. Apparently, fighting for corrupt companies wasn't all she fought for, considering this chilled glass of Reisling that quenched her thirst.

She drank a glass as she cut up vegetables for the stir-fry. The veggies slipped into the containers she put out, then she took the time to sip her wine. At least she could enjoy a normal meal, instead of the typical frozen dinners she threw together when it was her night to cook.

April looked at the bottle of wine and smiled as she read the description on the back. When the food was prepared, she put away everything, including the bottle.

And she sat in her chair, wondering if she would even finish cooking the meal before her husband got home. It'd been a long time since she'd done that. She finished her glass of delicious wine. She took in its smell as the last of it fell into her mouth.

It was something she didn't do much of when Georgia was home. She was too preoccupied with spending time with her daughter than having a little bit of liquid joy after a tedious day of work. Still, April would have taken time with Georgia over a few glasses of wine any day.

The door at the other end of the house slammed shut as Carl entered. "Welcome home," April yelled from the kitchen. "It's been a long day, so I have quite a bit to tell you."

Carl said nothing as he threw off his shoes and began to make his way to

the kitchen. “There is something in the air today. Because,” April mumbled through a full mouth of recently chopped bell pepper. “Everyone at work was just crazy. They’re giving another company the outs by blaming it on consumers. I don’t even think their plan is going to work. Honestly, I think it might backfire on us this time.”

“It never backfires,” Carl said as he came into her view. There stood her tall husband. The man was dressed in a nice suit, but his posture made it look as if it was about to fall off his shoulders. His eyes were glazed over like he hadn’t slept in days, though April wouldn’t notice because she was focused on the meal ahead of her and the work day behind her.

“But this time I think it will! I seriously don’t understand how these big businesses can keep doing this. I mean, someone is bound to get caught eventually.”

April frantically cut up prepped chicken breasts that had been sitting, cooked, in the fridge for a few days. A smile on her face, she didn’t even hear the chair squeak as Carl sat down at the table. “Anyway, it was all so frustrating. And then, to put the cherry on top, they asked me to head the whole thing!”

“April?” Carl said with his head in his hand.

But April didn’t hear him; she continued her rant, adding some more chopped veggies into her mouth. Pans clanged together as she prepped their meal. “Man, I’m starting to really wonder if I belong there. I never agree with their decisions. All day, I just sit and think about-”

“April!” Carl said louder, so loud that it startled April. She jumped, snapping her head to look over at him. She knew that her husband was acting strange by not talking this entire time, but now she could tell that something was truly wrong.

“What? What’s gotten into you today? You’re not talking,” she said as she came to the table and took a chair of her own.

“April, I think we should talk.”

She looked taken aback, questioning what her husband could possibly need to discuss just as he arrived home. Usually they just chatted about their days. Nothing serious enough happened in their lives that they needed to talk like this with each other.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Did something happen at work? Was he fired? Or maybe he’d gotten into a car accident and now they’d need to

scrape together the money to buy another car.

Carl cleared his throat and looked into April's eyes. "I think we should get a divorce."

The only thing that floated through April's mind was their wedding day. She thought about her dress, walking down the aisle to the love of her life. Or who she thought was the love of her life. Now, she wasn't so sure. "What do you mean?"

It felt like time stood still. She questioned whether she heard him wrong.

"I think we should get a divorce," he repeated.

It echoed in April's mind. The words that would change her life from this point on. It felt like she'd run into a wall of bricks. The wind was knocked out of her; she knew she wouldn't be able to stand even if she wanted to.

"Carl, what are you talking about?"

His brows furrowed together. "Haven't you felt it? This distance between us? It feels like we've been drifting apart for ages. And now that Georgia has left for college, I feel like it's time."

*Couldn't even wait a week, she thought to herself. Just after she leaves for college, you're running like you can't get away from me fast enough.*

The man stared at her as her blood began to boil. Fury rose in her chest. After everything they'd done together. After everything she'd done for him. It was about to be thrown away as if it was nothing.

"Just like that? I can't believe this is really happening right now," she said aloud. April looked down at the ground, barely able to stomach looking at her husband of nineteen years. They wouldn't even make it to their twentieth anniversary, which April was looking forward to.

"Is this really that big of a shock to you?" Carl asked, sincerely wondering.

"Yes!" she yelled. "It's a huge shock! You just came in here while I was prepping for dinner and told me you want a divorce!"

Carl reached out to touch April's hand, but she pulled away, disgusted by the conversation so that she couldn't even think about touching him. "I just assumed you also felt this drift. I have things that I want to do. Dreams I have, accomplishments."

"That's your plan now? Dreams and accomplishments?"

"Yes, I want to travel the world. There are things I want to do, and I just... have to do them alone. I want excitement and adventure."

The words sounded familiar in April's head. She'd been thinking those same things for quite a while now. It felt like a dream, or maybe a nightmare. She wasn't sure which. Carl leaned forward, getting as close to her as he could. "I'm sorry it has to be like this. I didn't think you would be so surprised."

April thought about it for a moment. Devastation was the only way to describe the feeling of her chest sinking to the bottom of an ocean. But she couldn't think about that right now. She was certain this divorce would ruin her, but if she thought about this moment for too long, she knew she would lose control of all emotion.

Instead of arguing with Carl, she could only muster enough courage to ask, "What kind of dreams?"

"I've always imagined myself traveling the world. I'd go around country to country, learning about new cultures, finding ways to better myself, getting out into nature. And of course, I would visit circuses at each stop."

That stopped April in her tracks. "I'm sorry, you want to travel the world to see different circuses?" April's first thought was that he was making a joke. She wasn't even sure if that was the right word for more than one circus. Who was this man she'd been married to?

This wasn't the guy she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. That man wanted to settle down. He'd told her that they needed to work hard and get things done so that they could achieve their dreams. But she guessed now that it wasn't their dreams she was working towards, it was just his.

And his dream felt ridiculous.

"Yes, I want to travel the world and watch all different kinds of performances by the circuses."

She had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing. At least in her pain there was some humor. She couldn't imagine Carl at a circus. Sitting there with popcorn in his lap, watching a man twirl around a baton and people do acrobatics. They'd never even talked about a circus before.

Out of everything Carl could have said he'd like to do, he chose the circus.

"Are you joking with me?"

He shook his head. "No, this is my dream. And I want to do this, alone. I think it's in both of our best interests."

Her hands balled into fists. "You think this is best for me? You think leaving here is best? To go travel the world to see the circus?"

April could tell that the conversation wasn't going the way Carl thought it would. His brows furrowed and he leaned back in his chair. "Yes. I told you why I want a divorce and I told you that I want to travel and see the circus."

Carl acted like it was so easy. Obviously, she should immediately understand what he's talking about. She should be more kind, open to what he had to say. After he tore their life apart.

This was one of the darkest days in April's life. Yet, here she was, thinking about her husband sitting at the circus. The world was having a laugh at her life. It was all one big joke to the universe.

"Well, I'm going to stay at a hotel tonight. I'm sorry you had to hear this way. I thought this would be more amicable."

April kept her head down and waited until Carl couldn't see her face to cry. She went to the kitchen island and pulled out her bottle of Riesling. And April had another glass of wine.



## CHAPTER THREE

The sound of the front door slamming shut echoed through the house as Carl left, with a bag packed, for the hotel. Apparently, he couldn't stand staying another second with April, who felt like his abrupt leave was a stab to the chest.

April thought that she should have kicked him on the way out. Anything to make her feel more in control of this situation that seemed like it would upend her life.

*Enjoy the circus*, she thought to herself. She poured herself another glass of wine and sat in her comfortable recliner.

As she sipped her wine, she stared out the window into the backyard where her family used to play. April thought about a time when Carl tried to teach Georgia how to hit a baseball. He pitched one right down the middle, allowing Georgia to hit it as hard as she could straight at her father.

She smacked Carl right between the legs. He keeled over in pain and April had to pretend to feel bad for him. But inside, she always thought it was funny. He was the one who wanted to play ball with her. And if he had been better at it, he would have caught the ball, or at the very least moved out of the way.

The thought of that memory made April feel just a little bit better. Still, she wanted to talk to someone, anyone, about what she was going through. Sitting alone in the house she shared with her family that was no longer here was killing her inside.

As she stared at her phone, the only person that came to mind was Georgia. But she couldn't call her daughter and dump this information on her. She didn't know much about divorces and how they affected the children, but she knew that she didn't want to put Georgia in the middle of it all.

Out of the corner of her eye, out the same window that she remembered the fateful backyard baseball game, April saw a rabbit. It skidded across the yard, stopping every once in a while to survey the area. The beauty of the white rabbit made her heart skip a beat.

She always was one for animals. They took to her like she was one of

those whisperers that knew how to read their minds. Maybe she should have been in one of Carl's circuses. Would that make him pay attention to her? Probably not, she thought, as she sipped more of her white wine.

At first, she'd wanted to become a veterinarian. It was a match made in heaven on career day. But her mother reminded her of all the good opportunities that could come from being a lawyer. They had better pay, a wider scope of work, and the ability to grow in business and notoriety.

After some convincing, April decided she would go into law. At the time it made the most sense. She would work in environmental law, sub-specializing in cases regarding animals. It would keep her lifelong dream of working with animals and still fulfill her mother's dreams of a sophisticated, successful career.

When she got to law school and met Carl, he wanted her to go into corporate law. They made more money and had high profile cases. It was easier to get into. At the time, it felt like Carl made sense. So she went into corporate law.

And as she sat in that recliner drinking her wine, a thought occurred to her. She had lost all her dreams to fulfill everyone else's. Her life had been formed by other people, into a shape that was unrecognizable to her.

Not only did she let them choose the path her life followed, but she let that work consume her. With not even enough time to move her only child into college, April had nothing outside of her career. Her days were filled with mundane work she didn't even enjoy. How ridiculous that she let herself get this far into life without ever noticing.

This had been going on the whole time. This life she'd chosen to live wasn't hers at all. She'd been blind to it before, but now, alone and with almost nothing to lose, she came to her senses.

Tears fell down her cheeks as she thought about all she'd missed in this life that wasn't even hers. It wasn't anything like she'd imagined it to be when she was young. Though when she was young, she also thought that she could sneak a turtle into the house without her mother noticing.

In an attempt to feel better, April wiped her tears and reminded herself that her husband was a jerk and the only way to make things better was to push forward. She could do what she wanted with the time she had left.

This whole life needed a reboot. A husband leaving her, a child off to college, a job she hated. It meant she needed to find the reset button for this

life. What this fresh start looked like, she had no idea. But she knew it needed to be done.

If Carl could enjoy his circuses, she could find something she'd enjoy too. Whatever that may be. It was a new era and she was going to live her life to the fullest from here on out.

There was just one thing that she didn't understand. How do you know what you want to do after years of listening to everyone else?

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Now that the sun had gone down, April had another glass of her favorite white wine. Mostly because she deserved it for giving her life to a clown that wanted to go to the circus.

Trying to find a way to push forward, April tried to remember who she used to be before all of this came crashing down around her. The pictures started to look a little fuzzy the more she drank, but the memories still came to her just the same.

One picture in particular stood out. She was a small child wearing something her mother picked out, which meant it was gaudy. A leopard print onesie with bright colored pants and white shoes. She stood in front of a large cabin, in a pile of leaves under a tree in the front yard.

It was an old house back then, which meant now it was absolutely ancient. It wasn't perfect, but everything up at the house was perfect to April. She looked back on the memories fondly, thinking about her parents more than she usually did. In an effort to be grateful, she thanked her parents in her head for taking her there.

Technically she still owned it because her father left the house to her. But it'd been so long since she'd actually been there. They'd talked about bringing Georgia to stay each summer. Carl even promised to plan a trip to the house one summer in particular but he never did. She couldn't blame him. She was so busy that even a vacation sounded like a chore because of how much work she would need to catch up on when they came back.

It'd been so long that but for the usual paperwork for taxes on the property, April wouldn't have remembered she owned the place.

Now that she thought about it, she would love to be there. The wine made her think of things as better than they were. And she loved that house while

sober.

In this state, April pretended like she was there already. She would rake all the leaves in the front yard and sit on the deck reading a good book. It was like she was really there. Relaxation would overcome her as she listened to the trees wave in the wind. The island always felt like home, but now it felt like the trip away from home she always dreamed of.

Yes, this was what she really wanted to do. She opened her phone and began typing away on the keyboard. *Hey, Maxwell, I regret to inform you that I'm quitting, effective immediately.* Or at least, that's what she thought she'd typed out.

Before she hit send, she wondered if this would become something she would regret in the morning. But then she smacked that send button and knew she wouldn't be able to take it back.

Without hesitation, now that the biggest hurdle was crossed, she browsed online to find a plane ticket out of there. She needed more than some new hobby; she needed to physically escape this place that had kept her captive for so long.

For a moment, April got distracted by the photos on the travel site she visited for her ticket. They showed beautiful mountain ranges, fast moving cities, and beaches that stretched out for miles. Maybe some people wanted that, but April wanted to go to that island, to her cabin.

And though the photos had stumped her for a second, she ultimately followed through with her plan to book the tickets to her cabin. Everything was falling into place. April was proud of her work to get out of this situation. Yes, this was the only option that made sense to her.

After finishing her glass of wine, because April never wasted wine, she made her way upstairs to the bedroom. She looked over all their belongings with bitterness in her heart. "I'll show you," she said aloud.

In the closet, there sat a large black suitcase. It was enough for about half of her wardrobe, which she would need if she left the house for a week or maybe two, and that was pushing it. She debated pulling everything out of her dresser and off the hangers, but decided to at least try to keep it organized.

Messily, she pulled everything she wanted out and tried to fold it nicely. Her suitcase was full in twenty minutes, with clothes and no toiletries or necessary electronics. April looked at her work and felt proud of all that

she'd done.

She'd basically planned an entire trip for herself on a whim. She quit her job, booked a ticket, and even started packing. Morning April was going to be quite pleased with what she'd accomplished here tonight.

The empty wine glass sat on the nightstand as April lay down. Before she drifted off to sleep, April thought about her childhood at the cabin. Which floorboards creaked when you stepped on them, how the trees smelled right after a good rain, the feeling of sand between her toes.

Her memories collided with her dreams. April was going to do everything she ever dreamed of.

At least that's what she thought. A jobless, lost, regret-filled woman was going to head back to her childhood cabin. What could possibly go wrong?

## CHAPTER FOUR

When April awoke the next morning, things were not quite what she remembered. The first thing she noticed was that she was lying in the same clothes she'd put on yesterday morning. The next thing she noticed was that her head hurt and her stomach felt like an empty pit of acid.

The phone on her nightstand buzzed repeatedly. That's when she remembered the text she'd sent the night prior. She opened the messages and found that her message wasn't quite what she remembered either. "Hey Max. I regret to inform u that I'm quitting egfect immediately."

Not only was it not as professional as she remembered, but the spelling error was something she would never do. It explained the twenty missed calls she had from her boss, Maxwell.

That's when it hit her. She'd quit her job, booked a ticket, and planned to get out of town for a while. Why would she do that? Her whole life was here. Her job paid her well and she'd worked so hard to get where she was now. The phone rang again, Maxwell on the other end of the line.

She knew that he wouldn't be happy, but she answered it anyway. "Hello?"

"April! Thank God. I don't know what happened to you last night, but you better have been joking. Tell me you were joking."

She stuttered, struggling to make a decision. "Uh... Well..."

"Uh, well, what? You're coming into the office today at your normal time and getting this work done. And if you don't, I swear, April, I will make sure..."

Maybe it was the tone Maxwell had decided to use that day. Or maybe it was just because she'd been wanting to do this for so long it felt wrong to back out of it now. "You're never going to talk to me like that again," she said calmly into the phone. "I said I quit and I meant it."

She could hear him beginning to rev up, ready to let loose on her. So with a smile, she hung up the phone. It wasn't worth it to keep listening to what he had to say. She'd decided to quit and she was going to stick to it.

April stood and looked at the suitcase she thought she'd packed so nicely last night. It had only four work shirts, two dresses, and a pair of dress shoes.

There were no pants or shorts, not a single pair of underwear, and no socks. To add to the mess, tons of clothes were piled up that didn't make it into the suitcase.

It looked like a contemporary, abstract art piece. April laughed as she thought about how, the night before, she thought this would help her morning self. It took some time, but she was able to clean it up.

As she cleaned up the clothes, she found some fresh ones for herself. Something comfortable for her plane ride later this morning. April's face was puffy from a mix of the alcohol and tears last night. It took longer than usual to go through her skin care routine and put on the minimal amount of makeup she needed to feel good in public.

Then she packed up what she would actually need for a trip to the house on the island. Her piles of clothes slowly became folded and made their way to the suitcase. She even got her toiletries in order, using her fifteen different organizers. It was a tight fit, even for the biggest of her suitcases.

She tried pulling it shut, reorganizing to hopefully make more room, but the suitcase still wouldn't close. Eventually, she succumbed to lying across the top of the suitcase, uncomfortably angled, to try and get the best leverage to zip it all shut. "Oh, come on!" she yelled aloud. "Just shut!"

"April?" a voice said from her bedroom door. Her head snapped up to find Carl staring at her, frozen in the awkward position atop her suitcase. She slid off the suitcase and onto the floor to try and make things look more natural.

"Yes?" she asked as though nothing was happening.

Carl looked between the suitcase and his wife sitting on the floor with her legs awkwardly crossed and her arms still stuck at uncomfortable angles.

"Uh... What's going on here?"

"What does it look like? I'm trying to get this to close," April replied to her husband.

He finally looked away, trying to ignore whatever was going on with her. "I thought you would be at work. I was just coming to grab a few things I missed yesterday."

April stood and dusted herself off. "Oh yeah... I quit my job." She said it as if she didn't care. Like it was something she'd just forgotten to tell him, like running into someone at the store - not quitting her job of over seventeen years.

Carl turned to her with widened eyes. "What?"

“I quit my job,” she reiterated with a smile. Her husband was less amused by the news. He gaped and stared until he processed what she said.

“April, you can’t just quit your job.”

She scoffed and crossed her arms in front of her. “Yes, I can. I did. They already know.”

“And they were fine with it?”

April thought back to the phone call and how angry Maxwell had been. They didn’t exactly take to the idea of her leaving, but they didn’t really have a choice either. Just like how Carl didn’t have a say in her life decisions from here on out. “No, but I’m not sure they can say no. You quit a job and you move on.”

“Quit a job? This isn’t just a job for you. This is your career. You’ve worked your whole life for this career.” April listened to the speech while taking out articles of clothing to ensure her suitcase could zip up. “You should really think about what’s best for you.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. She was trying her best to keep the conversation civil, but at this point, Carl needed a reality check. “What’s best for me? You lost the ability to say what’s best for me when you decided we’d be getting divorced. That means you don’t get a say in my life anymore.”

Clutching his chest in shock, Carl couldn’t do anything but stand there, staring. He didn’t even help her with the bag she’d been struggling with on the floor. “But, but, you still can’t quit. That’s your job. You need a job.”

“I’m done letting you tell me what to do. I’ve quit my job and that’s my decision.” April stood up and rolled her bag out of the room.

Feeling good about herself, she walked straight out the front door and into her car. When she sat there with her suitcase in the back, it became very real. The anger she felt as Carl told her what she could and couldn’t do burned bright in her chest. It felt like a weight on her shoulders. And as she started up the car, it became lighter.

When she pulled out of the driveway, it was lighter still. And when she was down the road, she almost forgot that there was ever a weight there to begin with.

April was determined to get to the airport. She didn’t know what was waiting for her at the cabin, but she knew she was going to find out. She just hoped she wouldn’t come to regret it.



## CHAPTER FIVE

April's short glass of rosé almost spilled as the plane's turbulence hit a little bit harder than she anticipated. It felt like everyone looked over at her as she struggled to maneuver her glass before the red liquid stained the dark carpets lining the walkway.

For a moment, she wondered how her daughter made these flights so easily as she took off to Appalachian State. April was only heading a few hours away from Boone and the flight felt like torture.

All the waiting, the turbulence, the overthinking - it felt like an eternity before the captain made the announcement that they were landing soon.

She looked out the window through the clouds as they descended and saw glimpses of the ocean she once knew so well. The beauty of the beach town, Sandcrest, overwhelmed her at times.

When April was young, the island brought her magic. It was where she learned to be free. In her mind, she could still see the cobblestone path by her house that led to rickety stairs bringing them down to the beach. There was no greater sight than the beach on a summer day, the shine of the water as the sun hit it just right.

The decision to visit was made purely out of impulse, a longing to be back at this place again. But April worried about leaving everything she knew behind for even a short while. Old memories mixed with ones from just a few years ago.

Adrenaline coursed through her as the emotions melted together in her gut. She felt excited to be back and see all that she knew. But what worried her was her high expectations of the place she once knew and what might happen to the life she'd built without it.

This was so unlike April, to go off on her own just because she wanted to. Flying in an airplane hundreds of miles away from the comfort of her house, her job, her family. Or what her family used to be. Now she didn't mind forgetting Carl for a little while.

Carl didn't know much about Sandcrest. He didn't know that on Sundays the streets filled with noise as everyone went out to the markets. And that April used to ride on her father's shoulders eating an apple as they roamed

the vendors.

He didn't know that every summer April would beg until her parents gave in to visiting their vacation home just one more time.

April's memories that she held so dear were hers alone, she realized. As was the pain she felt when she thought about leaving the island with her parents for the last time.

The last night of vacation was traditionally reserved for dinner at the island's Italian restaurant. Her parents knew the owner who got them the best table in the house, overlooking the beach below.

"What are you getting tonight, sweetheart?" her mother asked her as she nudged closer. "The usual carbonara or something new this time?"

April just shook her head.

"Always the carbonara," her mother said with a smile. April looked over her menu to her father, not even casually staring at the waitress.

Caroline had shot a death glare at him, but he was too transfixed to notice.

Her mother cleared her throat. "So, are we ready?" She called the waitress over, who was already paying too much attention to the table. Her father looked the waitress up and down with a smile.

Even fourteen-year-old April could understand what was going on. And she was as uncomfortable as her mother. Though she had to admit, this wasn't the first time it happened. But it was the most blatant. "What can I get for you?" she asked, staring right into her father's smiling face.

Her father ordered something she couldn't remember, then her mother, then she ordered her own carbonara. "Richard, did you have to look at her like that?"

"Oh what, I'm not allowed to look at a waitress? I was talking to her." His voice always reeked of passive aggressive tones and deceit. He smirked even as he tried to lie straight to her mother's face.

Caroline smiled at April. She smiled back despite knowing exactly what was going on. They always thought she was too young, too naive, too ignorant to understand what transpired between them, but truthfully April had been catching on for months by that point.

Still her father stared. "Richard. You could at least wait until the end of dinner to gawk."

He rolled his eyes and looked down at April. "Do you think I was gawking? Do you know what that word means?"

Caroline clutched her chest with a hand. “Don’t you bring her into this.” They talked under hushed tones in the middle of the restaurant. “She doesn’t need to be in the middle. Take some responsibility, get yourself together, and we’ll talk about this when we get home.”

And with that, the family became silent. April had munched nervously on her bread. When their meals finally came, she didn’t have much of an appetite. The air was so thick with tension April could barely breathe.

They tucked each other’s leftovers into to-go containers and made their way back to the vacation home.

April knew what was coming. Her mom’s fingers gripped her tightly as they walked. Her father acted as if nothing was wrong, every once in a while a smile on his face.

Walking back towards the house, they could hear every step, every rock that their feet scraped; it sounded like rumbles of ground slowly splitting open. April’s world was shaking.

It hadn’t always been like that, but she knew the tension had been building for months. Desperately she wanted to fix it, like she could put a Band-Aid on her parent’s relationship.

That’s what their last trip to Sandcrest was, a Band-Aid on a wound too large to stop the bleeding.

When they’d finally arrived at the house, her mother asked her to go to her bedroom for the night and get ready for bed. April agreed, but only because she couldn’t sit in the discomfort much longer.

Her parents didn’t come to kiss her goodnight, or turn out the lights. She heard them yell until the early hours of the morning. Until finally it stopped. April heard the front door creak open, then shut.

It was hard to go to sleep after that. April stayed up and stared at the ceiling, wondering what would become of her family. This house was the only place she wanted to be. If she didn’t leave the bedroom, maybe everything would be fine, like it was before. She didn’t need to walk out of there.

Unfortunately, she did the next morning. The house was dead quiet, except for her suitcase that she dragged behind her. Silence threatened to choke her as she tried not to make a single sound.

And she sat beside her mother on their flight home.

Young April watched out the window as they left her happy place. It was

the last time April remembered being that happy. Her childhood was all sunshine and roses until that last day.

That day they left the island and never went back as a family again.

Their divorce had been messy. April remembered seeing her father with various women throughout the remaining four years of her girlhood.

Thankfully, he traveled so much she barely saw him enough for it to matter.

Not only was he distant from the family he once knew, but April had been shipped off to some boarding school for her last years of high school.

Something her mother thought would whip her into shape, as if she'd been called into the principal's office too many times instead of just being a projection of her mother.

A projection that Caroline couldn't stand to see any longer.

So her mother grew distant and cold, but not any colder than her peers at the new school. April was never smart enough, clever enough, or well behaved enough to do right by anyone.

Caroline insisted constantly that she do better than she was. "Study more, no more of those campus parties." As if April had enough friends to attend one of those.

"You'd better clean yourself up so you can get to know some new colleagues. Networking is the path to success." April scoffed on the plane just thinking about her mother's overbearing demands. Nothing she did was right. "If you marry well, then you won't have to worry about things so much. You'll be taken care of."

April chuckled in her seat thinking about that one. She'd married well and look at where she'd ended up. About to get a divorce, single again.

"Become a lawyer. You'll be good at it and you'll make money. It's the only way to succeed."

And yet, she'd quit her job and ended up here. Another bout of anxiety rushed through her. Everything her mother wanted from her, she left behind to get on this plane.

April knew it would be worth it once she stepped foot on the sandy beaches and soaked up the sun. This quaint town was everything she wanted, needed even. It was going to fix everything.

The seatbelt sign flashed on as the plane began its descent. April threw back what remained in her wine glass before strapping herself into her seat again. The buckle clicked in a symphony of others doing the same.

A woman sitting a row or two back was gripping the armrests for dear life. Her eyes were squeezed shut. April realized that she felt a lot like this woman, only on the inside.

And for both of them, the terror would go away when they landed. The woman would feel better because she survived the plane ride and April would feel better because she could finally take a deep breath. She was going to forget all the troubles of the past few days and explore the place she once loved.

The place she still loved because it wasn't back home in the city. It wasn't with her husband at the circus. It was Sandcrest, the island town that held all her hopes and dreams.

As the plane continued its descent, April looked at the island with more hope than she ever did before. The last place she was truly happy felt closer by the second. The plane shuttered with its own kind of excitement.

All she could do was pray that the island would bring her as much peace as it once did before. If it gave her an ounce of the joy she'd had when she was young, it would be worth it. Any piece of happiness right now would have given April everything she needed.

The plane stuttered across the runway as they finally hit the landing strip. A select few cheered as they came to a halt.

“Passengers, we have now landed at Charleston International Airport.”

## CHAPTER SIX

The car sped down the highway, faster than April typically ever drove. But this was an exception. She would bend the rules just this once in order to get to the island faster.

It wasn't just that she was excited; she was also starving and ready for lunch. The wind brushed her hair past her ears at increasingly fast speeds. The man at the car rental place offered her a simple and practical Dodge Durango, but she opted for the sleeker and more expensive BMW.

After thirty full minutes of driving, she made it to the coastline. Ocean as far as she could see, golden beaches and tall oak trees - it was a dream.

April turned onto a bridge, the only one that brought people to Sandcrest. The sun was at its peak, light streaming down through the clouds. The waves sparkled at that time of day, something April had forgotten until she saw them again.

As soon as she crossed the bridge and hit the first mile of road on the island, something caught her eye. Movement, ever so slight, to her left made her stop the car on the side of the road. Was this what she thought it was?

April stepped out of the car, squinting into the large trees hiding what she thought she saw. Her eyes couldn't have been getting this bad, not already. No, she'd seen something before she stopped.

The trees rustled without a sign of life, but soon without the noise of the running car, a long head peeked out from the tree line. Then another, and another. Three wild horses, two gray and one brown walked out from hiding and began to nibble on the grass in the field beside her.

Trying her hardest not to make a noise, April walked a step closer. She sat down at the edge of the field, taking in the beauty of the horses. The brown one whipped its head up and down, sputtering and neighing to the others. They gathered around and continued grazing.

Mesmerized by the sight, April didn't move out of fear of disrupting them. She watched in wonder of them. She'd forgotten that wild horses roamed the island year-round. When she was young, she'd ask her parents to take her to the fields to see if they'd come out.

Half of the time, they found them. Then the other half, the horses were

nowhere to be found. That's what made the times they showed themselves to April that much sweeter. As she sat on the grass and took in the scene, she noticed other animals there too.

Three squirrels scattered up the tree trunks. Several birds flew together in the distance, some diving into the water to pick up a quick meal. And then she noticed the rabbits carefully hopping between bushes to keep themselves hidden from the noises of every other creature.

April realized this is why she wanted to work with animals. There was something about it that was so peaceful and fulfilling. A scene like this, where everything was beautifully balanced, was another reason to love the island.

Leaves twisted in the wind and fell to the grass. She watched them fall like raindrops from the sky.

One of the horses drew April's attention back when it began to swing its head at the others. Then it would run away, until it noticed none of them were following. Three more times it tried to play, but no one would budge.

"You need some time to have fun, too? I guess that's what everybody's looking for these days," she said to herself. Nature wasn't perfect, but it was magnificent.

How had she gone from wanting this serenity to working in an office on weekends for a bunch of jerks? April was more lost than she thought. Her job, her marriage, her life was getting out of hand, so far gone from what she wanted with her life.

It made her sad to think about it, so instead of sitting much longer she got back into her car. Instead of starting it right away, she looked out the window until she thought the animals were at a far enough distance. Then she started the car and drove carefully back onto the main road.

April smiled the entire way to the town square, where her cheeks hurt from the grin across her face.

Sandcrest was in its own magical bubble. When you traveled over the bridge to get to the island, you were transported into something more beautiful than you could have ever imagined. That's what April felt as she drove around town. The satisfaction of something so great she didn't have words to describe it.

Her chest felt lighter, the air bringing her a fresh breath. The breeze from the ocean pushed life into her. Everything felt new and bright.

And April hadn't felt that in a long time.

It was like stepping into a whole new world. Even as she walked into the little café she'd been in a thousand times before, it still felt new.

The sign above the counter read 'Millie's' in red letters that had faded to a darker maroon. She recognized the sign, the bar stools that sat by the counter, and the wooden tables with scratches from the wear and tear. But she didn't recognize any of the people inside, not even the workers.

Had it been so long that she'd forgotten their faces? Or was it really so long ago that everyone had left and new people had come in?

A middle-aged woman behind the counter called out to her. "Come on in, honey. Grab a seat anywhere." Her welcoming smile made April feel at home. It was like she already belonged. She grabbed a seat at one of the smaller tables near the back of the café; it creaked as she sat down.

That same waitress filled up the coffees of the two men sitting at the countertop stools, then walked over to April. "Here's a menu. Our specials today are a wild rice soup or a flatbread pesto sandwich. Do you know what you'd like or will you need some time?" Her voice was soft and inviting, like she really cared.

April shook her head. "All I know is I need a coffee. I'll need some time to look at the menu though."

"Of course. I'll be right back with that." The waitress nodded and walked into the kitchen.

Just as she was coming out with the coffee, the two men at the counter began laughing. Not just a light chuckle, but a hardy laugh from their guts. "Oh, don't you mind them," the woman said as she carefully set the mug down in front of April, along with a platter of creams and sugars. "They're always like this. Scaring off the tourists."

"Oh, I'm not a tourist," April said instinctively. Then she really thought about it. She didn't technically live here. It'd been years since she'd visited the house. Maybe she was a tourist of her own kind. "Not technically I guess."

The waitress's brows raised. "Pardon me for assumin'. I guess with all the tourists we get running in here... I haven't seen you before. Are you new?"

That made the men at the counter turn towards them. "Fresh meat, eh?" The man wore a denim button-up shirt with a white tank top underneath. "We haven't had any of that in a while."



The other man, slightly younger and wearing some kind of work uniform chuckled. “Yeah, Chuck here was the last new guy to enter town and look at ‘im now. He was twenty when he moved here.”

Chuck frowned at the younger man. “I’m older than you. Why don’t you show me some kind of respect?”

The woman leaned down to April and whispered, “They have this fight every other day.” Then she raised her voice at the men. “Chuck. Barry. Are the two of you ever going to be nice to each other?”

Chuck looked at Barry. Barry looked at Chuck. And in perfect harmony they replied, “Nope.”

“Then why don’t you stop being friends and meeting here every day. You’re scaring away new folk and tourists alike,” she told them with a threatening look. When she turned back to April, she had a smile on her face. “Now, honey, what can I get you?”

In all the commotion, April had completely forgotten to look through the menu. By now, she was too hungry to take another few minutes. “I’ll just take that soup, please. Thank you.”

“Of course,” the woman said, collecting the menu from the table. “And my name is Melonie, in case you ever need it.”

“ April,” she responded with a smile.

As Melonie walked back to the kitchen to put in April’s order, she walked past the men at the counter and smacked them both on the back of their heads with the menu. April couldn’t help but laugh to herself.

This is the kind of environment she remembered about Sandcrest. The people were friendly, but they had their own big personalities. In the city, you can find any kind of person. But here, the people were special, each bringing something different and unique to the table.

April sipped her coffee and watched as a few more patrons walked in. She didn’t recognize a single person that walked through the doors. If she had to guess, it was because her family didn’t talk to many of the locals. When they were here, they were on the beach, in the woods, at the few restaurants they loved.

The café was never one of those places they went to frequently. Maybe that was why she’d felt so at home, yet everything was unrecognizable.

Chatter filled the small café. April caught snippets of conversation here and there, but nothing important. She ate her soup in quiet reflection of the

love she had for the town.

When she was done and only sipping the last drops of her coffee, Melonie showed up to slide her a bill and take her dishes. “You want any more of that coffee?”

April shook her head. “No, thank you.”

The waitress turned, about to walk away but stopped herself. “And April? What was your last name? Just so I can tell all the people about the new resident in town.”

Though her smile stayed plastered across her face, inside April felt conflicted. Had she lied earlier when she said she wasn’t a tourist? She wasn’t staying forever, but her family had owned a house here for ages. “I’m technically not a new resident.”

Melonie just stared at her, blinking, and waiting for an explanation. “Well what are ya then? You seem awfully mysterious. You going to tell me what you’re doing here?”

April struggled to find the words to explain. She stuttered when she first spoke. “I... I used to... My family had a vacation home here for generations. I’m going to stay in it for a little while. Or a long while. I’m not actually sure yet. This whole trip was kind of on a whim.”

She was so used to being well-spoken. She was a lawyer, a strong woman in the courtroom. But here, she was just another person staying in town. And she was confused about her own intentions.

“Ah, I see,” Melonie said, eyeing April up and down. Her body shifted weight onto her back foot as she tried to place a face with a name. April smiled as if that would make it easier for her to identify her. “What’s your family’s name?”

“Faith.” It was her maiden name and not one that slipped easily off her tongue anymore. Though she thought she’d better get used to saying it. “We own-”

April was interrupted by an eruption of laughter from Chuck and Barry. It was so jarring that even Melonie turned to look at them, surprised. They were halved over in their seats, barely able to catch their breaths. As Melonie turned around, April was expecting another apology on behalf of the men, but instead of annoyance, April saw a smile across the woman’s face.

“Did you say Faith?” Chuck managed to get out between guttural roars. When April nodded her head, the boys laughed even harder than before,

which she didn't realize was possible.

"Now, boys," Melonie said with a smile. "Give the girl some time to adjust before you lay into her."

"Lay into me? About what?"

Melonie opened her mouth to say something, but then stopped herself. April almost began laughing, just to feel like she was a part of the joke somehow, instead of feeling like everyone was making fun of her.

"What?" she asked. "What is it?"

They all looked at her, smiles wide across their faces. Something was telling her that this trip was going to be more than she bargained for.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

As April stood in the front yard of her family's property, she couldn't believe her eyes. It wasn't exactly how she'd pictured it. In fact, it felt like a completely different house.

The home that was once a magnificent vacation home now sat looking like an abandoned ghost house. A breeze passed through the island, bringing a chill up her spine. Even the island thought this place was cursed. She now understood everything that Chuck and Barry had said at the café.

"It's an old legend around here that somebody from the family would come back and live in it once again."

"Yeah, and we've been telling it for years. No one ever showed up to fix the place. So we called it the abandoned mansion."

Chuck and Barry had slapped their knees until they stopped chuckling at her. "We created a myth that the people who used to live there are ghosts now. Or the new owners would come back and avenge their deaths by tearing the place down. But I guess, that's you. So if you're going to fix it up, just be careful of the sounds coming from the attic," Chuck had said.

Their words echoed in April's head. She'd scoffed at the word 'mansion' at the café, but looking at it now, she certainly realized what they meant. It was larger than she remembered it, with intricate carvings now dusty and grayed.

The empty fields to her left were once over two hundred acres of farmland. Years and years ago it was taken care of by Richard's family. It was a long line of owners on her father's side, all the way to her great-great-grandparents. It was only when her parents got divorced that her mother received it, for no other reason than neither one of them cared to have it.

Her father had become too much of a free spirit to be tied down to a house and her mother hated to look at anything that her father had stepped foot in. So it had all come down to April, the only one who still cared about the place even in its fractured state.

She looked at the tree she once collected leaves under and noticed the overgrown branches and the even tougher roots at the bottom of its trunk. The leaves on the edges of each branch were still strong, greener than ever.

A vibration came from her back pocket, distracting her from the beautiful sight of her childhood vacation home. The phone read that it was Maxwell, her old boss.

She wasn't going to let him ruin her time here. Whatever he wanted, it could wait.

April took a moment to thank mother nature for keeping at least one thing sacred at this poor estate. "You looked out for the one thing I really needed to see thrive," she said to the air.

The outside of the house was in poor form, but maybe the inside wasn't as bad. That was what April wanted to think as she approached the front door. The key in her front pocket unlocked it. Her hand grabbed the cold metal handle without turning it and instead she took a deep breath.

Whatever was in there, she was going to need some kind of strength to get through it. It was her first time seeing it like this. Disheveled and abandoned.

She closed her eyes and imagined what it was like back when she was a child. The large furniture pieces delicately placed throughout the rooms to make it feel inviting and spacious at the same time. The family had kept some original parts of the house and the furniture that was in it. But with each new owner, things here and there were updated.

The built-in on the living room wall was original to her grandparents, but the television was updated by her father. The kitchen cabinets were original to the house, but every owner since had painted them a different color or added a different finish. The one she remembered most was the off-white color her mother had insisted on.

It was almost like April was creating a floor plan in her mind, trying to ground herself to something she knew. She knew where each room was, the color of its walls and if it had wood flooring or carpet. That was a place to start.

With her eyes still closed, she slowly opened the door. The great entrance was wide and tall with intricate carvings on a rounded doorway leading to the living room. It revealed the staircase just inside, to the back of the living room and in front of a bedroom and bathroom. It used to be her space when they visited.

When April opened her eyes, she gasped with shock at the state of the home she once knew. The intricate carvings were covered by cobwebs as if they were no longer there. The couch was full of dust, covering its original

cream color to make it gray.

Just the smell alone was enough to topple her over, like something had died in the attic and had been rotting for a few years. Which was probably what happened.

April walked into the kitchen, remembering how her grandmother used to make pancakes in the mornings when she was extremely young. It was one of her first memories of the house.

The cabinets weren't the same color now, but they weren't the color her mom had asked to paint them either. They had yellowed, smelling of mildew from something left behind. April just hoped it wasn't as rotten as the dead animal she predicted was in the ceiling.

There was one piece of the kitchen the house managed to keep nice. The wooden countertops looked as if someone had just wiped them down. Sure, there was a little bit of dust here and there. But otherwise you couldn't say if they'd been installed today or thirty years ago.

She slid a finger across it, avoiding the sink that was bone dry, then lifted her finger to see the damage: only a light dusting.

It was the dining room next. Her mother had wanted to get rid of the formal dining room in order to build a giant pantry. Her father wouldn't let her, said it was tradition to keep it for special occasions. Even though they never used the space for its true intentions, everyone was glad they kept it.

It meant a lot to keep something that used to hold the entire family for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. April tried to think back, remembering any time she spent with the family when she was young. But nothing came to mind.

Her mother had said she'd been to one of those dinners, but she could never remember.

April walked around the house, taking in the damage and what needed to be done. When she got to the master suite, it was all too overwhelming.

The sheets on the bed were just like she remembered. A navy blue sheet set and a large cream-colored comforter. It was ruffled ever so slightly, as if someone had just gotten up. If there were animals in the house, the bed would have been the warmest place to lay. April had to hope that there weren't any under the covers.

She could never let herself into this room before. It took a special kind of preparation to walk in. And it was because of this very scene. Tears streamed

down her face.

Her heart felt like it was pounding in her throat. Her blood was rushing through her, warming her cheeks and hands.

The corner of the comforter laid across the left side of the bed, facing the door. April could almost swear she saw an indent from where her mother sat.

“I’m sorry you had to hear any of that last night,” she’d said. “We didn’t mean to keep you up.”

“Where’s Dad?” April asked her.

Her mother shrugged and half-smiled. She pat the bed beside her and April sat next to Caroline. “He’s gone away for a while. He told me to tell you that this isn’t your fault. You’ll see him soon, just not with me. We’re going to fly home together. Do you have your things packed?”

April nodded her head. She wasn’t sure what to say to make her mom feel better. No words would come out; she was just a teen with no understanding of marriage. It was the last time she’d seen her mother show pure emotion. After that, she became the stone cold mother April knew today.

As she wiped away a tear, she couldn’t believe that after all this time her parents’ divorce was still getting to her. But given the circumstances, she understood why she was so emotional. After all, she did drop her entire life to come out here. She thought she’d be coming to a pristine estate for a relaxing getaway, but boy was she wrong.

April walked up to the large wardrobe where her mother kept her dresses. Surely those would be gone, but it was a beautiful wood piece April always adored. With a creak, the doors opened and dust flew into her face.

Coughing and waving the air, she tried to free herself from the disgust of how much dirt had built up. That’s when she saw it. In the corner of the wardrobe, sitting against the wood at the back of the cabinet was a spider bigger than she’d ever seen. Though, she’d only been witness to tiny spiders that tried to touch her feet at the park.

This was at least the size of a quarter with legs that should have created earthquakes at each step, she thought. “Oh my God,” April said aloud. “Stay in there.”

Carefully, she stepped downstairs to the kitchen where she knew there were extra paper towels in the cupboard. She opened up a pack and began folding several layers of the roll onto her hand. Then, she grabbed her least favorite pair of sneakers from her rental car and headed back up to the room.

When she got there, she slowly opened the cabinet again. April slammed her shoe inside, shutting it as quickly as she opened it. Carefully, she opened the doors to the wardrobe again, watching all its corners to ensure the spider wouldn't get the jump on her. "Please be dead," she whispered to herself over and over. "You have to be dead."

The doors creaked open once more and she put up the paper-toweled hand to shield herself for whatever came next. But then, something even worse. The spider was nowhere to be found. April checked under her shoe, by slowly removing it with the covered hand.

Not there.

It was then that April knew she had to get out.

She stormed downstairs and threw the paper towels on the kitchen counter. Thankfully, she hadn't brought in her luggage yet so she could just get into her car and drive away, forgetting any of this ever happened.

Nothing was worth waking up to that spider crawling around her face.

As she stomped back out to the car, locking the front door so no other vermin could make their way inside, she opened her phone to a hotel booking site. If she couldn't stay at this house, she might as well enjoy her getaway nearby. This island is where she wanted to be. And she could still have that dream; it just wouldn't be at the house.

After she opened the car door, ready to hop inside and drive off, April heard a familiar noise. So familiar that she could have sworn she'd heard it earlier that day.

She turned her head slowly. A mere thirty feet away stood a dark brown horse, its head bobbing up and down. It stared at April.

Blinking a couple of times, she tried to clear away the possibility of a mental break. As many times as she blinked, she opened her eyes and the horse was still there. It was real.

April looked in the car and grabbed her purse that sat on the driver's seat. Back on the plane, the flight attendant had given her a packet of crackers before their descent. It was hard not to make a noise as she pulled it open. April was even careful not to close the door of her car out of fear of scaring it away.

The horse approached her, trying to grab the bag from her hands. "No, no," she said with a giggle. "Here, let me help you." April grabbed several crackers and laid them out on her hand, offering them to the horse.



Gently, its lips tickled the palm of her hand, picking up the crackers one by one. It left behind a layer of mud and grime from its mouth.

April laughed, wiping her hand off against her pants. Horses were common around Sandcrest, but what wasn't common was one eating out of a hand. They were supposed to be wild, sometimes they were even crazy, running around the island causing torment to the locals whose land they tore up.

The horse let April run her hand up its face. But as soon as the crackers ran out, it began to back away. When it was in the middle of the fields, April watched it bolt into the distance. The sun shone off its dark coat, reflecting a vibrant glow. This is exactly why April wanted to come to the island.

She was thankful the horse interrupted her booking. Because she didn't need it any longer. She was going to stay at the house, even if it didn't have A/C, Wi-Fi, or great plumbing. April was determined to make it work, whatever that looked like.

Even if she had to spend every waking moment cleaning with blistered hands, she would do it to make this place everything she wanted it to be. It could become something wonderful, she just knew it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The general store was nestled between a tiny post office and a large hardware store. Between the three places, April wondered why anyone would need to shop anywhere else. There were farmers, but they sold farm supplies at the general store. There was no need to go elsewhere.

Along the road was the main parking area. April had to parallel park, which she hadn't done in years. It wasn't until she entered the store that she found out there was a parking lot around the back that had more than enough room for the store to hold its capacity.

But she liked the front better anyway. It had a walking path with a large fountain in the middle, one that had been there since she was a kid. She remembered flipping coins into the nearly empty fountain and wishing that she would see more wild ponies that day, or that the waves would be calmer so she could go swimming the next day.

April entered the general store and began browsing. She wasn't sure what she would need to stay at the house, but she knew she couldn't sleep in the beds, drink the water, or use the stove that hadn't been turned on for at least fifteen years.

So she started in the camping section. There weren't many tents to choose from, but the biggest one held three people and that seemed like enough space to hide in. Her shopping cart buzzed as she pushed it through aisle after aisle.

For at least five minutes she stared at the lanterns wondering which was best. Battery powered? Solar powered? The biggest one or the one with the strongest light?

She picked out the biggest battery powered lantern and began to read the back of it, confused by all the jargon she was unfamiliar with.

"Is that who I think it is? Little 'ole Faith needed to pick up a few things for the house? Didn't believe us when you left, did you?" Of course Chuck and Barry were at the general store. They were everywhere in this town.

Barry waved over some people from down the aisle. "You guys, come here! We told you she was here."

One man and one woman stepped into the aisle and took a look at April.

Her cheeks became hot at the embarrassment. “Yes, yes. I’m April Faith. I’m here for the house.”

The four began to chuckle with each other. The woman, in dirty overalls with long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, said, “I’m sorry for laughing. We just never thought you’d come in our lifetime. It’s been thirty years since someone stayed there.”

“See what I mean, Cheryl,” Barry said, elbowing the woman.

Chuck nudged the man. “Yeah, Vernon. She’s real!”

Vernon decided to chime in on April’s circumstances as well. “We were all sure that it would turn into one of those legends, where someone died there and haunted it. The family abandoned it after something spooky happened. You know the type.” He looked April up and down, sizing her up.

She was suddenly very aware that her casual clothes weren’t as casual as theirs. Hers were pristine, recently washed, while they all had caked dirt up their blue jeans. Was this going to be what she looked like as she grew accustomed to this place and her new role in town? Or was she always going to feel like an outsider in her two hundred dollar jeans and even more expensive sneakers?

“You sure you’re gonna be able to stay there? Have you visited the place? Nothing like the Ritz.”

April would have been offended if she hadn’t just almost booked herself a hotel. It wasn’t like she didn’t consider going somewhere nicer than the dump of a house she’d just decided to fix up. But the comment hurt, nonetheless. “I’m just coming from visiting the house, actually. Sure, it needs a lot of work. But I’m up for it,” she replied, trying to speak as confidently as she possibly could.

The four erupted with laughter. April could only sigh. She understood now why it was so funny that she would work on the house. It was in bad shape, worse than she’d ever seen. This wasn’t just a clean-up project; it was an entire home renovation.

April thought of those shows on television where people fixed up their properties. The easy fixes that the stars worked on while the contractors did all the other heavy lifting. She had no easy fixes. She couldn’t simply paint the molding and ‘make this living room look like a thousand bucks.’

“I wish you good luck,” Cheryl said with a hand extended. “You need anything, don’t be afraid to ask. And if you don’t make it, that’s alright too.”

It's tougher than it looks to do all that work."

April was afraid to ask. The stubborn side of her wanted to make sure everyone knew she could do this on her own. She saw the house with her own eyes and still saw the possibilities. That was the real hard part. But, she could do anything.

She hadn't even been there a day and people were already laughing at her, doubting her abilities. They were right to question her, but this felt like overkill.

She'd always belonged. In college, at the law firm, she felt like she always had a place. Even if she hated it, there was a desk waiting for her where she could set up anything she wanted. April had never been anywhere like the house, even just to visit.

This renovation was more than she bargained for, that was for sure.

"Come on now, guys. Let's leave her to her shopping. I'm sure she has a lot of work to do. Though, you better get back before dark... The ghosts are less afraid to pounce in the dead of night," Chuck said with a smirk.

The four of them walked out of the aisle, whispering to each other as if April didn't know they were still talking about her. She put a hand to her forehead.

What had she gotten herself into?

She pretended not to care about the stares as she continued throughout the store. Word travels fast when people are airing out your business in front of everyone. At least Melonie had the decency not to tell everyone at the diner while April sat there. Though who knows what she did when April walked out the front doors.

Loading up her cart with blankets, snacks, a camp stove, and an air mattress, April finally finished her shopping, at least for that day; she would need to get more as she figured out what she was doing with the house.

The checkout line was long because there was only one worker at the counter. The other checkout aisles were barren. The people in line in front of her, a mother and father with three children, all stared. "I haven't seen you around here before," the dad said, his voice big and bolstering.

April gave them the story she'd been telling all day. She was here for the house, they'd live here for ages. The family, even the children, stared back at her in bewilderment. "I know it's crazy," she began.

"No, no. I wouldn't call it crazy," the mom said. "I'd call it... ambitious.

Good for you.”

At least one person was positive about the whole thing. If she could call the hesitation in the mom’s voice positivity. She hoped that she could because it was the only sense of optimism she’d gotten today. And she was going to have to take it.

After checking out, she piled everything up into the rented BMW out front. As soon as her door slammed shut, her fingers rubbed her forehead. The only thing she could feel was defeat. A day as long as this had been, she deserved something to cheer her up.

Her stomach rumbled and April realized she hadn’t eaten since the café, where she only had soup. Again, she was ravenous. There had to be a better way to remember that she needed food.

April’s phone vibrated in her pocket. As she pulled it out, she saw the name she most dreaded read out across the screen. Maxwell. She let it go to voicemail yet again. There was no time for sitting here listening to another lecture when she could be filling her stomach with something delicious.

Not ready to figure out the camp stove and cook something that night, April decided to make her way to a restaurant down the street. The large sign out front said ‘Giant’s.’ People were hurrying inside, so she knew it must be good.

She’d never been to the burger joint before; it moved in ten years ago according to the sign out front. Upon opening the doors, the first thing April noticed was the sign that told her to seat herself. Then she noticed that the people she had seen rushing in were the only people there.

Now she wondered if it was as good as she originally thought. Maybe it was terrible, with just the few fans of the restaurant seated with her. “I’ll be with you in a moment,” a man called out from the kitchen window.

If this was how the place was run, she was surprised there were customers there at all. Most restaurants have hosts to greet their guests, or waitresses that will come to serve you. Why was this man yelling at her from the small window into the kitchen?

As he pushed open the door, April was actually taken aback by his appearance. He didn’t look like some teen waiter that loitered around in the back. He was clean shaven, though his hair wilted down on one side of his face as he walked towards her table.

He was dressed in worn jeans and a tank top, but the clean white apron on

top made him look professional. Like he knew exactly what he was talking about, like he belonged in a five star restaurant in New York instead of this small town burger joint.

“What can I get you?” he said with a smile that threw April for a loop. The wrinkles at the sides of his lips intrigued her, but she made sure she didn’t stare too long at them.

She pulled up the menu in front of her face to hide the blush of her cheeks. “Can I ask a question?”

He looked around the restaurant, then shrugged. “Sure, I got nothing else going on.”

“Why is this place nearly empty? I know it’s late for dinner, but places around here are usually packed with people. It’s seven, not midnight.”

The man’s hand hit his chest as he feigned an injury. “Ouch. Okay, well if you must know. We’re approaching the end of tourist season. This is the best it’s going to get this time of year. Only the locals will come for the next few months.”

She felt bad for asking such a hurtful question. After all that happened to her today, she should have known a thing or two about that. “Right, sorry. I was just wondering.”

“That’s alright,” he replied. “Do you want a drink to start out? We have a ton of beers on tap. Otherwise, our wine list is right here.” He pulled out a small piece of laminated paper from the napkin holder and handed it to April. As she looked it over, she was impressed with the list.

“I’ll just take any zinfandel you have.” It was a white wine kind of night, just a little something to take the edge off.

The man nodded his head. “Sure, I’ll get you that right away. Take a look at the menu if you’d like something to eat. Our special today is a delicious breakfast buffet burger. It has hashbrowns, a fried egg, two different cheeses, and bacon.”

“Oh my gosh, that sounds fantastic. I’ll just take that,” she replied, salivating at the idea of the burger in front of her.

He smiled like he knew all along that she’d order it. “Of course. I’ll start on that right now.” As the man began to walk back to the kitchen, he yelled at the other guests. “You be careful tonight, Geno! I don’t want to have to call Carol again.”

April liked his voice. When it was loud and assertive and when it was

sweet, asking her what she wanted and buttering her up. Within a minute, she had her glass of wine in front of her. As she sipped it, she took the time to walk around the restaurant and look at the photos from local events.

Some of them were school sports, different teams making it to state. Rarely did any of them say ‘state champions’ and not ‘state qualifiers.’ Others were from the local fairs, farmer’s markets, beach days.

This place wasn’t made for tourists, though April was sure many of them came to eat the good food Giant’s had to offer. It was made for the locals with reminders of how good this community was. The walls were a love letter to Sandcrest.

After a few minutes, April looked around for the man to ask him about a picture on the wall, one that looked like him. But he was nowhere to be seen, until a moment later when his face appeared in the small window to the kitchen. He had a hair net on and was talking to someone behind the bar.

The man who took her order was the cook? Was he always the cook or a waiter who needed to fill in at the last minute? Suddenly she wasn’t so sure how good the burger was going to taste. Still, she knew she needed to give it a chance. If everyone liked the food here, why not give this guy a shot at making it.

April sat back down at her table until the man returned. This time, his pristine apron was covered with small, round blotches of grease. “Here you are,” he told her as he set the food down. It smelled delicious.

The soft music hummed over them. He watched as she took her first bite. With a full mouth, April mumbled, “Oh my God. Delicious.”

“I knew you’d like it,” he said with a smirk.

“I would say compliments to the chef, but it seems as though I’m talking to him,” April replied between bites.

He nodded. “Name’s Nigel.”

“Nice to meet you, Nigel. I’m April.”

Nigel smiled, a warm smile that lit April up. “That’s a nice name.”

“I saw a picture on that wall over there,” she said, pointing to the one she had questions about. A man that looked oddly like Nigel stood beside two other men who were nothing like him. They were both rugged, in messy clothes with scraggly beards. “And I was wondering who those people are. There’s a description of every other photo in here except that one.”

“That’s me and my two best friends. Hank, who’s behind the bar right

now. And Phillip who moved out of town a few months ago to get closer to his wife's family."

"And what about you? You have a wife?" She couldn't look at him straight on because she could feel the heat in her cheeks. Why did she wish he would say no? This was her first time meeting this man. She'd been married for so long; is this what it felt like to actually flirt again?

"No, no wife. Came close a couple of times." He gave a hearty laugh. "What about you? Family?"

She thought about her life the past few days. April knew she could lie and tell this man that she did have a husband back home. But what good would it do pretending? "A daughter. And I used to have a husband."

"I see." He said it plainly, matter of fact.

April nodded along as she ate her burger. As the two talked, Nigel eventually sat down opposite her. "What's brought you into town?"

She dreaded this question. Again, she would be laughed at, ridiculed for wanting to come here. "My last name is Faith. I'm-"

"Oh! You live in that house? Beautiful property. I was really sad to see it left all these years. Glad you're back."

He was so genuine that April almost teared up at the sincerity. No one had talked to her like that all day. "Yeah. Happy to be back."

April finished her burger as fast as she could, her hunger finally subsiding as she slipped the last few fries into her mouth. Nigel slid her card to Hank behind the bar. When she received the check she noticed that she'd gotten some kind of discount because it wasn't as much as she was expecting.

Nigel stayed seated with her until she finished the last sip of her wine.

A few more patrons filtered into the bar, calling out Nigel's name. "Well, I better get going. Thanks for the talk. It's always nice to see a new face around here." As he stood, he never broke eye contact with her. Even as he backed up to the bar with people trying to get his attention, his eyes never left her. "I hope to see you again real soon."



## CHAPTER NINE

Darkness crept into every corner of the house the first night April slept in the living room. She knew there wasn't room to fully set up her tent in the corner of the space, so she instead made a fort out of blankets and sat beneath them.

The air mattress would have to do for now, but there had to be something else that could make it a bit more home-y in her little makeshift room. She shuffled around on the mattress, trying to find a position that worked for her. When she couldn't get herself to settle in, she decided to sit on the edge of the bed and think instead.

It took her longer than she thought to get things set up and comfortable. She'd swept the floor and mopped it with a wet paper towel, but it still felt grimy. It was something about seeing the place like this, with all its littered contents. It made April feel gross.

Her feet slid across the wooden floors, trying not to think about how scared she was in a house that once felt more like home than anywhere she'd ever been. The wind howled outside. It pushed the branches of the trees together and she listened to them sway and crash over and over again.

April's feet swayed in the same rhythm as her mind began to wander. She thought about this house, how good it was to her for so many years. This place used to look like a palace of some kind. It was Cinderella's castle for a young girl like April.

And now, she was terrified of it. April willed herself to be brave, but it was hard to pretend in a place like that. After the day that she'd had, she should have welcomed sleep with open arms. Yet here she was, struggling to lay down.

Her eyes began to glaze over, but she willed them open again. She had to make sure this place was safe.

Her body slumped closer to the floor, feeling the weight of the world pressing her down, until she felt something on the tip of her toes.

Something smooth tickled her leg. "No!" she screamed as loud as she could. April's body rolled onto the mattress. She had no idea what had just touched her. Was it the spider coming back to bite her? A possum or raccoon

that got into the house?

She crawled slowly to the edge of the bed with the lantern in her hand. Lifting it up in a fit of fake bravery, she pulled back the blankets to find... nothing. There was nothing where her foot just was.

Nothing had crawled up her leg to bite her. Nothing was there.

April, determined to find it, threw the blankets around the fort searching for anything that could have touched her just then. Not even a dust mite was found.

So again she sat on the edge of the blow up mattress she'd just bought that day and placed her feet on the cold hardwood floors. She maneuvered her feet in every direction until she felt it again.

Something brushed up against her, smooth and silky.

This time, instead of panicking and pulling herself away, April slowly grabbed the lantern at her side. She held it up to her feet and examined the area. And finally, she found what she was looking for.

The blanket hung up for the fort had blown in the wind, tickling her ankles, and sending her into a frenzy. At least it wasn't her worst case scenario, she thought. Still, she was disappointed that she went to all that trouble just for a little throw blanket.

And after it all, April understood that she was still scared. Not of the blanket, but of everything else surrounding her.

If she closed her eyes, she was afraid that something would happen. That spider was still looming in the distance, probably watching her right now. It was waiting for her to close her eyes so it could come and crawl all over her.

April's body shivered just thinking about it. She never did find the spider; maybe she wouldn't ever see it again. Her arms clutched her knees up to her chest and held her just a little bit tighter as she worried about getting sleep that night.

It wasn't only the spider that was frightening April. The house settled at night. It creaked and moaned.

At first, April thought that it was footsteps. The ghost stories could have been true, and then what would she do? Could she really stay in a real haunted mansion? Each creak felt like somebody coming closer. She imagined doors opening and shutting, an old ancestor walking through them with a sheet over their head.

But as the night went on, closer to midnight, April thought differently

about the noises that plagued the property. She found a pattern in the madness. A creak, then a groan, then a brush of wind, then a creak. And it began to sound like the house taking deep breaths.

April began to breathe with the house, as if it was teaching her a yoga class. It began to relax her. And she drifted off into a deep sleep.

In her dreams, she saw the house as it was when she was a child. The vibrant colors, sun bursting through windows without cobwebs and dust. The cabinets were back to their off-white color as her mom sifted through the food they stored there.

She walked outside barefoot and felt the grass tickle her ankles. Down the cobblestone path she skipped until she made it to the sandy beach below the wooden steps. In a flowing dress she ran down the beachfront, the sand weighing her down with each step.

It felt like she was finally free. This was what she truly wanted, this freedom.

And in an instant, she was standing on the beach as an adult, the way she was now. When she turned to look at the house, she winced, afraid it was what it had become in real life. But it wasn't the dust-filled disaster of the house she arrived at today. It was magnificent.

A work of tradition and modern updates, the house looked even better than when April was a child. Probably because it was a work of her own. She knew in her heart that she created this place.

One by one, people began to gather at the beach. Before April knew it she was welcoming them. They smiled and stood in awe of the ocean and the sky, the same beach she'd known all her life.

Slowly she walked back up the wooden steps, saying hello to the people passing her by to get to the sand below. When she reached the house, there were people all over. The entryway was large, the front doors open as they came and went freely. April felt peace like never before.

Her excitement woke her up, and she almost hit her head on the top of the blanket fort she'd created. The lack of sleep didn't get to her, not with all the inspiration flowing through her mind. Even though it was still dark out, she could see the horizon beginning to form out of the dusty windows.

April smiled. She made her way down the cobblestone path, down the wooden stairs, and onto the beach. The sand felt cool and wet between her toes.

Staring into the sky as the sun began to rise, for the first time in a long time, April knew what she wanted.

## CHAPTER TEN

The pen slid across her paper like a hot knife cut through butter. It was seamless, beautiful rigid lines created realistic spaces. Her doodles were fantasies of the house she wanted this now-dump to become. And her lists were action items to get her there.

She didn't need much to make this place look better. April would clean it herself, something she'd done many times before, though it was never quite this dirty. Then she could hire someone to get the electricity checked out, the plumbing and water tested. It would look brand new in no time.

Her phone on the dining room table next to her vibrated, shaking her from her focus. Maxwell calling again. She'd sent him to voicemail a dozen times by now. He'd left only a couple and she didn't listen to them out of fear of hearing him yell at her.

There was no reason to listen to what the man had to say anymore. He wasn't in charge of her. She'd clearly burned that bridge. There was no way she'd come back to him if he was going to act like this, not that it was on her mind to go back.

She couldn't. Not now, after everything she'd been through the past two days. There was nothing back in New York for her. She had to push forward and make a life here. It was time to do this.

April focused back on her paper. She looked at the sketches, the fixes she wanted to do to the house. It didn't feel updated with just the items on her to-do list. Plumbing, cleaning, and electricity weren't going to get the smell out of the yellowing cabinets. She would probably need new ones.

But what kind would she buy?

Instead of drawing the bare minimum, April began to draw her dreams. Rich and dark cabinetry with bright countertops that shone when a new window in the kitchen made them glisten. It was a full makeover.

April looked it over again and again. She couldn't see the kitchen being done any other way. It had to look exactly like she'd drawn it. Or she would be disappointed; it wouldn't look right.

Room to room she redesigned everything while including the pieces of the original house she wanted to keep. It was all coming together nicely as she

looked at every one of her drawings. Every room was done to perfection. The six bedrooms and several bathrooms were exactly how she pictured them.

It was just like it was in her dream. The front doors were open wide, people coming and going, enjoying the work she'd done to make it beautiful while also admiring the history of a home built by generations of the family.

But this wasn't just a touch-up, this was a full home renovation. It was going to be harder than simply hiring a few people and putting on a fresh coat of paint. April swallowed hard as she looked at her ever growing list of things to do.

This wasn't impossible, but April no longer had a job. The divorce would take some of her savings, no doubt. Even with her full life savings, she wouldn't be able to do everything she wanted. It was too much, too extravagant.

The entire idea was too extravagant. The dining room enlarged to fit more people and several tables? The living room made into a sitting area with several televisions and coffee tables? The furniture alone would cost her a fortune.

April set the pen down beside her pad of paper. She couldn't renovate this house. What had she been thinking? She shouldn't have come to the island in the first place. This was all a dream, a fantasy. Those things don't come true, not for practical people like April.

It wasn't right to be sitting here dreaming when she'd left a whole life behind back in New York. April pulled out her phone and began sifting through emails. Email after email from Maxwell begging her to return to the law firm.

Sure, he was a jerk. But was he bad enough for her to choose being unemployed instead? April couldn't even think about it now. She would consider that when she was back in New York, figuring her life out again.

April started to pack up the things she'd spread out across the table, her pens and papers, her phone. But just as she picked up her phone, it rang. April prayed it wasn't Maxwell as she turned it around. She couldn't answer him just yet.

But instead of Max's name, she saw Georgia's. Her motherly instincts kicked in as she answered right away. "Georgia, is everything okay?"

"Woah, Mom. Chill out," she replied. "Yes, everything's fine. Well... You might not think so. I've uh..."

“Spit it out sweetheart,” April said, impatient as ever to hear what was troubling her daughter.

“I’m dropping out of school.”

April’s heart sank to her stomach. It hadn’t been but one week into her freshman year of college and Georgia was already deciding to drop out.

“Why do you say that?”

“I just have to do this. It’s my own decision.”

She rolled her eyes. Georgia had never been like this before. She sounded so mysterious, like she was hiding something. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s for my own reasons. I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

April slid down into her dining room chair. “If something is upsetting you, I’m here for you. We can-”

“Mom, please. I just want to drop out.”

“You can’t-” April stopped herself from saying the words she never wanted to say.

Just before April had gone off to college, her mother had convinced her to become a lawyer. Caroline pressured her into becoming that person she was back in New York. The person who let everyone else decide what she did with her life. April was so unhappy.

She couldn’t let herself turn into her mother, telling her daughter what to do and why. The parameters for success were no longer making money and having a nice husband. It was happiness.

If she scolded her daughter for leaving school, she would be just like her mother. She’d be telling her daughter that money, reputation, marriage are more important than happiness and dreams. A desire to quit school wasn’t what she wanted for her daughter. But it was what Georgia wanted.

“Okay,” she whispered into the phone, her jaw tightening as she held back. “If that is what you want to do.”

Georgia released a big breath on the other end of the line. “Really?”

April heard the joy in her daughter’s voice and she realized something about herself. The part of her that said she had to go back to New York and straighten herself out, that was the old April. It was the one who let everyone else tell her what to do. It was her mother saying she had to marry well and become a successful lawyer.

It wasn’t just Georgia that needed to follow her heart, it was April, too.

And her heart was in this house.

So she was going to stay here and work on it until she was satisfied with what she'd done. This was everything she needed; all her dreams would be fulfilled with this house.

"Mom?"

April shook her head, coming back to the phone call. "Yes, sorry. I think you should do whatever you want to do. But... what is that?"

"Oh, um. I have no idea. I wasn't sure what to do. I just knew that I couldn't stay here. So I'm dropping out today."

"Come here," April said without a second thought. It was just as impulsive as when she decided to come to the island herself. "I'm at the vacation home in Sandcrest."

"The one you've had for like, ever? What are you doing there?"

April wasn't ready to tell her daughter about the impending divorce. Or that her father was probably in another country exploring circuses.

When she told herself that she wouldn't put Georgia in the middle of the divorce, this is exactly what she meant.

April had been in the middle of her parents' divorce. She knew everything bad her father had ever done. It didn't stop her from wanting to spend time with her dad, but it did taint her view of him forever. Maybe that's why he'd stopped spending time with her.

And for that, she wouldn't tell Georgia anything about the divorce until she processed it herself and all the papers were filed.

"I'm just taking care of the house. You know what? I'll explain more when you get here. Come and stay at the beach with me. We'll have picnics on the sand, go swimming, it'll be fun."

Why did she feel the need to talk her daughter into coming? It wasn't like Georgia was going all the way back up to New York to stay in an empty house. There wouldn't be anything there for her. Unfortunately for Georgia, she had no choice but to join her mother on a beach vacation.

"Okay. I'll set up a flight and be down in a few days."

"I can't wait to see you! I love you."

"I love you too, Mom. See you soon."

April hung up the phone with a smile on her face. It wasn't her plan to have her daughter join her at the house. It would make things more complicated, harder on April. But she didn't care right then.



She only cared that she'd decided to stay on the island and finish what she started so far. Committing to the renovations was hard, but saying no to her inner voice that told her to leave this place was harder. And she was proud of herself for doing both.

Now she just had to follow through and actually do the things on her list. She grabbed her paper and pens out of her bag and added one thing to the bottom of her checklist.

*Find out why Georgia dropped out.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A car stuttered as it cruised the long drive up to the house. April watched it approach and wondered who could be visiting her at this early hour.

She'd spent the previous day preparing for her daughter to arrive and drawing up ideas for the house. The night wasn't any better than the first one, but she hoped the arrival of Georgia would help with that.

Neither one could kill the spider that now lived with her, but at least she would have someone to enjoy the experience with.

Georgia stepped out of the car and April's mouth fell open in surprise. By the time she got outside, the car had left her daughter there with suitcases by her side.

"I thought you didn't land until nine," she said as she hugged Georgia.

"I didn't want to bother you. We landed a little early, so I ordered an Uber."

A tinge of disappointment flowed through April. She wanted to be there to see her daughter arrive and drive her around the quaint island before heading to the house. Still, she could see why Georgia ordered an Uber for herself instead. She'd been so independent her entire life.

Even when she was young, at five years old, Georgia wouldn't accept help with her projects. April and Carl were only allowed to assist her if she couldn't figure it out herself and was on the verge of having a meltdown.

"Well I wish you would have told me because I wanted to drive you around and show you the island. It's beautiful here. Do you remember much of it?"

Georgia raised her brows. "Of our trip when I was like four? No I don't remember much of it."

April moved out of the way to gesture to the house behind them. "This is it! This is the family house. What do you think?"

Georgia's smile slowly faded as she looked the house up and down. Her eyes glanced over the property, sizing it up slowly and taking it all in. "Mom, this is... a big house. I mean it's something."

"It really is big, isn't it? I can't believe it looks even bigger than the last time we were here."

“But it needs some work.”

April gathered up some of Georgia’s possessions in her arms and started walking towards the front door. “Right, right. I get that. And that’s the plan. I’m going to work on it while I’m here. Won’t that be fun!”

This version of April was new to Georgia, she knew that. But her reaction of complete confusion wasn’t what she expected. Couldn’t she tell that this house was going to become something great? There was so much potential here, so many opportunities to improve this family heirloom.

“I guess so,” Georgia replied.

“That’s the spirit.”

The women approached the house, pulling the luggage behind them. April could sense Georgia’s hesitation and was hoping to prove to her that this would be something great.

“Let me give you the grand tour,” she said as she flung the doors wide open. “This space will be inviting and run straight into the living room where we’ll basically start from scratch.”

Georgia nodded along. “And what about the smell?”

April hadn’t realized that she’d gotten so used to the strange smells in the house, she didn’t notice them anymore. She stopped herself from asking which one Georgia was referring to. “We’ll clean it up and find the problem. That’s like the least of my worries.”

“Mom, I’m going to be honest with you. It should be your first priority.” She pinched her nose shut as she walked through the entryway.

“We can get candles today while we’re out.”

April showed Georgia around the house, trying to skip the worst parts of it and focus on her new ideas. It was unfair that this was the only version of the house Georgia would remember. She didn’t see the true vision of it, the passion April had for each room.

“What do you think?” April asked with a smile when they returned to the living room.

Georgia looked around the house, searching for the right words. “Why did you bring me here?”

With a tilted head and furrowed brows, April replied, “What?”

“You said that I should come down and spend some time with you at the beach. But why did you really ask me to come here?”

Suddenly, April felt defensive. She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“To spend some time with me at the beach. I wanted you to have a few days to relax here. Is that so wrong?”

April noticed that Georgia hadn't touched her belongings once. She hadn't even pulled her phone from her purse. It was as if she was waiting to unpack. “I don't think that's the real reason you asked me here.”

There was no way Georgia would know about the divorce, not yet. Her father hadn't told her; Carl never liked to be the 'bad guy.' And April didn't give her any ideas, did she? She rethought the conversation on the phone, examining every word she could remember. But nothing stood out. She didn't know about the divorce, so what was she trying to get at?

“Please, enlighten me.”

Georgia sighed, as if her mother was forcing her into saying it. “You dragged me here to this dump of a house to try and get me to go back to school.”

April wondered if she'd always been that controlling of her daughter's decisions. Sure, she wanted Georgia to stay in college and get a good job. But she would never force her to do something she didn't want to do. April had vowed long ago to not end up like her own mother. Maybe she'd failed at that mission all along.

Now she didn't know what to say to convince her daughter that she didn't have any ulterior motives. “I didn't ask you to come to try and change your mind. I asked you to come so that we could spend time together.”

Georgia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. You've barely told me anything about why you're out here. It's just a coincidence that the day I want to drop out of school you're out here at the vacation house talking about your dreams? You want me to follow my dreams and go to college, but that isn't my dream anymore. I don't fit in. I hated it there.”

She couldn't tell her daughter that she was going through the exact same thing. Her dreams felt so different that she'd almost left them last night before Georgia called. “I want you to do whatever you want to do,” April reiterated again.

Her daughter sized her up, tapping her foot as she contemplated. “I'm really dropping out. I mean that.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? You're just okay with that?” Georgia was getting visibly upset. Her voice wavered slightly and she began to pace the room. “I don't know

what kind of game you're playing, but I'm honestly shocked that you're playing it so well. What else can I say to get you to understand that I'm dropping out of college. You don't have a say in that decision at all."

April nodded her head. "Deal. And you don't get to tell me not to fix up the house. That's my dream."

Georgia's hand rose to her chin. "Fine. Now can you tell me why you've brought me here? I understand you want to fix the place up, but this house is not in shape for a beach weekend."

April walked over to her sketches and looked at them once more. This new fantasy of hers was on full display, inspiration at every corner. A piece of her was written on these pages. "I think we both need some time to clear our heads. I'll support whatever decision you make. You're an adult. And we both need to re-evaluate our lives, our hopes, and dreams. This place is going to give us time to do that."

"So, we're here to spend time together and figure ourselves out? That's it?"

She had to stop herself from chuckling. As if figuring themselves out would be easy. "Yes, that's it. We stay here for a bit and not try to change each other's minds. What do you say?"

April held out a hand. Reluctantly, Georgia shook it. "I don't know who you are or what you did with my mother, but I'll take a beach vacation without judgment any day."

She knew she was about to show her daughter who she truly was. April was proud of this new side of herself. Georgia would do what she wanted to do and April would do the same. They both searched for freedom to follow their own dreams instead of looking to others. And April knew they would do just that.

This beach vacation was going to be fun, though April wasn't so sure it would end up being a vacation. Not after all the plans she'd drawn up for the house. It was going to be something much bigger than that.

This trip was going to be life changing.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

April took Georgia on a thirty minute drive through the winding streets of Sandcrest. The beaches were busy, the sun shining down on various locals as they enjoyed their time on a practically tourist-free beach. “You see, tourist season is almost over,” she explained to her daughter as they looked out for which ones they’d want to visit. “So most of the beaches are practically empty.”

Then she took her around downtown to show her all the shops, including the most important, the general store. They decided to stop by later to pick up anything Georgia would need for the time at the house. Her daughter was more than discouraged at the fact that they would definitely be staying at the ‘old, rickety house’ as she called it.

And the last stop on the sightseeing tour around Sandcrest was the field just beyond the bridge where April had seen the wild horses on her first day.

They drove up slowly, making sure they wouldn’t scare them away and turned off the car. April got out, her daughter soon followed, and they sat in the middle of the field. “It’s nice because there are tons of these around,” April whispered. “This is just where I saw them the other day. But I also saw one in our yard, so just about anywhere you go you might find wildlife.”

Georgia listened intently, just like April. The only sounds they heard was the rustling of the leaves in the wind and the birds cawing overhead. “Do you think the birds are scaring them away?”

April shook her head. “No, they’re used to those things. We just have to be patient.”

The silence was thick. It didn’t bother April, but Georgia couldn’t sit still for longer than a few seconds. She twisted and turned, fiddled with her thumbs, and even began pulling at the grass beneath them.

“If you keep fidgeting, you might scare them off,” she offered, instead of nagging.

Georgia rolled her eyes and continued to pick at the clumps of grass around her. “Maybe they’re not coming because you hallucinated them yesterday.”

April wanted to scold her child for saying something so rude, but she

couldn't speak as she looked up and saw two majestic horses galloping through the field. Georgia didn't notice at first, so April nudged her and pointed towards the bucking horses in the distance.

"Wow," her daughter said. "They really are beautiful."

"Worth the wait?"

She shrugged. "Eh, I don't know about that. Maybe if they were closer. I think they can smell the house on us, that's why they're so far away."

There were two ways April could have gone about this. She could have laughed with her daughter, feeling impressed with her joke. Or she could have scolded her for saying such a thing about the house she loved.

After mulling it over for a few seconds, April decided to take the route that meant she didn't care what other people thought. She loved the house and that's all that mattered. So what was so wrong about laughing at herself, at a joke her daughter made?

The two laughed together, harder than they had in a long time. "I guess we'll have to come back tomorrow with some body spray and candles?"

Georgia nodded her head. "Now that sounds like a good idea."

They laughed until the horses no longer ran through the field and it was time to get back into the car and continue their day. Satisfied with the tour, April took Georgia to the general store to pick up the things they needed for the night as well as some candles.

"What do you think of this?" April held an open candle to her daughter's face.

She sniffed it and immediately turned her face away. "God, that's somehow worse than the house." She couldn't hold in her laughter.

"I liked it!" April said, mouth wide, offended.

"There has to be something wrong with you. First you couldn't smell how bad the house was and now you think *that* smells good?"

April scoffed and put the candle back on the shelf. "Oh, come on. There's no way it's that bad. The house, yes. This candle, no. You just don't like the smell of..." She squinted to read the name of the label. "Freshly Washed Cotton?"

Georgia blinked at her mother. "No, I don't really like the smell of detergent for a candle."

"Your loss, I guess. Which one do you like best then?"

As Georgia looked through the shelves for her favorite one out of the

hundred they'd smelled so far, April saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Someone she'd seen before was watching them. "Can I help you?" April said with a smile, hoping they were simply looking for something in the aisle.

Barry stepped into the aisle and smiled at them. "I didn't realize you were bringing more Faiths down to help. Might have a chance of fixing up the old place now. I'm Barry, pleasure to meet ya."

April simply stared back at him with raised brows. What was he trying to say? Was he just here to make more jokes about the house?

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "I came over to say I'm sorry for laughin' so much the other day. We just aren't sure you'll be able to make that place into something pretty. It's too far gone."

April had been hoping that Georgia wouldn't know how much the town doubted her ability to fix the house up. Her daughter looked at her with a mix of confusion and fear in her eyes. "You know this guy?" she asked her.

"We met the first day I arrived. Barry and Chuck thought it was hilarious that I was trying to live at the house."

It felt like not a single person was there for April. She had to do this all by herself and prove to them that this house could be beautiful; her vision was going to make it something special. "And now I'm apologizing," Barry said, though it didn't sound very sincere. "Because I know we probably almost scared you away. That wasn't what we wanted. It was just funny because--"

"Because why?" Georgia said, standing in front of her mother. "Because the house is in bad shape?"

Barry nodded. "Kinda. I mean, we all had that running joke about the ghosts taking over or the fact that it was abandoned and no one would ever come for it again. We were making up all sorts of folklore about that place."

Georgia crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Well, we're back now. So you don't have to worry about any of those silly stories. The house is going to be back in shape soon. We'll let you know when it's ready."

April peeked out from behind her daughter, smiling at Barry as he walked off, ashamed of his actions. There was something about teenage strength, the sass and sheer confidence working for good, that took a hold of Georgia that day. April was impressed by it. "Thank you," she said to her as they continued to gather their favorite candles. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know. But he seemed like he needed a talking to."

April laughed. Since when did her daughter talk like that? "Chuck was the



bad one. At least Barry knows they shouldn't be laughing like that."

Georgia put a candle up to April's face. It smelled like wild flowers and lavender. "This is my favorite," she said with a smile before dropping it into the cart.

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Giant's was even less packed during the lunch hour on Georgia's first day in town. The ladies were starving after such a day of touring and shopping. Two tables of single people reading the newspaper while eating their small meals sat on the opposite side of the restaurant.

"Back so soon?" A familiar voice cooed from the kitchen. "I'll be right out."

April nodded out of habit, forgetting that he couldn't see her from back there. "What do you think about this place? I think I'll probably become a regular here."

"Already? How many times have you eaten here?"

A flash of heat had risen on her cheeks. "Uh, just once. But it was so good. Their burgers are delicious."

Nigel ran his hands down his apron as he pushed himself out the kitchen door. Hank was nowhere to be seen, surely because there weren't many people drinking at two in the afternoon. "Alrighty then, what can I... I see you have company today!"

"Nigel, this is my daughter, Georgia."

With a smile, Georgia held out her hand to him, which he gladly took and shook delicately. "Nice to meet you, Nigel. I hear my mother is going to become a regular here."

April bit the inside of her lip to keep from glaring at her daughter. Of course it wasn't a secret, but it was strange to announce that after only coming once. Or maybe she was just overthinking it all. None of it mattered anyway. She was here to get away and work on the house, not pretend like she was ready to be interested in strangers.

"Is that so?" Nigel said, raising his brows at April. "We'd be happy to have you as a regular. Of course that means that you'd have to come here for like almost every meal and I'm afraid you'll get sick of me by then."

"Oh, please. I might get sick of you, but never the food," April replied

with a smirk. As soon as she caught how flirty her words might have come across, she cleared her throat. “So, um... We’ll take two lemonades and club specials, please.”

Nigel nodded, then bowed low like an old English gentleman. “My pleasure. That will be right out.”

He left with a warm smile and started on their food in the kitchen. “Is he usually the cook?”

“He’s the chef, the waiter, and the owner.”

“Oh, really? He seems nice. Handsome, too,” Georgia said with a smirk, watching her mother’s every move. April knew this trick. She was just trying to get something out of her, hoping she would react.

She shrugged. “I guess so.”

Georgia rolled her eyes, bothered by the lack of reaction. “Tell me more about your plans for the house. I knew it was going to be hard work, but that guy in the general store sounded like he knew it’s going to be more than just some elbow grease. Why do they all think it’s impossible?”

Because it nearly was. The house wasn’t a simple flip project that could be tidied and retiled into a stunning beach property. It needed a lot of care and planning. “They’re surprised that someone’s come back to fix it up. And they think it’s too far gone. For a second I thought they were right. It’s not just cleaning out some cabinets and redoing the floors. It’s basically redoing the entire house.”

“And you’re up for all of that? What does Dad think about it?”

April so badly wanted to tell her that Carl knew nothing about the project and that it excited her to do this on her own. But she couldn’t tell Georgia about the divorce; even the slightest hint and she would know that something was up. Another reason why April had to play it cool when she asked about Nigel.

Georgia was good at inferring. Her brain pieced things together that even April hadn’t known yet. She was smarter than her mom, that was for sure.

“Dad isn’t really in on this one. He doesn’t know. And I’d prefer to keep it that way for now if that’s alright with you.”

Her daughter nodded. “I can keep a secret.”

The word felt grimy. “Let’s maybe not call it a secret? Let’s call it a surprise.” At least some people liked surprises.

“Sure, whatever floats your boat.”

Nigel walked out with their drinks in hand and set them on the table before going back and grabbing their sandwiches. Just the smell of the ham alone was enough to make April salivate. “Thank you,” she told him as he began to walk away. A part of her wanted to ask him to stay and talk for a while, but she knew that Georgia needed her attention right now.

“So this renovation, it’s going to be more than you thought it would be. But why not just go for it. I took that interior design class in high school. Sure it was only one credit, but I learned a lot. You passed the bar exam. We can figure this out.”

April stopped herself from asking about college. Desperately she wanted to know what happened to make Georgia drop out so quickly.

*I will not become my mother*, April repeated in her mind over and over to stop herself from digging into her daughter to get the answers to her questions. *Just be supportive.*

“You would really help me out with this? I mean, it’s not really the beach vacation that I promised you.”

Georgia batted a hand in the air. “That’s fine. Seeing you get all excited about this is making me excited too. I’m just a helping hand for now.”

It gave April butterflies to know that her daughter was ready to help, even though she didn’t see the same vision yet. She wouldn’t have blamed her for wanting to run away from the disaster April had gotten herself into.

But instead of putting her mother down, Georgia simply looked at her and said, “Tell me what we have to do to make this place into something special.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You set up your own little fort!” Georgia cried out in the living room. “It’s basically camping. You’re camping in a house that you own? We might as well go down to the beach and sleep on the sand if we’re camping.”

April couldn’t stop laughing at all the comments. She certainly raised a spitfire. “Come on, it’s not that bad. It’s just a small air mattress. I asked you if you wanted one at the general store!”

“I didn’t realize we’d have to share a twin-sized one otherwise. That should have been in the description of your little campsite here. I didn’t sign up for this.” Georgia smiled, so April knew she was just joking around. In times of struggle, Georgia was the one to make everyone laugh.

So when the pair was forced to sleep under the blanket tent in the living room, Georgia started up her whole routine and they laughed until their stomachs hurt. “I did get a tent if you’d rather have that. But I’m sure the full-sized air mattress is going to be nicer than the floor or the sand.”

“We’ll see-” Georgia was cut off by her ringtone. It made them both jump at the shock of the volume coming from her purse. She sighed when she picked it up and that told April who it was.

“Hey, Dad,” Georgia said. April could only hear muffled yells from where she stood. The glow of the single lantern lit up her side. “You can’t really... Well, yes but...”

April saw a disappointment in her daughter’s eyes that broke her heart. It was a similar disappointment she faced when her mom told her to go into law instead of doing something with animals. It was hard for her to watch.

At first she thought that she should leave it alone. Carl’s parenting was his own problem. She would work on her relationship with Georgia here, supporting her. And he would voice his dissatisfaction from whatever country he ended up in.

But then she forced herself to look at things from Georgia’s perspective. At that age, she would have loved to have anyone on her side. She wanted someone to come along and tell her mom that she was allowed to pursue her own dreams, her desires.

It was April’s turn to be that person for Georgia.

“Put him on speaker,” April said with a calm authority her daughter had never heard before. “Hi, Carl. It’s me. Georgia is with me safe and sound so you can stop worry-”

“I’m not worried about her being safe right now, I’m worried about her future. How can you just stand there while she quits!”

Georgia looked up at April, worry in her eyes along with a few tears. “I can’t go back there. I’m not going back. You can’t make me. I’m an adult now.”

Carl laughed on the other end of the line. April rubbed her hand along Georgia's arm and mouthed the words ‘I’m sorry.’ “You can’t just quit, honey. You have to go back to school. Just because something gets a little difficult doesn’t mean you can leave. When you commit to doing something, you have to see things through.”

“You’re not listening to me!” Georgia cried out.

“That’s the bottom line and I’m not changing my answers. You’ll get back to school and finish what you started!”

April looked at a scared Georgia and decided to take the phone from her hands. This wasn’t something her daughter needed to worry about right now. Not after she’d spent all this time trying to tell her that everything would be okay and that she wouldn’t pressure her back into school.

Georgia sat on the edge of the air mattress and didn’t hide the fact that she was trying to listen in on the conversation. April took Carl off the speaker and walked into the front yard. “You need to stop,” she told him. “Yelling at her is not going to solve anything.”

“She needs to go back there! This is her future. She’s throwing it all away because of what? We don’t even know!” A hint of music played in the background of the call. April tried not to get distracted by it.

She sighed. “I’m sure she’ll tell us one day. When she’s ready. She said she doesn’t want to be there, so she doesn’t have to be there.”

“What kind of bull is that? When she’s ready? She’s just a kid and she has no idea what she wants.”

April peeked into the house at the curious Georgia sitting on the edge of the bed. She certainly looked like a kid from here, but she was eighteen. She was technically an adult now. They needed to let her go and begin her own journey, even if that meant dropping out of school.

It wasn’t what April wanted for her, but it was what Georgia wanted. And

that's what mattered.

"We had dreams at that age. You should try to remember that when you're scolding your daughter for trying to do what she wants to do. How did you even find out about this?" she asked him.

There was a pause as he stopped to think. April knew that he was debating telling her the truth. She could always tell when he was lying because of the way the pitch in his voice changed ever so slightly. Sometimes she wondered if he forgot that she was a lawyer.

"The school called me. They wanted to verify some things about her semester. They said she was taking the semester off and not coming back. I asked if they could hold her spot for a few weeks, days even until I can get her back up there. She still has a chance to go back!"

April let out a sigh. It was exhausting trying to fight him. Once he had an idea of what he wanted, Carl wouldn't take no for an answer. "She's not going back if she doesn't want to. She could leave the country and never talk to us again. If you keep pushing her, she's going to end up hating us. Is that what you want?"

Silence filled the other end of the call and April knew that she had at least gotten through to him. "That's what I thought. You don't have to worry about her, okay? She's safe here with me. I'll let you know if anything changes."

"Thanks," he replied, but she could sense a kind of sarcasm in his tone.

A loud bang echoed through the phone. "What was that?"

Another bang caused her to jump. "Nothing, I'm just at this thing," Carl said quickly, mumbling.

She smirked. Because she knew exactly what Carl was doing while telling their daughter she had to commit to college. "Are you seriously at a carnival right now?"

"It's not a carnival. It's a circus, April. And yes, I am doing what I said I was going to do. I'm following through."

April had to hold a hand to her mouth to keep herself from laughing. After everything he said to Georgia, he was out at the circus pretending like April didn't even exist. She wondered about all the promises he'd made her throughout the years.

He wasn't following through on any of those.

When he said that he was going to love her forever, be with her for richer or poorer, for better or for worse. When he said that he would be with her

forever. There were a lot of things Carl wasn't going to follow through on.

The argument wasn't worth it anymore. April knew they were getting that divorce. It hurt, but fighting with him wasn't going to change anything between them. "Where are you right now? Like what city?"

"I'm in Istanbul watching a traditional circus performance by one of my favorite troupes. And my favorite act is about to go up and I'm missing it. Because our daughter decided to drop out of school and come home to do nothing."

She couldn't hide her frustration any longer, it overflowed like lava from an active volcano. "There are so many things wrong with what you just said. She's not doing nothing, she's with me. And I'm so sorry you're about to miss your *little act* that you're probably going to see a thousand times on your *little tour*."

"Hey, hold on--"

"No," she said, cutting him off. His incessant voice became more annoying the longer she had to speak to him. "You cannot tell our daughter that she can't quit something while you've quit your life back home and are touring circuses right now. That's just ridiculous." Though she did stop herself from laughing, April let herself smile at the insanity that had become her life.

The man she would have died for a week ago was now being a total hypocrite toward their daughter. The absurdity of it all made her want to chase her small and practical dreams even harder.

It was insane for him to be so hypocritical at a time like that. He ran out of the country as fast as he possibly could. He told April that they were divorcing without a single discussion. He was confident and rash in his decisions, but no one else in his life was allowed to be the same.

If he knew that April had all these extravagant plans for the house, he would probably call her crazy, too. She would never have been able to do this while they were married, that was certain.

She'd tried to quit her job once, to stay home with Georgia. But Carl talked her off the ledge and back into her miserable routine.

April was fed up with him to say the least. It took everything not to continue ranting. But she knew it would just go in one ear and out the other with him. After some time maybe he would understand.

"So, Georgia is welcome to stay with me here as long as she likes. Is that

our final decision?”

Carl scoffed. How could he argue with her when he was off in a different country unable to handle this appropriately? It was April who stood beside Georgia and was trying to support her. And it was Carl who was waiting for some kind of circus act to get on stage. “I still don’t like it. I think she should be in school. She needs to buckle down and get this stuff done. It’s important. It’s her education, April.”

She hated her name in his mouth. “You listen to me very closely because I’m not going to repeat myself. Our daughter is going to stay with me while she decides what she wants to do next. You are going to stop being a hypocrite and leave her alone while she makes that decision. No pressuring her into doing what you want her to do. Hear me?”

Carl took a deep inhale as he was about to let loose on April. Instead of listening to his rant, she hung up the phone and switched it to silent. If Carl had a problem with it, at least he would bother her now instead of Georgia.

She waltzed back into the house and found her daughter laying on the air mattress. “Is it comfortable enough for you?” April asked as she lay down beside her.

Georgia didn’t answer. Slowly, she turned towards her mother and took a deep breath. “Is he going to hate me forever?”

As much as April wanted to hurt Carl, she knew messing with their father-daughter relationship wasn’t going to help anyone. She knew that Georgia was loved by them both. Even though her father had a hard time showing it and happened to do all the wrong things. “He doesn’t hate you.”

A tear fell down Georgia’s cheek. April wanted to reach out and get it for her, but she gave it a minute until she did it for herself. “Why does he act like that then? He gets so angry when I make a choice he doesn’t like.”

April wondered if that was truly parenting in a nutshell, kids making choices you didn’t agree with. It happened all the time as Georgia grew up. She was always so independent and willing to take on anybody about anything she believed in.

“I know it seems that way. I think he’s just scared that you dropped out. An education is really important to him. He wants to see you succeed.” Complimenting Carl felt like she was twisting the knife in her own back. She didn’t want to, but knew it was what Georgia needed to hear. “He worries about you on your own out there.”



Georgia's tears continued to fall and her hands continued to wipe them away as if they were never there. April hadn't seen her daughter cry much in the last few years. Probably due to her bedroom door being closed constantly. Or the fact that she wasn't home enough to see it in real time.

"That's not an excuse for his actions today. He shouldn't have yelled like that. I'm really sorry," April said, swinging her arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulling her closer. "I've talked with him. If he has a problem, he'll come to me now. You're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like. Even the whole semester."

"The whole semester?" Georgia slipped away to look at April's face and make sure this offer was serious. "You would let me do that?"

"How else am I going to finish this house? I need some serious help around here. And if you're not doing anything for the next few months... I could use the extra hands."

April knew this was the right thing. Her impulsive trip ended up helping them both. Georgia could spend time away from the pressures of being a new adult, and April could find out who she really was out from under people's opinions of her.

"I only have one rule. If you're staying with me, you have to help with the renovations."

Georgia smiled and tucked her head under her mother's arm. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Three days after Georgia arrived in Sandcrest, the renovations were in full swing. “And when could you come to inspect the house for that quote?”

April jotted down the dates and times on the notepad in front of her. “Great! Let’s do Thursday at three!”

Georgia tapped her mother’s arm and whispered. “Can’t do Thursday. That’s when the contractor is coming to help with the permitting.”

“Oh, uh... Could we actually switch that to Friday? Great, thank you.”

After April hung up the phone she took a deep breath. “How did I miss that?” she asked, flipping through her pages of notes and calendars. Then she took out her phone and looked through her calendar, finding nothing posted for Thursday.

“They had to reschedule because they weren’t sure if they could make it before the water testers come tomorrow,” Georgia explains. “You just forgot to write it down.”

This wasn’t the first time her daughter had saved them. April was typically good with details, but this renovation work was chaotic. Every subcontractor in a hundred mile radius would only give days that worked for them, not hours. They would get there when they got there and it was the best they could do.

Thankfully, they worked seamlessly as a team, so they helped each other with the details. “Oh and we got the quote from that one electrician. I’ll put it in a new pile so that we don’t lose it. I want to talk to a few more before we make a real decision because I’m not sure I liked him,” April explained as she flipped papers into their designated piles on the kitchen table.

Eventually, they wanted to get file folders and binders for all the paperwork they had. But so far it was hard to make it to the store. Georgia and April were too excited to get things moving. There was too much to do.

“What do you think about fixing the cabinets ourselves?” April asked.

Georgia shrugged. “We could figure it out, sure.” Immediately, she began to look up DIYs for refinishing cabinets, building cabinets, and painting furniture.

April touched a finger to her lips in thought. “I’ve just been thinking. It’s

going to be a lot of money if I hire people to do everything around here. We need to do some of it ourselves.”

“Some of it? How much is some of it?” Georgia didn’t look up from her phone as she watched a video on cabinetry.

April realized this was a great opportunity for her to let go of the reins for a bit. She could really show her daughter that she wasn’t here to control her or pressure her to make the ‘right’ decisions. “Why don’t you decide.”

Now Georgia looked up from her device and stared at her mom. “Me? You want me to decide what we’ll do on our own?”

April nodded. “It only makes sense since you’re interested in researching how to do things ourselves. I’ve sketched out a lot of my designs. You can look through those and find ways for us to do it on our own.”

It was a well-known fact that April had no experience in carpentry. Neither had Georgia. But they were determined to make this stuff work. They agreed that if they had to skimp on some of their design ideas, it would be okay as long as the general look was similar in style and function.

“That’s a great idea, actually. I’ll start looking through those and we can come up with a list of what we need to hire for and what we can DIY.”

April nodded. “Sounds like a plan.” Georgia ran off to begin looking through the sketches as April went through her own checklist of everything that needed to be done before they could get into the design aspect of the house. Electrician quotes, checking the foundation, permits, plumbing, water.

The list was longer than April was expecting, but it didn’t slow her down for a single second. With the help of her daughter, she knew that this was going to become easier as time went on. There would be hiccups, of course. But everything felt so right.

Adrenaline was coursing through their veins, pushed by anticipation of seeing the house slowly transform before their eyes.

From the living room, April could hear, “Hey everybody and welcome back to putting up molding in your home. This is how we’ve always done it here, but there are many...”

The voice began to drown as April turned her focus to writing emails to as many electricians and plumbers in the area as she could. Calling them was a hassle and apparently she couldn’t get the dates right after all this time on the phone. Emailing was going to be the easiest way to get a hold of them and have written proof of the date and time.

She mumbled as she typed out similar emails to each company. It took a full minute after Georgia walked into the room to realize that she had said something. “What, honey?”

“I saw this picture you drew, but I’m a little confused,” Georgia said, sprawling the drawing out on the table. “What is this?”

April took a break from looking at her screen to peek at the hurried lines on the paper she’d used to express her dream just days ago. “That is the entryway. We’re going to need to redo this gable right here in order to make it work. And then once we clean up the carvings in there, I’d like to keep those so-”

“No, no. I’m not talking about the house,” Georgia said.

April stared at her with furrowed brows. The drawing in front of her was of the house. It was exactly what she dreamed about, down to the smallest details. “It’s the house.”

“But there’s people coming in. Who even are they?”

April knew what she’d drawn before. The dream where people were entering and leaving the house, walking down to explore the beach and say hello to everyone.

But looking at it now, from a different perspective, she realized what she was looking for was right in front of her all along. “I think I just figured out what I want to do with this place.”

“What is it?” Georgia’s neck craned to look at the paper straight on. “Who are these strangers?”

“This house is too big for just me. Or for just us.” It hurt to say the word. She wasn’t thinking of Carl, but he came to mind because he used to be included in ‘us.’ A part of April hated that she thought of him.

The ‘us’ she wanted to be referring to was just her and Georgia, together. “I want to create a bed and breakfast for the town. We can make the bedrooms into individual rooms and the downstairs here into an inviting lobby. People would have access to our beach. I could share this house with others. It’s perfect.”

“So those people are guests?”

April nodded her head. “I didn’t know when I drew it, but I think so. Doesn’t it make so much sense? In my wildest dreams I saw people coming and going as they pleased. It was because they were staying here.”

“Can we do that?”

April shrugged. For the first time, she was okay with not knowing everything before she started. The details weren't important right now, the dream was. They would need to remember that as they got to the toughest parts of the build.

“How will we know if we don't try?”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Georgia walked April through the house, bedroom by bedroom and motioned to the changes they would have to make in order to design the rooms the way she'd planned. "And this is where the bed will go. Because this room is one of the largest, I have it down as a suite. We could include a queen bed and bunk beds over here for the kids."

April looked around the room that used to hold her mother's crafts and smiled. "It's perfect. I don't know how you came up with all these ideas, but they're brilliant. I didn't realize you had a knack for interior design."

Georgia shrugged. "I tried to tell you. I took a course in school."

Yeah, but April had taken woodworking and didn't know how to use a single saw. Though she had to give her daughter a break, because she'd been out of school for years and Georgia had just graduated.

"What's the color scheme for this one again?"

"Blue and dark wood. We'll hang a television here and place a microwave in the corner. To open up the room when people walk in."

April crossed her arms and leaned against the doorway. "I love it. Draw it up."

For every room in the house, Georgia was in charge of creating a vision board. It included the color scheme, layout, necessary renovations, and everything else she could think of that they would need to know. It was more than helpful to April, who only had time to do rough sketches before she felt the need to call more contractors and find the best deal.

Logistics was more her thing to begin with.

Which made her even more impressed when Georgia would come up with the most creative ideas. Half of the bedrooms were already designed. They took into account what kind of people might be vacationing: families, couples, single people, even elderly travelers who needed an accessible room. Georgia thought of all of them and made sure they would be comfortable in this new home.

April tapped her foot on the ground nervously waiting for Bobby to pick up. "Hey!" he said when he finally did. "I got good news and I got bad news."

“Tell me the bad news first,” she said with a sigh.

“Bad news is it’s going to take a little longer to get some of the other permits. But the good news is that we can officially apply to be re-zoned as a rental property.”

It wasn’t as bad as she thought. Her biggest worry was that her daughter was doing all this designing for no reason, because they wouldn’t be allowed to make the changes they wanted. Thankfully, Bobby the local contractor was becoming an incredible asset to their team.

April’s shoulders relaxed. “That’s alright. We can wait for the permits. Why don’t you send me over that paperwork now and I can go through it with you in case I have any questions. Do you have time?”

“Sure, sure,” he replied. The phone stayed silent as he sent the emails with everything attached that they needed to do for their applications. “Did you get ‘em?”

“I did,” she said as she opened and began filling it out.

The silence between them was so long that April almost forgot she was on the phone. “Uh, Bobby?”

“Yes? You got a question?”

“No, no. I was just thinking... Do you know much about tourism in the area? I’ve talked to a few locals, but I’d love to hear from everyone. It’s important to know the market, you know?”

Bobby’s voice grew cheerful. “Yeah, actually. My wife used to work at the hotel closer to the bridge. It’s probably the most popular on the island because it’s so close to the cities. She was practically laid off in the winter because the hotel would close down. No one would come in. There aren’t as many tourists when it gets even remotely cold out.”

April was grateful for the voice as she filled out her forms. Sometimes being somewhere new made her feel separated from everyone else. Especially here where some people were more likely to make fun of her for not knowing everything about the place.

“I did hear about that. It’s so strange how they all leave around that time.”

Bobby paused. “I didn’t say they all leave. In fact, some people want families to visit over the holidays. It’s hard to get them to come because there’s no hotels to stay in. I know you have a nice place over there, but not everyone has a spare room to let their parents stay with them.”

April stopped typing. She never realized that while she was living large at

the estate every chance she got, there were people on the island who couldn't spend Christmas with their loved ones because the hotels shut down.

She wondered why her parents had never offered to help their neighbors before. This was exactly why she was building this place. April wanted to help others connect with this beautiful house.

In her dream, it wasn't just strangers that came to stay at the house. It was everyone, including locals and their families. She vowed now that every winter she would keep a few rooms ready for the handful of people that want to visit the island. It was her way of paying back the town for everything they'd been doing for her already.

"April?"

She jumped at his voice, forgetting once again that they were on the phone. "Yes, sorry. That's horrible. I hope we can fix that for the town someday here soon. That's what we're here for. Thank you for your help. I've sent back the application forms. Did you get them?"

Bobby typed something on his computer. "Yep! All right here. They look good to go. I'll send them over today."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate all your help. Call me as soon as the permit information comes in?"

"Will do!"

As April hung up the phone, she smiled. Every day she was becoming further invested in this dream of hers. Each phone call, email, decision about the house, cemented the fact that they were supposed to be here, doing this exact thing, right now.

April could feel Georgia's eyes on her from behind, but she was so in the zone that she didn't find a stopping point to look behind her. "Mom, I think you need a break."

"A break? I'm in my prime. I'm on some kind of roll," she said without taking her hands off the keyboard of her laptop.

Georgia walked over to her mother and put a hand on the back of the laptop, slowly closing it until it slammed shut. "Seriously, I think you have to stop thinking about this. You're going to go insane if this is all you do all day."

April took a deep breath, adjusting to not staring at the screen. "What do you suggest I do, then?"

"I looked up some stores and as it turns out, there's a discount furniture



store on the island and a thrift shop known for some good pieces just off the island. What do you say we go and get some ideas for this place?”

It would be nice to get out of the house. April knew she was starting to go stir crazy just like her daughter said, though she didn't want to admit it to herself. “Okay, that sounds fun! Do you have any ideas of what you want to look for?”

Georgia looked taken aback.

“What?”

A smile spread across Georgia's face. “I'm just a little surprised... You want to leave now? You're okay with that?”

She nodded. “Of course. Let's go now. We can hit the stores and then we can hit up the hardware store for anything we need to start cleaning and fixing up the little things. We can go grab lunch with Nigel, too.”

“That sounds great!” April still didn't know why Georgia was so surprised, but she decided to try and let it go. No sense in worrying about her child's excitement. They should just spend the time together that they could.

The first store had plenty for Georgia to look at. The aisles were long, filled with different furniture with little defects.

One piece in particular was a long desk with several drawers that Georgia thought would be perfect for one of the single rooms. They took measurements and dreamed of exactly where they would put it.

“What about this one?” April asked, pointing to a vintage, bright orange sitting chair. “That used to be all the rage.”

Georgia stared at the worn seat, the tall back the only part of the fabric that hadn't been dulled over time. She winced. “That's not really the vibe we're going for. That's more... seventies era cool girl. We're looking for modern beach.”

April remembered having something similar in the house twenty years ago. Except it wasn't bright orange, it was a darker green. To her it was as cool then as it was now. But she took a step back and remembered that this wasn't her own house she was designing; it was the bed and breakfast.

They had considered adding an owner's suite, one just for them to stay in. Maybe she could buy the chair later and put it in there. It would look beautiful next to a reading nook.

Every piece of furniture that Georgia pointed to in the store was beautiful. April was impressed with her ability to see things in the design that she

couldn't, the way she talked about the space in a room as if it could breathe.

"That wouldn't fit there. The room needs to flow. If we put that by the door it'll feel closed in. Don't want our guests to feel suffocated on vacation," she'd said with a smile. April could only look on with admiration.

Until she found it. The one piece of furniture she'd dreamt of.

A long, blue, cloth couch with firm armrests and a subtle pleated back. "This is the one," she told her daughter. "This is what I've been dreaming of for the lounge in the living room! Oh, it's perfect. Don't you think?"

April prepared herself for the worst. If her daughter didn't like it, maybe it was just another one of those things that would end up in her personal suite.

It was disappointing though, because the way the light hit the fabric made it look almost sparkly. It was magic on its own. The way the windows would let in beams of light, the couch would look even better.

"I love it."

April had to do a doubletake as she made her way over to sit on it.

"What? You really like it?"

Georgia nodded. "It's perfect for the lounge area. It'll be the focal point of the whole room. And the fact that it's exactly what you were picturing, I think that tells us both enough. We have to get it."

April smiled from ear to ear, but was quickly interrupted by her phone vibrating in her pocket. Another call from Maxwell that would go ignored. "Everything okay?"

She nodded. "Of course. Let's go tell them which pieces we want and put them on hold until we can pick them up."

They excitedly finished up their shopping. This was the break they needed. Now they could go back to focusing on the building of their dreams.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dust burst into the air as Georgia and April pushed a broken desk from the corner of the living room area. It'd been a pain to gather everything there in the first place, but somehow it was even harder to get it all out.

April thought about cutting every piece of old decor into tiny pieces to carry out, but she knew it would be the same amount of effort, just different work.

Unfortunately, everything seemed to have dust. No matter what they were doing, dust and a musty smell filled the air. Nothing was safe, not even the paintings that hung on the walls.

"Gosh, everything is full of just a gray layer of filth," Georgia complained as she helped take the desk to the front yard where the half-full dumpster sat.

"Just think, your new furniture we ordered will be coming tomorrow."

As they pushed the desk up and over the dumpster wall, Georgia closed her eyes. "Okay, I'm starting to feel better. I think I'll feel even better when the furniture I ordered is in the actual house."

April looked back at the living room, noting all the furniture they still had to move. It was going to be a while until the new things would be allowed to touch the house. The place was still disgusting.

She almost didn't want to think about everything that had to get done. The laundry list of things needing fixes continued to grow. Somehow, they dodged or squeezed their way through every hurdle thrown at them so far. Everything broken was scheduled to get fixed.

Except for the things Georgia decided they could do on their own. Which included getting rid of the furniture once they saw how expensive it was to hire several people to clear it all out.

Cleaners were next on the list to get crossed off, after April convinced her it was an unnecessary expense. Cleaning supplies were cheap enough. And with everything they were replacing, like the carpets and floors, they barely had any work to do. It was mostly the dust that had to be wiped away.

The next piece of furniture on the list was probably the heaviest one in the entire house. The wooden dresser from the second floor was almost thrown down the stairs in a fit of frustration the day prior. After an hour of grief, they

were able to slide it down the stairs one at a time.

Now, they could at least pick it up from the bottom and carry it out the door with little trouble. Everything else had been harder to carry out the front door and easier to take down the stairs. But this was heavy, with most of its weight in its bottom half.

“Okay, one, two, three,” April said as they each tried to get a good grasp of the chunky furniture piece.

It toppled slightly as they tried to get their hands in the right positions. But finally, it evened out and they began to walk. That’s when April felt it.

Something small tapped her finger. She shrugged it off thinking it must have been the side of the dresser, the little lip that helped prevent things from sliding under it. But then it happened again. A tickling of her hand. Then several tickles, as if something was crawling.

Without a second thought, April’s hands slid from under the dresser. If it had been higher off the ground, Georgia would have been hurt from the sudden drop. But thankfully, she was able to slide her side to the ground soon after.

“What is it?” Georgia yelled to her mom.

April held her hands between her legs, scared to even say it out loud. “I think... There’s definitely a spider there. A spider crawled on my hand. It touched me! It tried to bite me!”

Georgia looked between her mom and the dresser. After rolling her eyes, she walked over to the kitchen and grabbed a paper towel. Her hand slid under the wood and April gasped, afraid for her daughter.

“Look,” Georgia said as she pulled up the towel in her hands. She said it so calmly that April’s body fully relaxed and inched closer to investigate the towel. “It was just a daddy long legs.”

The body looked as though it were still alive, but it didn’t move. And April jolted back. “Oh my gosh, you’re holding it! I can’t believe you just did that!”

“It’s just a spider, Mom.”

April couldn’t believe that her daughter killed the thing that had been haunting her for days. Ever since she saw it for the first time, she knew it was always lurking in the house, waiting for her to sleep. And her daughter killed it, just like that.

She didn’t realize that the renovations would include such a brutal battle

with the thing she hated most.

April did love animals, but spiders were where she drew the line. Anything but spiders.

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One of the other things April and Georgia decided they could do on their own was replace the light fixtures in the bedrooms. The old, yellowing dome lights were being thrown out in favor of the more modern, black lights with fans.

It wasn't the easiest they could have chosen to install, but it was a better option for their guests.

April read over the instructions as Georgia began to pull out the light pieces. They sat on the clean floor of the first bedroom and stared at all of it. "What do you think goes first?" Georgia asked.

"I think we put the blades on the fan part and then all we have to do from there is install it and hook it up to the lighting up there."

They stared at the hole in the ceiling where they would need to center the entire fan. April began to regret their decision to do this themselves. It would be hard work, but it would save money in the long run, she had to keep reminding herself.

Georgia worked hard on getting the parts together as April read over the same four steps in the instruction manual. "I think if I stand on the stool and we carefully lift it together, then we just center it and I'll hold it while you screw it all in."

"We're going to need two stools, then." She went off to grab them from the living room as April continued to stare at the same pages. She didn't want to get this wrong. If the fan pulled down their entire ceiling, she was going to have so many more problems than just a missing light in a bedroom.

When Georgia came back with the stools, she started to question the decision even more. A lump grew in her throat. "I'm so nervous."

"What? Why? We're just following the instructions. If we do that, nothing can go wrong."

She appreciated her daughter's confidence, but a lot of things could go wrong. "If you say so," April said, shrugging.

"Okay, so I'll grab the screws and the drill and help you carry it up."

And that's exactly what they did. Georgia grabbed the tools and hardware as April focused on lifting the light. As they held it up to the hole, April searched for the lighting attachments and worked to get them all connected. "Okay! The light is attached; now we just have to screw in the fan!"

It was all coming together easier than April thought. She wondered why she'd ever paid anyone to do things like this before. At one point, she was paying people to come in and change her light bulbs if they were too high up. Now she was installing her own ceiling fan.

"That's the last of them," Georgia said as the drill came to a stop. "We actually did it!"

April and her daughter climbed off the stools and jumped up and down together. "We did! You were so confident before! I couldn't have done it without you."

She shrugged. "Ah, Mom, I bet you could've. You just needed a boost. I was nervous, too. But we finally did it."

Satisfaction ran through her more than it ever did at her old job. The law firm never felt like this. She was never doing something with her own hands, excited to finally accomplish something.

"I'll get the box for the next room and you bring the stools there," she told Georgia after they finished celebrating.

As she grabbed another box full of the necessary parts, a moving shadow caught her attention out the back window. It moved so fast, she thought she imagined it. Until it happened again.

She walked out the front doors, to the back of the property. And there was the brown horse she'd seen on the first day, prancing through the field. For a moment, she thought about running inside and grabbing more of the crackers she'd given to it on her first day.

But it was having too much fun, bucking through the fields. It wasn't the time to disturb such a pretty creature.

Something about the day must have had an effect on the animals, because as the horse pranced, two squirrels ran around the trunks of a tree far across the field. Then a small fox wandered through the same trees and jumped at the squirrels. It was too slow to reach them, but it continued on as if nothing had happened.

April took a deep breath in the fresh air. It was out of a dream. She could pretend like the work on the house didn't exist for a moment. Everything she

needed was out here. It was beautiful. Perfect in its own way.

Her eyes slowly closed. The wind gently slid under her sleeves, a chill trickling up her back only to be warmed by her shirt again.

“Mom! This one didn’t come with screws! Can you run and get some?”

And she was woken up from the dream, forcing herself to crash back into reality.

Nature drifted away and responsibility weighed heavy on her shoulders. April sighed. She would come back to the heart of the island, the animals that ran wild. It would just have to be after she was done.

Because she was going to finish this place if it was the last thing she did.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

April stepped through the aisles of the hardware store searching for screws that matched the one in her hand. “Henry, can you help me out?” she called out to the worker in the same aisle.

He was old enough to retire, but hadn’t wanted to. April knew all about his work life up until now. Henry told it in pieces as he checked her out each time she showed up with a new problem he could fix.

“You’re looking for the longer ones, see?” He pointed to the difference between the two in her hand. “So that means you need to check up here.”

As he slid out a random box from the top shelf, he pulled out a screw identical to the one April had brought in. “You’re seriously a lifesaver.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said with a smile.

April began to sift through the box and pull out the number of screws she needed, plus some extras in case there was another fan with no hardware. “At the very least, you’re a time saver. I don’t know how long it would have taken me to find these if you hadn’t helped. Not to mention the million times before that you’ve saved me from walking around the store aimlessly.”

Henry only blushed and walked back to where he was spooling packets of hinges on displays. Holding up an empty box towards her, he walked to the end of the aisle. “I’m going to get another in the back. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do, thank you!”

As soon as Henry was out of sight, April heard a familiar voice. “You know, I went by the house the other day.”

“Yeah, it was definitely different.”

Chuck and Barry stood at the front of the aisle with only paint chips in their hands. “We just saw you come in and wanted to say that you’re doing a real good job with that place. We’ve heard that it’s going to be something great.”

It took everything in her not to say, ‘I told you so.’ Still, she smirked, unable to hide her joy at their mistake in making fun of her weeks ago. “Who told you that it’s going to be great?”

“Nigel said that you’d been working hard on it. And we didn’t believe



him,” Chuck said. “We had to drive by. Hope we didn’t bother you.”

Every once in a while, April and Georgia heard people coming up the driveway, but not to the house. They knew it was just the neighbors or someone who’d taken a wrong turn. People in Sandcrest couldn’t help but be nosy when it came to the undertaking of the Faith house.

“You didn’t. I’m glad you saw that we’re making progress. It’s going really well. We’re happy to let you see it when it’s all finished.”

The men nodded and sauntered away. “Thank you,” Barry called out as they left the store. “We’ll see you again, soon.”

April just continued to sift through the screws with a smile. There were a lot of people in the town who doubted her. But they would soon learn just how determined she actually was. Clearly, some of them were already noticing.

It was encouraging to hear that they were making a difference. From the inside, it sometimes looked the same day after day. The little things didn’t look like big things no matter how you did them. If they took a day to clean the dust, the next day it would only look like a dusted house, nothing more.

Sometimes April woke up hoping that more would be done than they did the night before. As if a fairy would come through the front door and fix it all up for her. Magic, she would say to the people who asked how it was finished so quickly. And she wouldn’t be lying.

But magic didn’t exist. So here she was, sifting through screws to put up lights and fans. The most menial of tasks. It was more fun to tell people she was renovating the place than to actually do the work. Still, she knew it would be worth it in the end. She would have fun in the middle parts too, she just had to push through these hard times.

As April walked to the front of the store with all her screws in a small paper bag from the aisle, Henry still wasn’t back. No one was working the front counter.

Another woman stood in front of her at the only open checkout line. Of course, no one was there to man it, so the ladies simply waited next to each other.

“Henry just went to the back,” April explained, trying to help but wondering if she was overstepping. She’d only been in town a few weeks. Everyone knew everyone else around here. And she hadn’t met this woman yet.

Her gray hair was mixed in with the darker strands that landed around her shoulders. It wasn't straight, but it wasn't curly. And her outfit looked like it came from a model at one of the high end stores in the big city. "Oh, sure. He's always up to something," she said with a smile.

April was taken aback by her voice. It was so easy, like the words were slipping from her lips. She could have listened to her read a textbook. "I don't think I've met you yet." April extended her hand.

The woman shifted around the bird feeders in her hand to shake it. "I'm Rose. I'm guessing you're new around here? I was out for the past few weeks, so I guess I missed the welcome parade."

"I am pretty new. I'm April Faith. I'm fixing up my family's property out here. Everyone thought I was crazy, but I'm actually doing it." April shrugged. She felt like she was trying too hard to impress this woman. But she wasn't sure how to pull herself back. "What were you doing out of town?"

Rose shifted back and forth on her feet. "Well, I actually was just picking up some stuff from my ex-husband. Apparently I left some things in the storage unit we had years ago. I was worried he was going to throw it all out, so I left in a hurry."

She wondered if she'd overstepped, but was thankful to meet a divorcee like herself. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's no problem," Rose said, chuckling. She threw her free hand in the air as if brushing it off. "It's been a year already. I moved out here to get a fresh start like a lot of us. I'm forty-six now, so there's not much out in the city for me anymore. Always felt like a young gal's place."

"No, no! If you like the city, it can be really gorgeous. Anybody can make it work. My soon-to-be ex-husband's dad lived in a city apartment until he was nearly ninety."

Rose raised her brows. "Really? That's quite impressive. It's also nice to meet someone who came out here for the same reasons I did. Or... I guess I'm assuming."

Realizing how nice it was to talk about it with someone else, April's words gushed out of her. "You'd be assuming right. It's been a... wild ride to say the least. It all just kind of happened. Like this past month. So I'm still a little bit crazy." She chuckled at herself, but Rose only met her with a kind smile.

“I get it. It’s pretty wild to think about. I’m here if you ever want to talk. I swear I’m a really good listener,” Rose said. “I’m sorry you’re going through it.”

Finally, April was able to let it all out. And now she wanted to continue to let it pour out of her. But she knew she couldn’t put all of that on this one woman. Not if she wanted to become friends with her. She had to go easy at first. Get to know her before she put all this baggage on her shoulders. It wouldn’t be fair.

As April opened her mouth to say something else, Henry appeared from the back room. “Oh, man! Sorry about that ladies.”

“Never worry about it,” Rose replied. “Besides, we were making great conversation before you came around.”

Henry pointed to the back of the store. “I can go back there again, if you guys wanted to continue your chat.” He looked between April and Rose, brows raised. When neither of them said anything, he continued, “That’s what I thought.”

While Rose checked out, April could only think about how great it would be to have real friends around the island. There would be people her age to talk to. Not that Georgia wasn’t great company; she just wasn’t going to stay forever. And she was teaching April too many words. The kids these days were coming up with more slang than she could keep up with.

Before she left, Rose turned around and called out, “See you later, Henry, April.”

Henry began counting the screws in the bag. As he took out each one, she knew it would take him a few minutes. Instead of waiting to see Rose again, she decided to ask what she really wanted to know. “Do you know if anyone else has come to the island for a new adventure?”

“New adventure?” he replied without looking up.

April shrugged. “Like how I came here for a fresh start? Stuff like that. I’m sure other people have done the same. Rose was just telling me that she came here after her own divorce.”

“Yes, that woman has been through so much. If you ever need any advice, she’s the woman to go to.”

“Is that so?”

Henry nodded. “There have been a few women coming in the past year or two that need a fresh start. They’re great women. So many of them have told

me Rose has helped them. She's a good friend to have around here."

It was exactly like April had thought. She wasn't the only one who came here for something new. And it wasn't just Rose either, though it seemed like she was the best one to talk to. There was hope for April to find a group of people that could relate to her situation.

She left the hardware store with screws for a ceiling fan and a new friend.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The paint went on easier than April expected. Every inch of the floor and furniture in the living room was covered in plastic tarps. The only paint she'd spilled so far was on her shorts.

Georgia had small lines of white primer on her neck from when she'd scratched her cheek with a paintbrush in her hand. April admired it from across the room as they stood on ladders and swiped their rollers full of paint up and down the walls.

April was worried they would need three buckets of paint instead of just the two they'd picked up from the hardware store. It was a nice sandy beige color that Georgia picked out to complement their beach theme.

It was hard for them both to stay on theme lately. April always wanted to go overboard, too cliché with bright colors, shells, and anchors everywhere. While Georgia wanted to go too bland with only a color scheme and nothing else to match their grand motif. Together, they were working to find that balance.

Songs blared through the open front doors of the house as they painted. So they didn't hear when Nigel's car pulled into the driveway. April only noticed when he stood in the doorway and bellowed, "I have a delivery!"

"Oh!" she said, surprised by the visit. "What are you doing here?"

He stood in the doorway with a plastic bag hanging from his arm. "I have brought you two a feast for lunch. Haven't seen you in Giant's in a while. Thought it would be nice for you to have some good food. Not whatever you've been cooking on that camp stove."

Nigel served them various lunches and dinners over the past few weeks. They would sit and talk for short periods of time during the rushes, but he'd never showed up like this.

April watched his eyes stare at the old stove sitting on the kitchen counter. But he couldn't have known she was using one until now. There was something else on his mind, a reason for his visit. She wasn't sure what yet, but she was curious to know.

"Thank you! I feel like I haven't eaten in weeks," Georgia said in an exasperated sigh as she stepped off her ladder.

Carefully, April lowered herself down one step and was met with Nigel's hand out in front of her, offering to help her down the rest. She took his hand and slowly worked her way down. "Thank you."

He nodded with a smile. That's when she knew he was definitely up to something. It was nice to bring a meal for them. Nigel was someone who would do nice things without expectation. But this felt different, like he was here for a reason other than just dropping it off. Like he was here to see her.

April cleared her throat, nervous now. "So, uh—"

"I was—"

They spoke at the same time, stopping themselves when they realized. Both looked at each other, waiting to finish their thought. Then they chuckled. "Sorry," she said quietly. "You can go ahead."

Nigel rubbed the back of his neck. "Hope you like pulled pork and burgers because that's what I brought."

"Love it."

The silence felt like it was choking her as they walked over to the counter. Georgia had already started pulling everything out, each ingredient in its own to-go container. "Our plates aren't very nice or anything. Just some plastic ones," April warned him as she grabbed them from the shelf inside the first cabinet. She noticed Georgia furrowing her brows out of the corner of her eye.

"That's fine," he replied, a smile still plastered across his face. "I don't mind. If the food is good, it doesn't matter, right?" Nigel winked at Georgia, who smiled in return.

Her daughter nudged her. April looked at her like she was crazy. "Just relax. Be normal," Georgia said, and motioned towards Nigel.

April hadn't realized she'd been so weird since he walked in. But obviously she was acting differently. She couldn't help it. It had been years since there was any kind of romance in her life. And even though this was just a tiny crush, she couldn't figure out how to be around him.

As Georgia filled her plate, Nigel stepped in front of April and whispered, "For the record, I think you're very relaxed." He smirked while April's cheeks went bright red.

She feigned a giggle and started to serve herself a plate. Georgia sat on a stool at the kitchen counter and began to scarf down her food. As April stirred the rich, saucy pulled pork and heaped a spoonful onto her plate, long

drips of barbeque sauce fell to the floor. “Oh, dang it,” she whispered.

“I’ve got it,” Nigel claimed, but before he could even reach for a napkin, April was already on the floor with a washcloth in her hand. Everyone stood watch while she frantically soaked up the mess.

She couldn’t see it, but assumed that Georgia was rolling her eyes. Why couldn’t she just let the man be chivalrous? This anxious energy felt like it was going to consume her.

After she stood and got her food, she stepped aside for Nigel to fill his own plate. And as he prepared his burger, he cleared his throat. “So, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to get a more formal dinner with me?”

“Oh, you’re serving something special at the restaurant?” April said between bites. Georgia nudged her again.

Nigel bit his bottom lip. “No, I was thinking maybe not at the restaurant.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Oh, uh, like a date?”

It was his turn to blush as she made him answer the straightforward question. “Yeah, like a date.” He shrugged.

Everything in her wanted to say yes. April wanted to yell out that she would love to. And if her daughter wasn’t there, she might have. But Georgia was there. She had no idea about April’s impending divorce. April wasn’t ready to lay all of that out now, in front of the man she was crushing on.

Her life was too complicated to date right now anyway. Right? “I’m really sorry. But I just can’t right now. I do enjoy spending time with you. I have-”

Nigel interrupted by waving his hands in front of him. “You don’t have to... No reason to explain yourself. I completely understand.”

Though he said it was fine, April saw the sadness in his eyes and felt horrible about her decision. For the first time, she wondered if it was the right thing, bringing her daughter down to stay with her.

April’s life was so complicated already. She didn’t want to tell her daughter all the details of her divorce, not yet at least. But she was such a great help, a fantastic partner in renovating this house into something out of her dreams. It was no doubt a good decision. There were just some things that were made harder by Georgia’s presence.

This was one of those things. April could let go of a possible date with this man she was interested in, in order to have her daughter here by her side. So she bit her tongue and smiled at the man she’d just turned down.

“I didn’t realize we missed so many meals at Giant’s that you had to come

check up on us. Guess we'll have to come by more often."

Nigel sat on a stool next to April. "Yes, please do. The place is starting to feel empty without you two."

Georgia chimed in between huge bites of her burger. "I can't stand much more of her camp stove cooking. We'll be in as soon as possible."

The rest of lunch was more relaxed. The three joked and laughed until Nigel had to leave for the so-called dinner rush. He knew there would only be a few people coming in, but there wasn't anyone else to cook. It was made clear to April that it was the only reason why he was leaving.

As he drove off, Georgia and April waved from the front door. "So, you like that guy?"

April's face burned. "What? No. I mean, he's very nice. I wasn't expecting him to come and bring us lunch. And it was so good, too."

With every word, she tried to curb Georgia's suspicions. It clearly didn't work when she replied, "All I asked was if you like him." Her smirk was telling enough for April. Her daughter was observant; she'd caught on quickly that there were sparks between them. "I mean, I get why you can't go out with him. But you seem to like looking at him."

April's mouth fell open. "What! I do not stare at him like that."

"Mhmm, whatever you say." Georgia grabbed the same paint roller she had before and began to roll it in the tin full of paint.

Convinced that her daughter had dropped the conversation, she began to paint her wall again, too. But Georgia hadn't started painting yet because her mind was still lingering on a question. Which April found out when she looked over and saw her staring at the blank wall. "What's wrong?"

Georgia snapped to and began to roll on the color. "Nothing. Just thinking."

"About what?"

She shrugged. "Why can't Dad know about our project? And why isn't he here?"

April felt like all the air was squeezed out of her chest. She couldn't breathe. It felt like time had stopped completely. It was the one question she didn't want to answer. Because she was either forced to lie to her daughter or tell her the truth and she wasn't sure which was more daunting.

"Well, your father is on a trip right now. He's having fun with some friends in Europe." It hurt her throat to swallow as she lied straight through



her teeth. “And I don’t want him to worry about this. It’s a lot. I’m taking up time and money to chase this dream of mine. I’m not really ready for him to know about what’s going on here. And that’s okay. We’re each doing our own thing for now. It’s healthy to have some space.”

Parts of it were true, but it still tasted sour coming out of her mouth. It was technically a lie. “That makes sense. I think he’d lose his mind if he knew about all this. We’re starting a new business. Speaking of which, what happened to your job? They’re cool with you being here full-time?”

“I’m taking a leave of absence. I’m not sure I want to go back. Would you be disappointed if I didn’t?”

More lies. Her chest hurt, acid creeping up her throat threatening to cause a problem. It was as if her body was physically punishing her.

“Of course not!” Georgia replied. “That place doesn’t deserve you. You work way too hard.”

A deep breath centered April as she heard exactly what she needed to hear. It wasn’t enough for her to tell Georgia the truth, but it was enough to make her feel better about her decisions.

Still, her daughter was getting close enough to figure everything out. It would take one phone call from her father at the circus to tell her about the divorce. Or one flirty conversation with Nigel.

She would have to tell her daughter, and soon.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

After weeks of working with the contractors, the stove had finally been approved for them to use. “Thank God,” Georgia said as April cooked their first meal on it. It happened to be one of their favorite dishes, chicken stir fry. “We really needed an actual meal.”

“I cooked plenty of good meals on the camp stove!”

She scoffed. “Okay, sure. But it was too small to make something like this. Now we’re really cookin’.”

“You’re just happy because we finished painting the living room today.”

Georgia nodded with a smile. “That’s right. And that means that the living room is one step closer to your dream lobby. We have almost all the furniture pieces picked out too.”

“That’s right! It’s really starting to come together. This is going to look fantastic when it’s all put together.” April stirred the dish with a wooden spoon. “You’ve done a great job at designing it.”

Her daughter was never great at taking compliments. It was always turned into a joke or got pushed aside. But this time, she looked like she genuinely was proud of her accomplishments. Georgia didn’t say thank you, but April knew that she was grateful for every time she was told how good of a job she was doing.

April imagined that after quitting school, Georgia was struggling with her direction in life just like her mom. So she would give her all the validation she wanted. It was all support from here on out.

She opened her mouth to praise her daughter even more, but the phone in her pocket vibrated. Expecting Maxwell, she reached down to push the button to ignore. But then she saw the dreaded name flash across her screen.

‘Mom.’

Did she really have to answer it? But what if it was an emergency? She sighed, rolling her eyes, knowing that she needed to answer or it would only create more problems for her in the future. “Can you?” April motioned to the stove with the wooden spoon in her hand. “It’s Grandma.”

Georgia nodded. “Of course.”

She knew how much April didn’t enjoy talking to her mother, which April

was extremely thankful for in times like these. It felt good to have someone that had her back.

“Hey, Mom, what’s up?”

The high-pitched, posh voice came through crystal clear. “I’m at your house. No one’s home. What the hell is going on here?”

Her heart pounded in her chest. Would she lie to her mother, too? She might not have a choice. “I’m at the house in Sandcrest with Georgia.”

“With Georgia?”

Immediately, April regretted her words. She shouldn’t have told her mother anything about Georgia. It was too soon for her to start nagging about college. “Yes, she’s here with me.”

April had learned long ago that when it came to her mother, the less details the better. Even when she asked questions, April would give her the least amount of information that would get her to stop asking.

“Why isn’t she in school? There’s no break right now, is there? Who takes breaks only a few weeks in?”

She swallowed hard, trying to think of an answer that wouldn’t upset her mother. “Well-”

“And where is Carl?”

She released a breath she was holding at the fortunate change of subject. “Carl is out of town on business. Everything is fine, Mom. We’re all okay. There’s nothing to worry about. What are you doing at the house?”

“I was coming to visit you. I wanted to see you guys. But obviously I can’t do that anymore without a reservation.”

April rolled her eyes. Always with the guilt trips and exaggerations. She wondered if Caroline would ever refer to anything as just the way it was, instead of ten times bigger. “We’re working on some stuff down here. We won’t be back at the house for a while.”

“What is going on with you guys? Your family is all over the place. I have so many questions. No one tells me anything anymore.”

It was still hard for her to tell her mother the harsh truth. She wanted to say, *‘stay out of my business and stop coming to my house uninvited.’* But she knew if she said that, all hell would break loose. And the bad side of her mother would crawl out, wreaking havoc on everyone else’s lives around her.

It took another deep breath and a hard bite on her lip before April was able to say, “Mom, we are fine. You don’t have to worry about us, okay? We’re

finishing some things up and I'll explain everything."

"When will that be?" Her voice was nasal, a sign of her rising level of irritation.

April turned to look at Georgia who was serving their dinner. Then she looked over the house with one room almost complete and several others started. Still, this house was going to take them much longer than she originally expected. Everything was taking longer, from painting to contractors to finding furniture.

Considering she came to the island on a whim, everything was taking longer than she expected. At every turn there was something new to make things more difficult for her, adding to the time it would take before she even thought about leaving this place.

"I'm not sure yet. But I'm going to call you soon and we'll talk about everything. I'll explain, I promise." The reassurance wasn't going to do anything for her mother. "We'll talk soon, okay? Alright, love you, bye."

She heard her mother begin to talk, but had already committed to hanging up. She'd face the repercussions of that later. Hopefully, the news of her daughter dropping out and her divorce would overshadow the fact that she just hung up on her mother.

Turning her phone off, ignoring the several notifications of emails and voicemails from Maxwell, she stuffed it into her back pocket. A plate was waiting for her at the dining room table with Georgia already eating her own portion.

"How was Grandma?"

April raised her brows and shrugged. "I don't even know. She was at the house in New York apparently. She was upset that no one was home."

"Oh, I didn't think about that. She was probably asking a million questions. Does she know about school?"

April sat and started scooping the delicious stir fry into her mouth, trying to make herself feel better about the day. It worked as she filled her belly with the warm sustenance. "She doesn't know that you've dropped out, but she knows that you're not there. I accidentally told her you were with me here."

"So she knows I'm not in school? Was she upset?"

She wished that her daughter wasn't worried about what her mother thought about the situation. April had been trying so hard to be supportive

and yet, Georgia was still worried about how her decision looked to everyone else. What would she do if her mother pressured Georgia into going back to school?

It was against everything April had been working towards. There was no way she could let her mother ruin all this progress. Georgia had finally begun to believe that she wasn't trying to control her decision. Which was the truth. But if Caroline came in and stomped around, they would all need to confront it head on.

At the very least, April knew that her mother wouldn't let this go. She would continue to ask questions. And she had better have those answers the next time she called. Caroline would absolutely call again. Again and again until she was satisfied.

"She was upset, but that's okay. We'll get through this. You focus on you right now. Let me worry about Grandma."

They ate their dinner in peace. April wondered how long this peace would last. The picture perfect vacation they'd envisioned was slowly cracking at the seams.

She knew she didn't have long before it would burst open.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Okay, this is going to be hard to watch. But if you want that double back door here, then we have to take out this piece of the wall and framing, okay?” Georgia reassured her mother.

They stood in full demo gear. It was the last big project in the living room, the double doors that went out to the backside of the house. The doorway was only big enough for one sliding door. And the dimensions for the door they’d picked out were larger. It was a simple process that Georgia had looked up a thousand times.

It was important that they got it right, or they’d have to hire someone to fix their mistake. And it was the last project of the living room, meaning their dream lobby was almost complete. This was the day they’d been waiting for.

The panel they needed to hammer out was small, smaller than the ones on the videos they’d watched. There was so much more to be done. This should have been an easy feat.

Even with all their research, April was nervous about taking a hammer to her beloved home. She needed every bit of reassurance Georgia gave her. Reluctantly, she nodded. “Alright, let’s get it over with then.”

Though April was hesitant, Georgia was quite the opposite. She was excited to rip the place apart, even just a small piece of it. It was just like those renovation shows she watched on television when she got home from school. The demolition was always the best part. April listened to her drone on and on about all the things she was excited to tear down in worry that the house would be destroyed and they wouldn’t be able to put it back together.

Yet she still found herself here, watching her daughter swing the hammer at her wall. It came down with a crack and suddenly, they could see the innards of the walls they’d been living in.

Georgia turned with a smile on her face. She handed the hammer to April, who tried to deny it. “You’ve been the one looking forward to this part. You should get to do it,” said April.

She shrugged. “Yeah, but then I realized how good it felt and now I want you to try it. It’s so freeing. Feels like you’re the Hulk destroying a city.”

April highly doubted that smacking a hammer into the wall felt like

destroying an entire city, but she was willing to give it a shot. At the very least it could be an outlet for her frustrations about life lately.

She took the hammer from Georgia and stood confidently before the wall. In her mind, on the drywall just above the hole Georgia made was a projected photo of Carl. He was smiling, just like in their family photos.

*All of it was a lie*, April thought.

And she remembered every lie he ever told her, every time that he said they would be together forever. Fire ran through her veins; heat built inside of her until there was nothing else but pure rage.

The hammer was lighter and easier to swing after that, smashing into the wall with enough force to create a hole even bigger than the one Georgia made. In a huff of breath from the energy, she turned and yelled, “Wow! That was really liberating.”

But the smile on her face slowly faded as she watched Georgia’s expression turn worried. She furrowed her brows. “What is it?”

Then she turned to look at the hole she just made, worried she had hit something she wasn’t supposed to. Was there water pouring onto the floor? Mold? No, it was much worse.

Through the hole she just created, they could see several wooden support beams. They were necessary to the home’s structural integrity. It was normal to see the supports through holes in the wall.

What wasn’t normal was the rot that infested the exposed beam. It wasn’t wet, but rather splitting in certain places, ready to crack and splinter if the wrong amount of pressure was put on the wall.

“Has that always been like this? It doesn’t look good,” Georgia said, nervously approaching the wall.

April admitted that it didn’t look good, but she wasn’t an expert. They would have to pay to have someone come in and take a look. “If this is structural damage, we’re screwed. That’s going to be a fortune to fix. I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

She said just about every swear word she knew in her head. It was another setback, something else to add to the list. Except this was something major, worse than they’d faced so far. Which was hard for April to believe after everything they’d fixed already.

It was going to be harder than she thought. The room was almost finished, but this was going to set them back weeks of work and thousands of dollars.

Especially if the problem was not just this beam, but all of them. The house was old; it was more than possible that they needed several beams replaced.

“Let’s stop for now. We’ll have to call in a professional. You go get the omelet stuff ready and I’ll check on some things.”

April didn’t want to get into details of just how costly this new discovery could be, as not to scare Georgia. But she knew they would both be disappointed if they couldn’t finish their demo session.

Unfortunately, that’s not all they would be disappointed about. As Georgia sauntered off into the kitchen and started chopping their ingredients for breakfast, April slipped into the dining room. On her laptop, she pulled up the budget she’d been working on. It showed how much they’d actually spent on the items they’d already gotten.

The supplies were the most expensive part, more expensive than she’d allotted for at the beginning of the project. Every piece of wood, doorknob, caulk had entailed more product and was more expensive than she prepared for.

They were always over budget, but April told herself they had some wiggle room. There was a personal account she’d kept all these years. It had a few thousand in it for emergencies. She would consider this a kind of emergency. And then she could later be ready to fill it back up again once the bed and breakfast was on its way or she found a temporary job.

April imagined how busy she would be trying to take care of the house and work a job. She wasn’t sure if she could even stay in the house and work at the same time. It was hard enough to keep on top of the cleaning and maintenance.

She could maybe get a loan if they needed wiggle room. At this point, if anything else came up, they would be out of money. Even if the hardware for a cabinet was a dollar more expensive. This money was hopefully going to get them their structural fix, but that’s all.

And it was really her only option at this point. So she pulled up the bank account to check how much they really had to work with. She would be using every penny in order to make this place the one she saw in her dreams.

After putting in her email and password, the dashboard popped up with her current total in checking and savings accounts.

Zero dollars.

She blinked a few times, not believing her eyes. When she reopened and



saw the zeroes again, her stomach dropped.

How could it be that she had no money in the account? Even months ago she'd made another deposit like she did every few months. It should have at least five to ten thousand dollars, just enough for the surprise repair.

But here it said she had nothing left. Absolutely nothing, zero dollars.

April's heart began to race; she clutched a hand to her chest. Suddenly, it was hot in the house, sweat beaded at the top of her forehead. A breath caught in her throat. All together it felt like she was going to have a heart attack.

How could she have lost this much money? How could the bank have done this?

This must have been some sort of mistake. It made no sense because she was the only person with access to the account. She checked the account number twice, but it was unfortunately correct.

The bank had messed up somehow.

That was her next step. Just call the bank; they would figure out what happened here. She pulled out her phone and called. It rang three times before it went to an automated menu of options. She just needed to speak to a person, a real human, and everything would get sorted out.

Finally, the representative line rang and rang. "This is Emily from Three Cities Bank, how can I help you?"

"Yes, I need to speak to someone about my account. It looks like all the money I had is gone and I didn't accept any withdrawals. In fact, I don't think I've ever used any money in this account before. It should be exactly what it's been for the past few years."

"Oh, that is strange. Let's take a look at the account and hopefully we can clear this up for you!"

The woman's enthusiastic voice annoyed April. This situation was all their fault. You would think Emily would be much more apologetic, scared that someone found a flaw in their perfect system.

She gave her account information and waited on hold, listening to awful royalty-free music. The only thing she could do was pace the floor beside the dining room table and hang on to the hope that this voice would bring her news that her money would be back in her account soon.

"Hey, everything okay?" Georgia whispered from the short hall that led to the kitchen.

April nodded and smiled, trying to hide the nightmare she found herself in. The music was torture. The longer it took, the more worried she became.

“Hi, Mrs. Harris.”

She almost cringed at her married name now that everyone else knew her by her maiden one. “Uh, yes. Still here.”

Her voice was meek, scared. “So it looks like your husband came and cleared out the account weeks ago.”

April was speechless. “You’re sure it was my husband and not some scammer or something?”

Emily hesitated. It was clear she wasn’t sure what to say, that she might have been new at this whole thing. It had to have happened before, a spouse taking out money without the other knowing. There had to be a policy, some script to tell her exactly what she needed to know about this kind of thing.

“All people wanting to make a withdrawal are required to show ID and be on the active account. It says here it was a bank withdrawal, not an ATM one. So, we can be certain he was Ided and on the account.”

April put a hand to her head, trying to calm herself. “But he’s not on the account. His name isn’t an authorized person on the account.”

“It says right here that he is. I’m not sure how that was mixed up. But his name is on the account somewhere, which means he’s able to make withdrawals.”

She thought about if she ever asked him to call and make changes to their account. Even the slightest change like an address could have made him an authorized person. But she didn’t remember telling him about her personal funds.

Until she remembered something. When they applied for a loan several years ago, they both had to disclose the total amount in all accounts. That was the first time they talked about the secret funds she had stored away. He didn’t mention anything about it since he had his own personal accounts too. Though, he didn’t use them as much as she used hers.

He also changed all their information when they moved. That was probably when he requested access and she gave it without question. Because he would never touch her accounts; there was no reason for him to. They both made plenty of money and this was her rainy day fund, her once in a lifetime break of the piggy bank.

“We suggest speaking to him to clear all of this up. I’m sorry we can’t do

more for you,” Emily continued when she heard nothing in response.

How could they not do anything more for her? This was all their fault. Or maybe that was her anger taking over.

April couldn't speak. The confusion, disbelief, it was too strong. Would her husband really have the audacity to take money from her right under her nose? He had to know that she would find out someday.

“Thank you. I'll discuss this with him. Have a good day,” she eventually replied.

As soon as she hung up the phone, Georgia entered the dining room. “Hey, is there anything else you need me to cut up?”

Oh, yeah, the breakfast she was supposed to be making. “No, honey. Thank you.” April stepped slowly into the kitchen. She knew she would be unable to concentrate on anything until she made one more phone call. But breakfast had to be made. She stepped into the kitchen and started the stovetop, slipping in all the ingredients into a layer of eggs.

“Everything okay?”

She nodded, even though it wasn't true. “Yep. Just need to talk to Dad about some stuff. We'll need more money since there's some damage we'll need to repair.”

“Do you think the storm is going to make it worse? The news guy said there's supposed to be rain today.”

April shrugged. She wanted to say no, because she hoped that the damage was purely due to the age of the house and the wear and tear through years of renovations. But she couldn't be sure. “I don't know. We'll have to ask the professional when he gets here. Hopefully they're free today.”

As soon as the eggs began to firm up, she handed the spatula to Georgia. “Keep stirring, don't let the bottom burn. And you can take it off after two-ish minutes on each side. Okay? I'm just going to step out and make a call.”

Taking the spatula, she nodded and watched the omelet cook. April headed outside in the cool air to call her soon-to-be ex-husband. She paced the yard, back and forth, until she felt enough courage to push the call button.

And it rang, and rang, and rang. “You've got Carl. I'm unable to answer-”

“Idiot,” she muttered under her breath. “Answer the phone.”

Again, she heard her husband's voice in that annoyed brighter tone he recorded for his voicemail. She couldn't let him get off that easily; she had to talk to him.

Three more times she called and three more times he ignored her.

On the last call, she let the voicemail message play out. After the beep she began to talk in code, so as not to surprise him with the fact that she knew everything. “Hey, Carl. It’s just me. We need to talk ASAP. It’s really important. So, please, whenever you can, call me back.”

Hopefully, he was at one of his shows he was dying to go see. The time difference meant that, depending on where he was, he could be eating breakfast, lunch, or dinner, at a show, or sleeping at some hotel.

As April was slipping her phone into her pocket, a faint rumbling began. She wasn’t sure which direction it was coming from, until the sound of the engine grew louder. A car pulled into the driveway.

But they weren’t expecting any visitors. Who could be here this early in the morning?

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

April squinted, trying to see beyond the windshield against the bright sun in her eyes. It only took a short piece of hair for her to identify who sat in the car.

A tall man dressed in professional clothes stepped out and into the light. April's stomach twisted in knots. "April, thank God. We need to talk," Maxwell said as he stepped closer.

She could sense the desperation in his voice. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but he'd driven all this way. What else could she do? If she denied him now, it would just be cruel. And she could stomach one conversation with the man, who probably just wanted to ask again if she would return to work.

Newly found strength was on her side. She could bear to tell him no, again and again if she needed to.

April opened her mouth, but was interrupted by Georgia walking outside. "What did you want in your ome- Mom, who is this?"

"This is my old boss from the law firm. We have something to discuss. You go ahead and eat your breakfast and I'll be in to make my own in a few minutes, okay?"

Georgia nodded, but looked skeptically at Maxwell. "Just a few minutes." She smiled, proud of her daughter's intuition. Maxwell wasn't typically to be trusted. Certainly not now after April had quit and he traveled so far just to talk. There had to be something else going on; April could feel it.

After Georgia returned inside, shutting the front door behind her, Max stood and stared at April. She lifted her brows and crossed her arms in front of her. "What can I do for you? Why did you drive all the way out here to find me?"

As if he was snapping out of a trance, he shook his head and came to. Max walked back to the car and opened the back seat to reveal a briefcase and file folder.

"I need help with this case you were on? The Jolly Good one? They needed some evidence that you found. I guess they couldn't find it in the files." He smiled like it was just some fluke he came to her cubicle to discuss

and hadn't flown thousands of miles for.

It didn't make sense that he would come here for something so small. April hated feeling like there was something he wasn't telling her. The account was the least of her worries. So she didn't care about taking the few minutes to solve the problem.

She took the files from him, starting to shuffle through familiar notes. "That's what you came here for? Files?"

He nodded, but April knew better. She found the piece of evidence they were looking for, a dated email with a link to a website and screenshots of the website stealing Jolly Good's work. It took her months to track it all down, because the opposing side tried to cover their tracks. It didn't take her longer than two minutes to find everything Maxwell needed.

"Thank you," he said, taking back his things.

"That's not all you came here for. That could've been a phone call."

He smirked. "You wouldn't answer my calls. This is the length I had to go to get our clients what they needed." His arms folded out, trying to prove his point. "If you want to call me a great lawyer, I'll accept."

April rolled her eyes. "What else did you need?"

It was hard for her not to be rude. Everything this man did to her, forcing her to miss her daughter's life, her own life. It was hard not to tell him to get back in his car and drive away. But April wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. Something in her felt like she had to be nice.

Maxwell sat on the step just outside the house and patted the space next to him. April had half a thought to continue standing over him, feeling the power of not listening to him surge through her. But instead, she sat at his side, just as he asked.

"The reason I'm here is because I think you're ruthless, just like me."

April almost burst into laughter. Ruthless wasn't the word she would use to describe herself. In fact, she'd gone along with what most people had to say for so long, she needed this big, impulsive trip just to feel like her life was her own again. "Is that so?"

His knee was up beside him, separating them, and he slid it down to get closer to her and say, "Absolutely!"

It was the sincerity in his voice that made April pay attention. He continued as she noticed his body was closer to hers than it ever had been before. If he wanted to reach out and touch her, he could have. And April

wasn't so sure she liked that.

This was their first real conversation that wasn't behind a desk or across a table. Did he always sit this close to people? Maybe he was just one of those men who thought that proximity meant power or community. April wasn't sure she liked any of the options.

Maxwell was always just her boss, the guy who made her stay late and got credit for all her hard work. If he hadn't shown up at the house, she would have been fine with never speaking to him again. It looked like he didn't feel the same way. April waited for him to speak, to tell her the true reason he was here.

"You and I are similar in a lot of ways. We don't stop until the job is done." He said it like it was a good thing and not the reason her life had gone in the complete wrong direction from her desires. "The corporate world needs people like us. We're superheroes coming in to save the day. If we weren't there, the businesses would be falling left and right."

He talked in metaphors, like he did at the office. April wished he was more straight to the point. His pauses between getting out the words made her skin crawl.

Maxwell chuckled, but April kept her face straight. "And that has to do with what you really came here for?" He looked annoyed at her interrupting his great speech. She just prayed that arrogance would get him in trouble one day soon.

His words were no more powerful than her own. They were on a level playing field now, which meant he wasn't more important just because he acted like he was.

"I was getting to that." He put a hand through his hair. "I was thinking about you, and how great you are at your job. And we need you to stay with the firm. This corporate world needs you. Think of how many businesses will fail if you're not there."

"I think you have plenty of good lawyers who can help them. And if you don't, then you should be finding new lawyers." She smirked, knowing this little game wasn't going to work on her. There was no way she was going back to that job. It took everything from her. She was done doing things just because other people wanted her to.

Maxwell turned closer to April, which she didn't think was possible. "I don't need new lawyers. I want you. You have something special. I can't

quite put a finger on it.” His voice was quiet, yet strong. It used to scare April into doing what he wanted.

April wanted to shout out that it was because she was the only one who wouldn’t tell him no. She did all the real work around the office. It only made sense that he would want her to come back so he didn’t have to do it himself or find someone who could do it as fast and as well as she could. “I can’t come back.”

Maxwell’s hand inched towards April’s on the step. “Please.” His voice was quieter, nearly silent. “We need you back. And it’s not just for work. It’s for me. I need you back at the office.”

Suddenly, April was very aware of how close his face was to hers. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his eyes close as he whispered into her ear. “I can’t stand not seeing you every day.”

She stood faster than she ever had before. This wasn’t anything like she expected and she couldn’t hold it in any longer. Kindness wasn’t the answer any more; she had to be blatantly honest. “Max, I am not interested in you like that. We were coworkers, that’s all. Partner and lawyer. Boss and employee.”

Much to her discomfort, he stood to meet her. “You can’t pretend like we haven’t had something this whole time. From the moment you walked through my doors I knew there was chemistry there.” April noticed how his hands stayed near his chest as he puffed it out. “We’ve had something special. Don’t deny that now just because of the physical distance between us.”

April couldn’t help but chuckle. She felt horrible for letting it out, but it was her reaction to the entire situation. “I think there’s been a miscommunication here. I’m not interested in a relationship with you.”

“But our physical connection. That at least has to be explored, right?”

She knew that someone out there would probably like his deflated muscles, thinning bright hair, and dark eyes. But it wasn’t her. She found nothing about him attractive, most of all his personality; it made her want to throw up just thinking about getting physical with her ex-boss. “No, thank you. I’m flattered by all this, really. But in no way do I want to be with you. I’m telling you no.”

“April,” he pleaded. Max’s voice started to get louder as he grew more desperate. “Don’t do this. I came here for you. I heard about your divorce and



I knew you were finally free. Now we can explore our feelings.”

Now April was fuming, the air coming from her breath hot and heavy. “You know nothing about me or my family. We worked together and that is it. I was a good lawyer. You run a good firm. And that was the only reason why I didn’t quit before. But yes, now that I’m getting a divorce, I’ve seen things in a new light. There’s no reason for me to be in New York anymore. I’m happy here. I think it’s time you let me be happy.”

“You’re moving here?” His brows raised and he looked around the house. Max couldn’t have done anything else to add to April’s fire. She began to see red.

“My life is none of your business anymore. This is it. I’m staying here and you’re going back to the office to live your own life.”

His jaw dropped to the ground as he started to really see that she was serious. “How will we know what becomes of these feelings if we don’t explore them?”

April had met men like Max before. They acted like loving them was a gift, their affection a crown that the women should wear with pride. Max’s arrogance was almost too much to bear. It was stronger than the others somehow. Even blatant rejection wasn’t enough for him to back off.

He wanted what he wanted and that was that. Thankfully, April was strong enough now to realize it. She was strong enough to reject him as many times as he needed to hear it. But she felt bad for anyone who didn’t have the same opportunity to turn down such a disrespectful man.

“The feelings aren’t mutual; now I really need you to leave.”

Max came another step closer and April stepped back. He put his hand on her shoulder, his eyes full of regret and disappointment. “I came all this way. Can’t I at least... have a kiss goodbye?”

He repulsed her. She shrugged the hand off her shoulder.

“Bye, Maxwell,” she replied with a smile. “Have a good trip home.”

With his briefcase and folders in hand, he got back into his car and started it up. He looked around the property, like he was saying goodbye to his hometown as he was leaving for college. And then April waved to him for the last time.

It was clear that the rejection hurt him. The conversation didn’t go the way he wanted it to. Just looking at his face as he drove off was enough satisfaction for April.

Finally, that man would be out of her life for good. Whatever she was expecting from him, it wasn't that. He'd never shown any affection towards her in the office. In fact, he always acted like she was never doing enough, never good enough to be working there. Everything fell on her shoulders because of his delegation.

As the car disappeared into the distance, April burst into laughter. She couldn't believe that after all this time he wanted a relationship with her. Well, she wasn't sure it was really a relationship. He sounded more interested in sex than anything else.

She had just turned down her boss. For the first time, she was able to watch as his ego was crushed. It had been a goal of hers, she realized now. That successful man was the most arrogant person she knew. But she was able to deny him one thing he wanted: her.

As she laughed, Georgia joined her outside. She sat down on the same step they'd been on just moments earlier. "What did he want?"

April swiped her hand through the air. "Oh, just some old stuff from work. I guess they wanted me to come back. But I turned him down, of course. We have too much to get done here."

"And... he hit on you?"

She wasn't going to tell her daughter about all that, but now that she knew, April couldn't hold in the information. "Yes and it was so weird. I mean, who wants to date their boss!"

Then it hit her. "Wait a minute. You heard all that?"

Georgia nodded, face turned slightly away from her mother. "What was all that about you and Dad getting divorced?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

April sat next to her daughter unable to say any words that could make things better. She knew nothing would remedy this. And yet, she had to say something. The silence was so thick she was having trouble breathing. Or maybe that was just the nerves, the anxiety.

“Georgia, I...” Her mouth moved, but nothing came out. With her hands, she pushed the skin on her legs, massaging her quads though she could barely feel anything right now. “I didn’t realize you could hear all of that.”

Her daughter pointed to the window right beside the door. April’s jaw fell to the floor when she saw it was open, the screen gently molding to the wind. “I heard everything. Even the gross stuff about your boss wanting sex from you.”

“Sorry,” she replied, wincing. To be fair, she didn’t want to hear any of that either. “This is not how I wanted you to find out about the divorce. I was waiting for the right moment. Your father and I have barely discussed it. It just happened a few weeks ago.”

“Is that why you left?”

April took a deep breath. “Yes. It’s why I left the house and came down here. I wanted to find myself again and this was the only place where I knew who I was.”

Shaking her head, Georgia put a hand up to her face. Neither could believe this was really happening. “Why didn’t you tell me? What is going on? Everything has been so effed up since I left college. I need some answers. Any answers. Now!” Her voice got louder as she went on, working herself up.

By the end, April jumped at her tone. She’d never heard her daughter so angry before. “I know you’re upset. I can see that. We didn’t do this to make you angry. It actually has nothing to do with you; this is all about us. Okay? You have to understand that.”

“I find it hard to believe. You guys were doing just fine and then I leave for school and within a week you’re getting a divorce.” Georgia kicked her feet out, heels hitting the wooden step beneath them, toes skipping rocks across the driveway. “Sounds like it’s related to me.”

April considered her words carefully. This was a tightrope she had to walk and she was terrified of heights. Before Georgia found out so suddenly, she thought that she would have time to think of the right things to say. Now, every stereotypical line in every movie and show about divorce flew into her head at once. Which ones worked for them?

She had also hoped that Carl would be here to help. Together, they could have been more reassuring. They could've rehearsed something nice. Georgia would have understood and had time to process.

It should have been her first clue that he was off to another country to check out the circus.

Instead, she was on her own, going off book. "Your father wanted to travel around for a while. We decided that it would be best for us to split. Looking at it now, it was a long time coming. But I think we waited until you were gone to college so that things weren't messy for any of us. We still care about each other, but it's best if we're not together anymore."

Georgia's face was turned to the side, but April could see tears fall from her cheeks. It took everything not to reach over and wipe them away. This was her little girl. But she wasn't so little anymore. She was processing on her own, learning her feelings. It was natural, like growing pains. And April had to leave Georgia to do this by herself, no matter how much it hurt her.

"He wanted to travel? That doesn't make any sense. He... he wouldn't divorce you because he wanted to go on vacation!"

The sobs stung April in the chest, making it harder and harder to breathe. Her shoulders tensed up to her chin. "It wasn't like that. We grew apart. And it's not just a vacation. He's chasing his dreams, trying to see the world. And I needed to come here and figure out my own dreams. I was stuck in a rut, too. My life had become work and it was awful."

"It's my fault."

April touched her shoulder gently, trying to turn her, and look straight into her eyes when she said this. But Georgia barely looked up from the ground. "It is not. None of this is your fault. You can't put this on yourself."

Georgia shook her head. "It is. None of this would have happened if you didn't get pregnant with me."

Her heart shattered into a million pieces. Tears pricked the edges of her eyes, nearly falling down her cheeks. The only way to keep them in was to remember that it wasn't true. "All of my choices were my own. And getting

pregnant with you was the best thing that's ever happened to me. You are my everything."

"And yet you couldn't step away from work to send me off to college. You had to work to take care of us. If I wasn't born, you could have followed your dreams from the beginning and I wouldn't have been such a burden!"

Now Georgia looked directly into her eyes and she saw all the pain they held. It was everything she'd been avoiding. Not being able to say no had taken over her life so much that it hurt the one thing that mattered to her.

She couldn't hold them in any longer; the tears ran down April's cheeks. Wind began to brush them away as it slowly became stronger. She yelled, as if that would get the point across better. "No! You are not a burden! You never have been!"

It was so clear now that her daughter had to do so much without her that it became a part of Georgia's life. She was independent and stronger than she had to be because her mother wasn't always there to help her.

"If I'm not a burden, then why did you and Dad wait until I left for college to divorce?"

April knew it wasn't because her daughter was a burden, but because they didn't want to become burdens to her. Still, the right words weren't the ones that came out. "That's not it. We waited because we didn't want you to worry about it."

"That's just you protecting me, again. Which means I was the reason for your decision! I'm the reason you guys didn't get divorced years ago!" Georgia rose to her feet and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Honey, please. Let's just talk about this. There's so much I want to tell you. You are not a burden to anyone. All I want is for you to live your life. It's my fault this is all happening."

By then, Georgia had made up her mind. Nothing April could say would have made things better. "You're not listening to me! It's all my fault!"

Georgia's feet were fast as she ran towards the stairs to get to the beach. The wind began to pick up and April noticed the darker rain clouds rolling in. Not only was it the worst time for the news of the divorce to drop onto Georgia, but it was also the worst time for the rain to come.

April knew she didn't say the right things. It seemed like she couldn't do anything right some days, but this day especially. Divorce was a challenging topic for any family. Breaking up a relationship impacted everyone, not just

the two involved.

If only she could have brought it up like she wanted to. Things would have been much easier. Georgia would probably have had the same reaction, but at least they would've been inside, comfortable, and more prepared.

This day was a disaster. Her life had only gotten messier since she came down to the island. Everything was going wrong. Feeling defeated, she forced herself up and followed the stairs down to the beach.

"Georgia!" she yelled down the stairs. "Please, come back. Let's talk about this!"

Her daughter didn't respond. Thunder rolled above them in the dark clouds. "This storm is going to be bad. Please come back!"

But Georgia didn't turn around. She simply ran slowly down the beach, her feet caught in the sand. "I'm coming down there to help you!"

Before April could take one step down the wooden stairs, more thunder roared, only closer this time. It was ongoing and loud from behind her.

*That wasn't thunder, she thought. What more could be coming for her today?*

A part of her hoped that it was Nigel coming down the driveway. At least she would have someone there that knew her and would be there for her. Something she desperately needed as the rain began to pour down, clouding her vision.

The car wasn't one she recognized. When the shadow came out of the door, she was sure it wasn't anyone she expected to show up to help in the storm. The body was small, light hair curled around the person's shoulders. A black umbrella shot up the second they got out of the car.

As they approached, April squinted to try and get a look. And unfortunately for her, she did catch a glimpse of their true identity.

Her mother walked carefully across the driveway until she reached April. "Hi, honey," Caroline said.

The day had gone from bad to even worse.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

“Mom? What are you doing here?”

The rain made it hard to hear, so they stood extremely close together. No matter how hard Caroline tried, she couldn't get them both under the umbrella. So, April let the rain run down her clothes, knowing that she would have to run after her daughter as soon as possible.

“I'm here because no one will tell me what's going on. In my *own* family!”

April let out an exasperated sigh, no longer able to hold it all in. “Mom, it's my family. This is happening to me. I don't have time to explain everything to you! I have to go. Georgia is out there; she needs to get inside.”

It wasn't just that there was a storm coming and her daughter had run off. It was that she wanted to be as far away from her mother as she possibly could be. The overbearing nature of her was too much.

With everything that was going wrong, April didn't need the lectures.

“Georgia is a grown woman. She needs time to cool off. I saw the way you looked over here, yelling down at her.”

If there was one thing about her mother, she was going to find something wrong that April did. No matter how short of a glimpse she got of the situation. “It wasn't like that! You know what, it doesn't matter. Because you aren't going to do anything. I'm going to get her.”

Caroline put a hand on April's chest, stopping her from going down the stairs. “You need to tell me everything or I will take this house away from you.”

“What are you talking about?”

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “Oh, now you're interested in talking to me?”

April rolled her eyes. What could she say to get her mom to treat her like the adult that she was? “Mom, what are you talking about?”

“Fine,” she threw up her arms. “I still own the house, technically. Even though I said I would give it to you and we signed some of the paperwork. It didn't get fully filed. I found out a week ago when you said you were down here. I never got the new lease for this place and it's because someone forgot

to file the paperwork.”

April’s world crumbled at her feet. She was completely defeated. Everything she was working hard for was pulled out from under her. Dreams became crushed, evaporated into the air as she watched them all blow away. “What?”

“Can you not hear me because of the wind or because you need hearing aids? I said the house is mine. And I won’t give it to you unless you tell me exactly what’s going on here. Now.”

“Carl and I are getting a divorce,” April spewed out. “We’re done. He’s on another continent to check out their circuses because that’s his dream. I came here to figure out mine. While I was here, Georgia called me and said she was quitting school. Instead of letting her go home and sit alone in the house doing nothing, I told her to come here.”

Caroline nodded along, but her face remained perplexed and frustrated, her wrinkles smushed together in every direction. “A divorce? Oh, honey. I told you he was no good.”

“Yes, Mom. You told me. And now he’s taken my money and left to travel the world. Thank you for the heads up.”

Caroline scoffed and crossed her arms. “I didn’t know that he took your money.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know.”

April’s hands balled into fists at her side. But there were other things going on here; she needed to run to that beach and get her daughter. Who knows how far she’d gotten by now. When Caroline didn’t respond, April said, “Now, I need to get her.”

As April turned to leave down the steps once again, her mother’s hand wrapped around her bicep and tugged her back. April erupted with anger, “What? What more do you want from me?” April asked. “I told you everything, now let me go get her. Can’t you see it’s about to storm?”

Her body felt heavy even though it was only mid-morning. Exhaustion was settling into her bones. Everything hurt. She stared at her mother, practically pleading to be let down the stairs. All she wanted was to get Georgia and have the house back from the witch she called Mom.

“There’s something else I need you to promise me. I won’t give the house back unless you convince Georgia to go back to school. She needs an education. It’s important,” Caroline explained, though April didn’t think it



was a good enough reason to stop her from looking for Georgia.

The wind whistled around her, threatening and harsh. “Fine,” she agreed. It wasn’t the plan. She never wanted to become like her mother, but what else could she do at that point? If there was no house in Sandcrest, there would be no bed and breakfast. Everything they’d worked for would be a waste.

Sure, Georgia would be disappointed. But maybe she would find a career she loved. April could stay in the house and work on it alone. Georgia could come down during the breaks. It was all lining up in her head.

Caroline looked her daughter up and down. “And you go back to New York and get that job of yours back.”

The piercing winds must have grown even more threatening because it felt like she was being choked. It was hard to breathe, hard to see anything through the frustrated tears stinging her cheeks. “Fine,” April replied.

April knew she couldn’t say no to her mother. In her heart, she hoped all she promised didn’t have to happen. But April also knew that Caroline never forgot promises. She would bother April until she got what she wanted. That’s just how it all worked.

“And now that you’re done getting what you want, which is the only reason you came down here in the first place. I’m going to go make sure that your grandchild is safe,” April said.

April twisted her arm out of her mother’s grasp. Caroline’s mouth was open wide, but April couldn’t tell if that was from the shock or the wind taking her breath away. Still, she was proud of herself for saying at least one thing that was brutally honest.

While her mother stood there hounding her about college, the young woman she wanted to become educated was stuck on the beach in the middle of the strongest storm she’d ever seen.

The water splashed her face with such intensity that it hurt as she walked down the steps. Her hood did little to shield her from its wrath.

Even as she finally was on the sand, able to search for Georgia, she was thinking about her mother. Regrets began to pile on. Why had she agreed to everything her mother asked? Why was it that she couldn’t get the courage to say no? It took a while, but she’d learned how to follow her own desires.

None of it mattered anymore now that she’d agreed to her mother’s wishes. She always had something to hold over April’s head to get what she wanted. And if she didn’t, then there was something she could make April

feel guilty for. It was like she was riding down some fast rapids and her mom was controlling the current, tugging her life into a million different directions.

As her feet sunk into the sand, April realized that a lot of what she did rubbed off on Georgia. Sure, she wasn't as demanding as her mother, but she'd asked a lot of Georgia as she was growing up.

There wasn't enough time in her day to take care of everything at work and at home. She didn't take time off to spend with her daughter. No matter how many times she thought she would make time for the family, she didn't. Georgia was left to pick up the pieces on her own. Responsibility must have laid heavy on her shoulders, just like Caroline's expectations laid heavy on April.

This whole thing was a disaster. With the winds rushing around her, rain sputtering into her face, she walked the beach. Despite her past, she was a good mother.

And she was going to find Georgia and bring her home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

April wandered the empty beach alone. She thought her lowest point was when her husband asked for a divorce the second their daughter left for school. Now she realized that things were at their lowest now.

When she had Carl, she knew things weren't perfect. Her job was horrible, she had no time for anything but work. Her relationship was fine, not great. They weren't winning 'best couple of the year,' that was for sure. Georgia didn't hate April, but didn't spend any time with her either.

Everything that felt like it was taken away was something she should have left behind years ago.

Now, she had gotten everything she wanted. The house, renovations, time with her daughter, finding herself again. It was all within her grasp and it was taken away in just a day.

Her feet dragged in the sand as the wind pelted her face. The rain was coming and going, but mostly sprinkling, which she was thankful for, because it was washing away the few tears dripping down her cheeks.

With zero dollars left, she couldn't finish fixing up the house. Her dreams were crushed. Georgia was angry with her even after all this time they were able to spend together. And her mother was worse than she was before, threatening to take away the property if she didn't do exactly what she wanted.

If she followed through on those promises, she would end up the same way she was before. Lonely, busy, and this time, sitting in an office with an arrogant man who'd just hit on her. Things would be uncomfortable to say the least. April knew she would be miserable.

But she had to do it. This was a new low for her. She didn't have any other options.

April tried not to get too close to the violent waves reaching shore. The wind was taking the water for a spin, throwing it at will to crash on the sand. She hoped Georgia stayed away from the shore, too. It was too dangerous to be out here.

A shadow began to trek across the beach, from the sand to a grassy patch just up a slight hill. She squinted to try and see it better, but it looked like

blobs from far away. Something rolled across the sand towards April, the blob running to catch it.

That's when she finally came into focus. It was Rose.

"Oh! Hi!" she yelled, standing over a lawn chair. "I'm trying to get all my stuff inside before it really picks up. I didn't realize it was going to be this bad today!"

April shook her head. "No kidding! Do you want some help? You only have a few more chairs."

Rose nodded. "Sure!"

The three chairs that were left dug into the sand almost lifted and ran down the beach like the others. With April's help, they were able to pull them to the house without a problem.

Under the canopy, they could hear each other better. "Have you seen a young girl run through here? It's my daughter, Georgia. She stormed off down the beach and I haven't been able to find her. I want to make sure she's somewhere safe before this storm hits. It looks bad enough already."

Rose's hand went to her chest. "No. Oh my gosh, that's awful. I'm sorry. Is everything okay?"

For a moment, April thought about lying. She could have easily told her new friend that everything was okay. Rose didn't need to know about every little miserable detail. It was too much for April to comprehend right now; how could anyone else listen to her sob story?

But then she looked into her eyes and saw the kindness, the worry. It wasn't Rose just being polite; it was an offer. An offer to listen to April's story and be there for her, no matter what.

"No. It's not." Just saying it pulled a small weight off her chest. Desperation took over as the words began spewing from her mouth, needing more of the weight to come off. "Georgia's mad at me. She thinks it's her fault that I'm getting a divorce. That's a whole mess I don't know how to fix. And then my old boss came this morning and tried to hit on me. It was so weird and awkward and I told him to get out.

"But my mom came and she told me that I have to go back to them. Because I don't even own the house I'm working on apparently. She's not going to give it to me if I don't get Georgia back to school and go back to work. And, and..."

Tears and wind burned April's cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping away

the tears. “This probably doesn’t make much sense to you.” She chuckled slightly, surprising herself by that reaction. It must have been from the ability to let it all go. The words didn’t come out right, the stories jumbled, but in letting out some of the stress she felt so much better.

Her mouth got dry while staring at Rose, waiting for any kind of response. She sat there sizing her up. So much that April looked herself up and down to see if something was wrong. “What?”

“I’m trying to decide if I should give you advice or if you just needed to get that off your chest. To be honest, I don’t think you want advice, but I think you might need it. You have to be willing to hear me out though.”

April couldn’t express in words how thankful she was for a new friend that could be blatantly honest. This is what she needed, what she was missing. “Please. You can tell me anything. Give me the advice.”

Rose sighed in preparation. “You have to stop letting this happen to you.”

Taken aback, April’s breath caught in her throat. Let this happen to her? Like she was simply asking for all of this to happen? “What do you mean?”

“This is your life, April. All these people keep trying to force you to make decisions. But you are the only one who can decide what you do. No one can force you to go back to that horrible boss. Sure, your mom can pull you from the house. But you’d still have your life. You can keep Georgia’s decisions her own and take control of your life, too.”

She hated how much Rose was right. It was as hard to hear as Rose had warned. Her cheeks now not only burned from the strong winds and tears, but shame from not realizing her problems were her own doing. She wouldn’t be so stressed out if these choices were her own, instead of letting other people dictate her life.

“You’re right,” she replied, staring at the ground unable to look into her friend’s eyes. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before.”

Rose only smiled. “Sometimes it’s hard to see when you’re in it. I understand. I just hope you can find a way to do what you want with this life, instead of letting everyone else tell you what they want you to do.”

It seemed to be a recurring theme in her life that she followed the lead of other people. Since arriving on the island, April told herself a thousand times that she wouldn’t get back into the habit of listening to everyone else. But so far, she’d seemed to do just that.

In moments of stress, she let anyone tell her what to do next. She would

do anything if it meant that she didn't have to confront someone else. If her mother wanted to use the house as a bargaining chip, then she would let her.

And it was exactly what she didn't want to do.

It felt like April was fighting against herself, constantly in a battle to win the right to make a decision for herself. But not only did she have to fight herself, she had to fight back against the people who were trying to take control over her.

It was easy against Carl, the man who would soon no longer be her husband. He didn't have a choice in her life anymore because he was choosing to leave. It was even easier for people in the city to make snap judgements about her and the house. They couldn't tell her if she was able to fix it up or not. They didn't know her at all.

But against her mother, the woman who knew her for her entire life, it felt nearly impossible. April had always listened to her mom, out of respect and necessity growing up.

Even now that she was an adult, her mother had this power over her. Like because she had raised her, it meant she could dictate how her life should go.

April knew it wasn't true. Caroline had no right to take control of her life, even if she was her mother. It wasn't her mother's life to live; it was her own. Somehow, she would have to find a way to tell her mom that she wasn't doing any of the things she'd just promised.

"It's easier said than done," April replied with a smirk. "But I'm working on it. Thank you."

Rose smiled, but immediately was hit by a blast of wind. "We should probably lug these chairs inside." They tugged the remaining lawn items into the house from the patio and shut the door. The television was turned to the news and Rose listened in as April pulled her last chair inside.

"Well, I think I'm going to go. I have to find Georgia. She's probably back at the house by now."

April shook her head, still staring at the television. "You shouldn't leave. The storm has been upgraded to a hurricane."

"No way." April's jaw fell to the floor. Even as Rose turned up the volume on the news, she didn't want to believe it.

"Local officers are insisting everyone stay indoors and seek shelter immediately, preferably in a basement or somewhere away from windows."

April opened the patio door. "I have to go. I need to get to Georgia and

my mom.”

Rose pleaded with her to stay. “You can’t. It’s a hurricane. This is insanely dangerous. Who knows when it’ll pick up and be right on top of us. You can’t go back out there.”

There wasn’t a choice in April’s mind. She had to get back to the house to make sure Georgia was safe. If she was out in the storm, April would never forgive herself for not searching the island until there was nothing left.

“I’ll call you when the storm is done. I’ll be okay. I promise! Thank you, I can’t say enough about what you’ve given me today.”

They shared a smile that said it all.

April walked out of the patio doors and began to make her way back to the house, praying that her child was waiting inside.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

It took ten minutes to walk back to the house. She felt like it was longer than it was when she came out this way. Going back felt like an eternity, even though she was trying to rush even more than she was before.

This time, she wasn't looking for Georgia because all her hope was that she was inside the house. She had to have gone back. Otherwise they would have found each other by now. Right?

Rain poured now, streaming down April's already wet clothes, and forcing them to cling to her skin. There was nothing that April hated more than wet clothes in the wind and rain.

When she finally saw the house on the horizon, she began running up the wooden steps and onto the path. The house creaked, like it did when it settled at night. Now she slowed, wondering if she was able to face the answer that was held within the walls of the home.

The door opened slowly and she looked around the living room to find no sign of Georgia. Caroline walked down the steps and glared at her. "I hope you're happy. This whole thing has been upgraded to a hurricane and we can't do anything until it stops."

April ignored her and said, "Mom, have you seen Georgia? She didn't come back here?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Haven't seen her come back in. I thought you would have found her by now."

Panic began to fill her. There's nowhere Georgia would feel comfortable enough on this island to go. The only place she knew how to get to was the house. Where could she have gone and how was she not headed home this instant?

Then April thought about it. She had only learned of the hurricane ten minutes ago at Rose's house. And only now did the rain start to pour down. Maybe her daughter didn't understand the severity of what was to come. "We need to find her. Now," April said.

They ran to the beach, April more quickly than her older mother. "Georgia!" Caroline called from the stairs. "Georgia!"

It was hard for even April to hear, but if they screamed together, maybe



someone would be able to understand their pleas. “Georgia!” April began to yell in sync with her mother. “Georgia! Come back!”

Two minutes of screaming did almost no good. April began to wonder how much longer they could stay outside before needing to head closer to the house. Something strong was coming towards them; they wouldn’t survive out here if they stood on the beach. Neither would Georgia, but maybe someone had taken her in once they learned about the storm.

April felt like she couldn’t chance it. If she needed to wait on this beach until the very last second, she would.

“What is that?” Caroline yelled down to April from the stairs. Her hand was up to her face as if to shield her from the rain that pelted them from all directions. “There’s a shadow out there. I think it’s moving this way!”

She squinted, trying to find what her mother was seeing. But nothing came into focus. “I don’t know what you’re…”

Then she saw the most beautiful sight she’d ever laid eyes on. It was Georgia, running down the beach towards them. Without another thought, April took off after her. The sand made it hard to run, but April pushed through the pain in her calves to reach her daughter. She would do anything to get to her.

They met in the middle, happy to see each other alive. April pulled her into her open arms, snuggling her head tightly to her chest. She kissed the top of Georgia’s head. “Thank God you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, but we have to get inside. Somebody down the beach said there’s a hurricane coming!” Georgia yelled over the winds.

April nodded and held her daughter’s hand as they jogged back up the beach. Caroline was still waiting on the stairs, slowly moving up as she watched the family come back to the house.

It was hard walking against the storm, but they managed to walk as fast as they could back into the safety of the house. Though they knew it wouldn’t be safe much longer. They had to head down to the basement, bringing a few supplies with them like flashlights, large bottles of water, and some cans of food. They brought down bundles full of blankets, towels, and pillows. And one first aid kit that had only half of what it originally came with.

They were all for emergencies only, which it obviously was. But it felt like they were prepared for the most extreme case. They hoped it wouldn’t come to that. April had heard of storms like this, but she’d never seen one in

real life. It was much scarier facing it head on.

Even in the basement, they could hear the noises of the storm crashing around them. The rain pelted the roof while the wind pushed the rocky supports and foundation back and forth. If April hadn't known better, she probably would have said that everything would be fine.

But she'd seen the support beams that needed fixing. What else could have been wrong? And what would the storm easily take with it?

April paced the small concrete basement. Georgia sat in a corner, a towel in her lap as she tried to dry herself off. Caroline used another towel to scrunch out her hair, as if she was only worried about perfecting it. "Are you going to pace the floor the entire time?" she said to April with raised brows.

"Even in this moment, you can't do anything but criticize me, can you?" April snapped back. It was about time they sorted this out. What better time than when they were all stuck together in the basement of the house?

Her mom held up her hands, as if surrendering. "I didn't mean to criticize. I was just asking so I can prepare for how the rest of this is going to go. Because if you keep pacing, I'm going to get irritable. And we'll all need to deal with that."

April raised her arms. "Nothing I do is going to be right. I can't do anything without you holding something over my head. You want me to do what you want me to do, and if I don't there are consequences."

Caroline crossed her arms in front of her. "I didn't know you felt that way about me."

She couldn't take it anymore. April let out an exasperated sigh. "This is what I'm talking about. You put so much pressure on me to be who you want me to be. Have you ever thought about what I wanted?"

"You're one to talk," Georgia muttered under her breath. She looked up at her mom in shock, wide-eyed. April guessed it was supposed to be quiet enough for only her to hear it. "It's just that you put pressure on me by not being there. You want me to be successful, but then no one is there to help me. You wanted me to go to college, so I went. And I don't know if I want to go back."

April noticed Caroline looking on, but she wasn't disappointed anymore. Was it sadness that plagued her now? She could swear she saw regret in her mother's eyes. There were more important things.

"I'm sorry. I should have been there for you," April explains. "I was so

caught up in trying to do the right thing and never saying no to people. I didn't realize what I was really doing was saying no to you because I was helping everyone else. I should have been there."

Georgia nodded. "Wow. I wasn't expecting you to realize that. I'm supposed to be the edgy teen, running away and yelling. I've been waiting for weeks for you to break and you never did. You really didn't bring me here to force me back to school?"

April looked over at her mother, sitting in the corner looking guilty. "No. I didn't bring you here to drag you back to school. I want you to do whatever you want to do. I've been trying really hard to be more supportive. I should've realized earlier that you deserved more from me. You've always deserved more from me. I should've given that to you."

"And the lie? Not telling me about the divorce?" Georgia asked.

"Well." April swallowed hard. "I promised myself that I wouldn't put you in the middle. I felt like my parents talked badly about each other and pushed me into the middle of their messy divorce. I didn't want the same to happen to you."

April looked over at Caroline, who wore her shame with reddened cheeks and a downturned head.

"I can see why you would do that," Georgia said. "Thank you for keeping me out of it."

It was Georgia who smiled first, then April. April walked over to her daughter and sat between the two on the floor. Georgia's head fell onto April's shoulder. She kissed the top of her head just like she did in the rain.

Just as April closed her eyes to take it all in, she heard a sniffle. As she opened her eyes, there was another one. For a moment, she wondered if Georgia was crying, but she realized it was from her other side.

Caroline was struggling to keep in her tears, but April was smarter than that. She'd seen her mother on the brink of sobs like this before. She was upset about something. "Mom?"

She looked over at April, tears brimming just over the edge of her eyes until they slowly cascaded down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, honey. I just wanted you to be independent. I wanted you to be the best version of yourself you could be. And I pushed that on you."

For the first time, April saw things from her mother's perspective. After what she went through with her father, she should have seen it sooner.

They'd both gone through messy divorces. Out of anyone, April should have known how it felt to be left on the whim of a chaotic man. Of course, circuses were nothing compared to younger women.

But still, the shock of being left for something 'better' hurt just the same.

After something like that, they both wanted something better for their children. The perfect life for someone they loved. April wanted better for Georgia, independence, and the ability to make her own decisions like she couldn't. Caroline wanted better for April, a man who would treat her well and a successful career that would sustain her.

"Mom, I never thought you would see that. I just wanted to make my own decisions. And now I feel like I'm finally discovering who I truly am." April finally felt like she could be honest. She spoke to her mom from her heart without lashing out or not being honest about her feelings.

Caroline nodded, swiping away a last tear that fell onto her cheek. "I understand. I should've been kinder to you. And to you," she said, motioning towards Georgia. "I wasn't easy on your mom or you. I'm sorry."

It was the first time she'd heard her mom utter those words and really, truly mean it. There were a lot of firsts in that basement while the hurricane surged above them.

Georgia stared at her mother and grandmother. "Can you both promise that you'll focus more on yourselves and what you want for you instead of what you want for everyone else?"

April and Caroline looked at each other, smiled and nodded. Caroline pulled her daughter into a side hug. April let herself lean on her mother's shoulder. Georgia joined in by leaning on April's arm. They sat there and listened to each other's breaths.

"Mom," Georgia whispered to April as they held each other close. "I know that the divorce isn't my fault. Everything you said made sense. I was just so mad. It felt like you guys were putting on a show the last few years for me. I was scared that everything wasn't real."

April kissed the top of her daughter's head. "Everything was real. We might not have had the best relationship, but this family was really important to us both."

Georgia nodded, looking down, as if she was still convincing herself that it was the truth. "Thank you. I'm sorry for everything I said before."

"You don't have to worry about any of that. I know it came as a shock. I

should have told you the second you came to the house. I was still processing it myself. I was scared that you would panic like you did. But that's no excuse. You deserved to know."

Georgia smiled up at her. It finally felt like things were right between them. April hadn't realized it, but she was so stressed about the secrets between them that letting them out felt like a weight off her shoulders. Her stomach settled and she could finally take a deep breath.

They had so much to learn from one another. And it would happen, slowly of course. But they knew from then on that they would all try to be more understanding, less quick to judge, and focused on what they wanted for themselves.

Each one promised to do better.

Georgia realized the divorce wasn't her fault, her parents had just outgrown each other. April finally saw that her mother only wanted the best for her, but that it was time to do things on her own. And Caroline realized she should have been putting her energy into enjoying her family instead of trying to make it perfect, exactly how she wanted it to be.

The house slowly became quiet. When they felt comfortable enough, they decided to go up and check out the damage. April took a deep breath as she held the doorknob. Whatever it looked like, they would figure it out together. She turned the knob and opened the door to her dream house.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Under their feet the broken pieces of what was their dream home crunched with each step. The house wasn't completely destroyed, though. Walls stood where they left them, standing firm in the roaring winds.

The real damage was in the windows, glass shattered everywhere. It made April terribly nervous. Most of the furniture they'd just bought was ruined, filled with water and dirt. Some of the pieces had been torn apart, shattered into parts after being thrown across the room.

The water that flooded the first floor barely reached over her foot as she walked. It was cold and gray, sending a chill up her spine. The couch they'd fantasized about was sitting in the rubble, cushions cut open from the wood that piled on top of it. It was a sopping wet mess.

She looked over at Georgia, all her hard work ruined by the damage. Her face fell as she looked at it all. Her daughter had never experienced anything like this before. It was nothing less than a tragedy to see all the work they'd done, destroyed.

How would they ever come back from this? All her money was gone and there was no way she'd be able to afford new furniture, windows, and fix the problems. Not to mention the fact that the house wasn't technically hers. It was all a jumbled mess.

They continued to step around the remains of the home, treading carefully as if they could do any more damage. She helped her daughter and mother step around the glass beside the front door.

April was terrified to take a step outside. If the inside was this bad, how horrible would the outside be?

The front yard was the first thing she saw. It was covered in various objects that didn't belong to her. Towels, blankets, trash bins, and outdoor furniture were scattered throughout the large property. The grass was nearly dead from the waterboarding it'd just received.

April had to close her eyes and open them again, trying to blink away what was now engrained in her mind.

All those memories of the house were washed away by the storm. This wasn't her childhood dream house, the perfect property where she visited

each summer until they forced her to go back home. This was her nightmare. An after photo of some natural disaster on the late night news from somewhere far away.

She'd never experienced anything like it. It was every bit as disastrous as people always said it was.

The roof was ripped to shreds, pieces of the shingles laid in messy heaps across the top of the house. It was too terrifying to see what happened to the attic and top floor of the building. She knew she wouldn't be able to handle it.

April searched the yard for any place to rest her weary feet, but everything looked wet. She decided she would have to settle for the sopping wet wooden stairs that ran down to the beach. It transferred to her shorts as soon as she sat on the top step and looked out at the water. But she didn't care. At this point, a wet butt was the least of her problems.

Her head fell into her hands. Not ten seconds later, she felt an arm across her back. She looked up, ready to grab her daughter's hand. Only, it wasn't her daughter, but her mother. And her daughter's hands came down on her shoulders as she stood above her.

Georgia took a seat on the other side of April, even though it was a tight fit for all three women to sit side by side. "I can't believe after everything we tried to do, it's all over. Everything is ruined."

"Mom... Nothing is ruined," Georgia tried.

April almost laughed. Everything she had was taken from her. The family she thought she had, her money, this dream of a house. It all disappeared in just a few weeks. Nothing felt right anymore. Her life was truly a disaster.

"I have nothing. Everything we worked for is all gone. We've spent every spare second the past few weeks trying to put this house together. It was finally coming along and now... It's all gone."

Her daughter put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "I mean, that's kind of true. The house is in bad shape, but that's not what matters here. We found a way to get back together again, right? It wasn't for nothing because we're closer now. And that's progress. That's moving forward."

She nodded and smiled over at Georgia, then her mother, who was also sporting a grin. "You're right. We're together and that's what matters," April said. "I just wish our work could have meant something for our future. I'm not sure where to go from here. I feel so stuck."

The tears fell down her cheeks, but she quickly wiped them away in an attempt to get herself together. An attempt that failed quickly as she realized there wasn't anything left of her dreams.

She shrugged, feeling the weight of her family's hands around her. "I'm so glad you two are here and that we've hashed things out. I just can't go back to the way things were. I can't go back to New York after everything we did here. But clearly this dream of mine isn't happening."

Georgia looked back to the house. When she turned back around, she had a hopeful smile. "We can fix this place up again. It's not like we don't have time."

"We can't. Even with insurance, it won't cover the renovations. There's really nothing we can do to get it back to the way it was. And... I have no money left. Everything I had was either given to your father or put into this house."

April wasn't sure how much she should tell Georgia. After everything they'd been through, she still cared enough to keep her view of Carl in good light. It might not have been completely honest, but at least she wasn't tearing him down.

The lies about the divorce were one thing, but talking bad about her father to her face was something completely different. It felt like a line she didn't want to cross.

Caroline's arm gently raised away from April's back. Her smirk aroused suspicion from April. "Mom? What are you thinking?"

"I might have a way to help with the whole money thing."

April knew her mom well. Well enough to know that she didn't have all the cash needed to fix up the whole house. "How do you think we're going to get enough to fix this dump?"

"It's not a dump, it's your dream home," Georgia corrected with raised brows, scolding her own mother. April chuckled.

"For starters, I'm going to sign over this house to you. It'll be yours. For good."

Her eyes got big. "Seriously? That's really kind of you."

"Oh, please," Caroline waved her hands in the air. "You know that it was always yours. I was just being a grouch earlier. I shouldn't have held it over your head. You've always been the one to take care of the place, to keep up on its taxes, to make sure it stays in the family. Now you're going to make



sure it's everything you want it to be.”

April finally felt a glimmer of hope, which died as soon as she thought about the terrifying logistics. “But how will we get the money to fix it? There's hardly any work here that will pay me enough to live somewhere and renovate the house.”

“You won't need to work. You'll sell the house in New York. I'll help you sell it, get it ready to go on the market and everything. You can use the money from that to pay for the house down here. It'll all even out.”

Georgia tapped her shoulder. “Wow, Mom! This is really happening!”

Quieter, April replied to her mom, “But what about Carl? He owns half of the house. Which means that I'll have to pay him half. Do you think that's enough money to fix up this dump after everything that's happened? I'm still worried-”

“He won't get half. Not after what he did to you,” Caroline said a bit too loud.

Georgia's eyes thinned into slits. “What happened? Who did what to you?”

After an exasperated sigh, Caroline responded, “Your father took some money that belonged to your mother. She's deserving of more than half the house.”

Everything April had just decided about Georgia and Carl blew out the window. She couldn't lie now. Her head hung low, defeated in her efforts to salvage their relationship with her own deception.

At least it wasn't her who let the truth spill out. That was what she told herself, anyway. Technically she didn't break the rules because it was her mother that had revealed the truth about Carl.

“Unfortunately, that's true. I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want you to look at your dad in a negative way. He's a great guy, really. It's just... he made a bad decision and took money out of my account to do some of his traveling.”

Georgia's hand went to her chin, her brows furrowed in thought. “I get it. He's not perfect. None of us are. But he did a bad thing, which means however you want to work that out, that's up to you.”

“Right, which is how exactly, Mom? Technically he owns half of that house.”

With a smile, Caroline explained herself. “We'll hire the best lawyers in

the country. He took money without your permission, from your own account. That's not going to look good to a judge if he wants to take it to court. We'll get the house. I can promise you that much."

April wondered if her mother knew that from experience with her father, or from the soap operas she liked to binge on the weekends. Either way, she had to trust her. All of this would work out for the better. The plan was great.

"I also have something to say," Georgia said softly. She looked at the ground as if searching for the right words to appear before her. "I think that I'm going to go back to school."

"That's wonderful!" Caroline shouted.

April's head snapped back to her mother's, trying to push her to calm down. "What do you mean, honey? I thought you didn't want to go back. What changed your mind?"

"I don't want to go back for pre-law or medicine or anything big like that. I think I want to do interior design and maybe architecture? I don't know yet." The words tumbled out of her mouth, faster and faster. "But definitely interior design. Maybe I'll find a new school that specializes in it and get to be around real artists."

She wanted to cry again. Her daughter had found her passion because all of this mess wasn't a mess after all. April wondered if it wasn't for her leaving college, for the house being a disaster, if Georgia would have ever found her calling.

"I think that's a great idea."

The three women stood. They grabbed hands and stared back at the disaster of a house they thought had broken them. April smiled at the potential of the place she'd been dreaming of. Sure, it wouldn't be exactly as it was before. But it would be something special because they would all work on it.

It would become another dream. A branch of the original and a reminder that when they got beaten down, they would dust themselves off and get back up again.

April tilted her head down to her mother's shoulder. Georgia squeezed her hand.

"I'm so proud of you," Caroline whispered into her ear. "This place is going to be something great."

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

At least twenty people had been through the house in the last three weeks. Not only had Georgia and April been working full-time on the cleanup and renovations, but carpenters, plumbers, electricians, architects, and one insurance appraiser had worked on the house.

It wasn't back to its full former glory, but it still had the same charm. The built-in was repaired, the original wood from several projects was able to be restored or reused in different areas.

April stared at Georgia as she swung a hammer into the wall, this time to build something instead of tearing it down. The nail slowly tapped in, leaving enough to just barely place the hanging hook.

And there, April set a framed photo. A selfie that Georgia took on the day of the hurricane, including all three of the Faith women. They'd been drenched in rain water and tears with a broken home behind them.

Their smiles were the true centerpieces to the image. It was like a light in the center of a dark tunnel. They were surrounded by destruction, the lawn chairs in the background of the yard were broken and sideways. Yet, they still smiled and posed as if they just got great news.

"I think it looks straight," Georgia argued.

April shook her head after climbing down the step stool. "I don't know. It still looks crooked to me. Hand me that level?"

As she went down to pick it up from the tool box, they heard a car pulling into the driveway. "I thought Grandma wasn't supposed to get here until this weekend?"

"She's not."

The house had sold quickly. It was all thanks to Caroline that everything moved so fast. She was able to be up at the property taking care of all their belongings while April and Georgia worked on getting the house back to a livable condition.

It was livable, but not quite perfect. There was still a lot of work to be done. The living room was almost back to the way it was before the storm, though with different furniture. The kitchen was working, as were all the bathrooms. But some of the bedroom walls needed drywall, mudding, and

some kind of flooring.

The place was a work in progress to say the least.

Georgia and April made it outside to find a truck with a familiar face behind the windshield. “Nigel!” Georgia yelled as she ran to meet him. Together they carried in the dishes he’d made for dinner.

“You’re early,” April said as they walked past her. The sun was still up, which meant that it wasn’t time for him to be arriving.

It had become a tradition that every other Wednesday Nigel would bring food for them and they’d eat together. Sometimes he helped with things around the property, sometimes he simply provided a meal and some company.

They hadn’t planned it out, per se, but all three of them knew exactly when he would arrive with a meal in his hands.

He hadn’t asked April about a date again, staying away from any subjects around seeing him outside of the dinners. It was even more shocking to April when Georgia would constantly bring up seeing him again. He somehow had a way to get out of it every single time, though he looked up at April with a look of longing in his eyes.

It became harder and harder to resist him.

“Hey, Georgia, could you run outside and gather up the tools from the front before dinner? I’m going to help Nigel set up.”

After setting down the dishes in her hand, she nodded and ran outside with the biggest smile on her face. “When does she go back to school?” Nigel asked, pulling off the lids and moving containers around to set up their meal.

“She’s headed back at the end of winter break. She starts at a new place, though. It’s a design school just a few hours away.”

It was hard for her to find a way to seamlessly transition topics like Nigel had always done so well. She felt like his words were a river, ebbing and flowing. While hers were in a pinball machine, sometimes missing the mark completely and other times hitting the obstacles with force.

“Could you... ask me again?”

Nigel looked up from his casserole he’d just cut up. “What? When does she go back to school?”

April’s cheeks immediately reddened. “No, uh... the other thing? You asked me so long ago, maybe you don’t even remember.”

She struggled to look away from him, but knew she needed to see every

expression he held. At first it was confusion, then brows raised in question if they were thinking of the same thing. “Do you mean...?” April nodded excitedly, with a smile. “April, would you like to go to dinner with me? On a real date?”

“Yes, I would love that.” It took everything not to jump up and down and giggle with excitement. It had been a long time since she’d accepted a date with a handsome man. “Let’s check our schedules and maybe you can text me what days you’re free?”

Nigel nodded, not even trying to hide his excitement. His mouth hung open, eyes wide. She didn’t realize how much it would shock him. “Of course. I can do that. I’d love to-”

“Mom!”

The call from outside struck anxiety through April. A breath caught in her throat, making it hard for her to swallow. What could possibly be happening now? “Mom! You have to come see this!”

After a deep breath, she realized that her daughter wasn’t hurt, but rather, excited. “I’ll go check it out, you finish plating, and we’ll be back in a minute. Thank you, again,” she said, brushing her hand on his bicep before walking outside.

She couldn’t believe she’d actually touched Nigel like that. It’d been years since she flirted with someone and she couldn’t tell if that was strange or outdated. Still, it excited her to touch him.

“What’s going on, honey?” April called out from the deck. Georgia was no longer standing out front, packing up the tools. She squinted into the distance to try and find her, but it took her a minute to see the silhouette.

When Georgia didn’t answer, she approached. Out in the middle of the field stood Georgia, staring opposite of the house. “What’s going on?”

Georgia turned sharply and shushed her. “You have to be quiet. Don’t scare them away.”

That made April even more intrigued. Only as she slowly approached her daughter did she see the sight before them.

The dark brown fur pattern and the familiarity told April that this was the same horse from the first day she arrived there. But this time, it wasn’t alone. Standing beside it was a mate, a partner. “Oh my God,” she muttered under her breath. “Amazing.”

Slowly, she inched up to it. Once she was a hand’s length away, she

reached out and brushed up its face. It let her, just like it did before. Only this time, she didn't need crackers to get close to it. It just knew that she wasn't going to do it any harm.

With April's courage, Georgia found herself able to do the same. She walked up and pet the steeds, gently nurturing the wild animals.

The fur was slick under their hands, and warm. Their coats were so beautiful, a rich brown that covered them from head to hoof. Their manes were a dark black that shimmered in the sunlight.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" Georgia asked her with a smile.

April nodded. Then she leaned onto the horse, gently nudging its head past her shoulder. She had to stand on her tiptoes in order to put her mouth to its ear. "I'm sorry, I don't have any crackers for you today. But if you come back tomorrow, I'll make sure you have as many as you could ever want. You have a friend in me and I'm not going anywhere."

She knew that's what they were really here for. Once she gave the food to the stallion, she knew the mare would come soon after. They would be searching for her and the treat she would give.

But just as quickly as they arrived, they seemed ready to leave. April could feel them getting restless and carefully pulled Georgia back with her.

At first, the two horses simply stared at them. As they took steps away from the house, they would look back as if their new human friends would have magically found the treats they wanted. When they realized they weren't getting anything but love today, they trotted into the distance.

When they were even further away, they began to run. It was the most majestic thing April had ever witnessed. They simply stared at them, in awe of the beauty.

This was why April loved this place so long ago. It occurred to her that she hadn't included them in her plans for the house. Her vision became tunneled after she had the dream about the bed and breakfast.

But maybe it was time for a new dream, something bigger than just a bed and breakfast by the beach. Something that included her precious animals and hundreds of acres of land that used to be a farm.

On this land, she would build a horse ranch.

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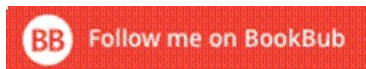
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